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Lessons from the Employer Practice Workforce Innovation Executive Summary

Community Research Institute-Johnson Center

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*Lessons from the Employer Practice Workforce Innovation
Executive Summary*



About the Community Research Institute

The Community Research Institute (CRI) empowers communities with quality research and data. CRI provides innovative applied research, generates information to improve decision-making, forecasts trends for effective problem solving, and measures results and reports outcomes of investments in community change.

CRI gathers, analyzes, interprets, and shares national and local data through partnerships with nonprofit and neighborhood groups in an effort to assist local and regional nonprofit leaders with decision making, grant writing, and program evaluation. This is research that makes a difference through a distinctly valuable blend of university rigor and community relevance.

This report was prepared for the Delta Strategy. The research team consisted of:

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Workforce innovations are about “information and relationships.”

Focus on workforce innovations is increasing in our community due to current programs that show successful private-public-nonprofit sector partnerships. Interest among funding institutions is also increasing. In 2006, West Michigan received \$15 million in funding over a three-year period to support innovation-based economic and workforce development.

This study shows that innovations are successful when they build a network of partner organizations from government, business, and nonprofit sectors that work to reduce barriers and provide opportunities for employment. These lessons are critical in adapting innovations across other communities.

Background

This report provides information on the structure and nature of successful workforce innovations and looks at possible factors for successful replication in various geographies and sectors. It documents the impact of the innovations on business, public agencies, and nonprofits.

The report is a “learning history” and presents the experiences and understandings of participants, and serves to record the collective knowledge of those participants at a particular point in time. It then draws themes and places them in the context of a “Best Practice Review” to further inform learning.

The questions for the learning history interviews were based on information from a variety of sources that included the themes and lessons learned from the 2004 Community Research Institute report on the “Learning History of the SOURCE Model” (Winter, 2004) and a social network/social capital literature review. These sources were utilized as the basis for the open-ended nature of the questions and the topics anticipated in the responses.

This research was conducted on behalf of the Delta Strategy by the Community Research Institute at the Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University. This executive summary is from the full report of findings presented to the Delta Strategy.

REFERENCES

Winter, Janet (2004). Best Practices in Workforce Development. Community Research Institute, Johnson Center for Philanthropy, Grand Valley State University. Prepared for the Delta Strategy Employer Practice Group. Grand Rapids, MI.

Process

During 2006, 36 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who had participated or were participating in one or more of the following workforce innovations: the SOURCE, Cascade Engineering, the Health Field Collaborative, the Re-Entry Roundtable, Teamwork NorthWest, the Ottawa County Employment Alliance and the Kalamazoo Project.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine not only how participants conceptualized a workforce innovation model but also establish if the model could be successfully adapted to sites and sectors other than the original manufacturing site. The interviews were semi-structured to encourage the greatest possible flexibility for participant responses. Participants were asked to describe the key dimensions of a workforce innovation, explain how the various sectors interact in such a model, and discuss the motivations of employers, public servants and nonprofit professionals. In addition, participants were asked what a model would look like when it “works.”

“The ‘model’ gets us (workforce development agency) access to workers at work...we can get them resources because we are connected to their place of work.” - PUBLIC SERVANT



Core Components of a Workforce Innovation

Workforce innovations work because they provide critical community partnerships that utilize existing assets and address system issues. Individuals and institutions work together in creative ways to increase the skills of the workforce, reduce barriers to employment, minimize redundancies in service, and maximize the effective distribution of resources across sectors at the community level.

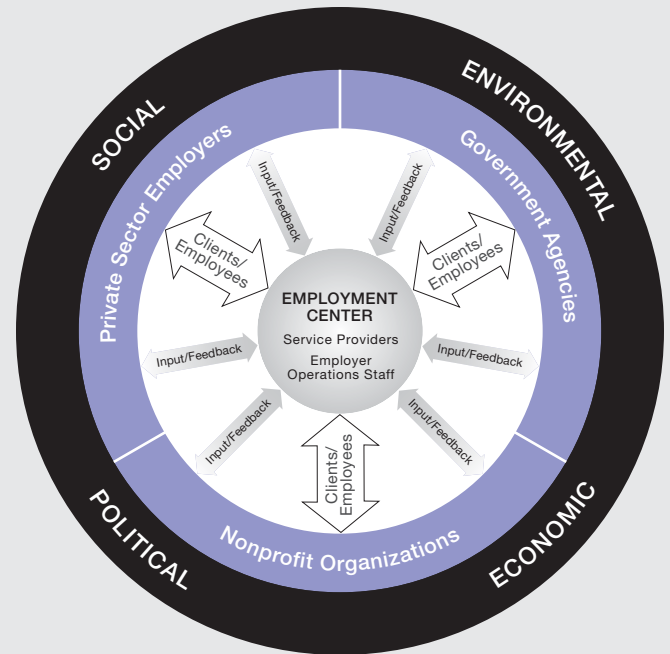
Workforce innovations create a network that links the various assets of a community, coordinates the various services offered, and reduces redundancy to address the disconnect between unmet labor needs and the large pool of unskilled workers. This network includes coordination between the private, government, and nonprofit sectors.

