

Big Ideas in Workforce Innovation: Creating a New “Business as Usual” for California’s Workforce System

“How do you learn and establish new things, especially when you’re so ingrained in such a large bureaucracy with so much going on?”

– Accelerator Fund public sector partner

California’s economy continues to grow, but income inequality is rising, millions of workers struggle to make ends meet in low-wage jobs, and leading industries can’t find the skilled labor they need. Many share the goals of closing the skills gap and expanding economic mobility, but “business as usual” is unlikely to secure the future we desire. Woven into the fabric of our workforce and education systems – and to some extent into the norms of non-profit and private sector partners -- have been inherent disincentives to experiment and innovate. If we wish to be smarter about developing California’s diverse workforce, we must move beyond a narrow focus on performance outcomes to listen to the needs of workers and employers, try “risky” new approaches, and learn from what unfolds.

The California Workforce Development Board (State Board) is fostering an environment where creativity and innovation may begin to weave a new fabric and ultimately solve our workforce development system’s most entrenched challenges. Through technical assistance and strategic investment of discretionary funds in the SlingShot initiative and the Workforce Accelerator Fund [see sidebar], the State Board is inviting experimentation among partners inspired and guided by the insights and interests of California’s workers and businesses.

This brief captures emerging lessons from the SlingShot and Accelerator initiatives about how a new “business as usual” may emerge from this environment conducive to innovation and risk-taking. Interviews with various partners engaged in this work – local workforce development boards (LWDBs),

The State Board’s **SlingShot** initiative seeks to seed collaborative efforts by employers and industry, government, workforce and economic development, and education stakeholders within a region to identify and then work to solve employment challenges that slow California’s economic engine.

The **Workforce Accelerator Fund** provides grants and technical assistance to prototype innovative strategies that bridge education and workforce gaps for targeted populations, and implement promising practices in workforce system service delivery infrastructure.

Both **SlingShot** and **Accelerator** projects profiled in this brief address the misalignment between workers’ skills and employers’ hiring needs and practices that contribute to keeping economic mobility out of reach for so many Californians.

training and education providers, community-based organizations, employers and industry associations, and private-sector consultancies – reveal themes related to the potential for fresh, new ways of addressing the misalignment between workers’ skills and employers’ hiring needs. The projects profiled here illustrate the intentional gathering of job-seeker input to better inform service delivery, and engagement of industry leadership to inform career pathways, expand work-based learning opportunities, and inspire inclusive hiring practices. They demonstrate significant investment in regional and broader partnerships that improve coordination and alignment. And they describe processes of innovation that are driving toward more responsive services and better results for workers and businesses. These cross-cutting themes are illustrated by several site examples and summarized below.

Learning from Youth and Employers How to Diversify the Tech Workforce in Silicon Valley

“What we’ve always wanted to do at NOVA is figure out how our model for older, dislocated tech workers plays with other populations. Now we can base innovations on the input of young students.”

–Luther Jackson, Program Manager, NOVA

The NOVA Workforce Board partnered with non-profits #YesWeCode (#YWC) and the Economic Advancement Research Institute (EARI) – a nonprofit research institute focused on workforce and economic mobility issues -- to improve the success of diverse young people in the tech sector. NOVA’s staff had extensive experience delivering career navigation training to dislocated tech professionals in Silicon Valley, but much less experience with other populations. Drawing upon #YWC’s human-centered design (HCD, see sidebar) experience, NOVA and #YWC embarked upon an extensive listening process. “Our programs are customer-focused. It’s important to us,” said Luther Jackson, NOVA Program Manager, “but I’ve never approached [human-centered program design] with the rigor that