An employment center is created that functions as the central player in the system. The center can be a physical place or it can be a virtual center defined by staff functions rather than space. The employment center's role includes getting input from and providing feedback to the private, government, and nonprofit sectors (displayed in the bi-directional arrows in Figure 1.) The combination of resources from each sector result in "doing business differently". It is not about one partner doing the work but rather about creating a collective new way to do work.

Workforce innovations are "employer driven" because they focus on getting and keeping individuals successfully employed. Yet, the employer is only one of the three partners who "spin" their work to engage and support clients/employees.

Relationships between the public and private sectors are defined by local realities (i.e. local politics might determine what public agencies or nonprofits participate; local economics might determine what private sector employers might participate). The different social realities offer unique relationships, connections, or influence. The community is a dynamic system and adjusts when individuals or circumstances within it change.

Figure 1: Core Components of Workforce Innovation



■ Economic + Environmental + Social + Political = Community Context
 ■ Private Sector Employers + Government Agencies + Nonprofit Organizations = Trisector Context

Figure 2: Workforce Readiness Factors in the Community Environment



"I feel happy in my work...I am moving ahead, advancing." - EMPLOYEE

Key Learnings

1. Workforce innovation (e.g. the Source, Health Field Collaborative) can be successful given an **effective engagement process** that is grounded in mutually agreed upon core principles or values. Shared values across sectors, strong leadership, committed partners, and a problem to solve that is community relevant are significant factors that affect the quality of the engagement process.
2. **Community readiness** is important (Figure 2). Community readiness is defined by the following:
 - Conditions in a community create an interest for change.
 - Champions use their influence to recruit key stakeholders, then engage them in making change.Workforce readiness factors in the political, economic, and social environment are illustrated in Figure 2.
3. The way of doing work is operationalized in **work rules** (operating system) and is an ongoing relationship between stakeholders.
4. Adaptation from one community to another is not a “cookie-cutter” proposition” rather an effort that requires community readiness and engagement. Core principles are adapted based on the community environment and the innovation is viewed by other communities with conditions of their own.
5. The innovation creates change on an ongoing basis and the process requires a **neutral facilitator** to sustain the work.

“To break down barriers you need to develop trust which is something that takes time...the way to do it is to create relationships and work on a small project together, see the success in it, and when you get both sides coming back...that is how you grow it...” - EMPLOYER

“She (nonprofit professional) comes with a lot of knowledge of the folks that we (public servants) deal with...from a different point of view...we deal with them from the correctional side, the criminal side and she deals with them from the needs side as to what kind of services they need...to get a job and keep a job because the primary factor is whether they go to work.” - PUBLIC SERVANT

“I describe them (employment center) as a friend that is always there.” - EMPLOYEE

“For the employer, the win is to reduce turn-over...getting people into positions and increasing skills so, they get a better employee. The worker has a steady income so they have a job, maybe a house, probably a career, and as for the government, bringing services to the client increases efficiency and reduces cost.” - FACILITATOR

Conclusions

Based on an analysis of the interviews conducted as part of this project, it is clear that the network innovative approach to workforce development is adaptable to sites other than the original site and in sectors other than the original sector of manufacturing.

The engagement process is important in establishing and sustaining change efforts. The process is needed to bring individuals together to decide on the work (to make it different) and to hold the effort accountable (keep it different). Once the work is established, it may seem that the process becomes less important but according to active participants, it remains significant.

To receive a copy of the full report, contact Dr. Mary Mc Donald, Director, Community Research Institute, 616.331.7258, mcdomary@gvsu.edu.



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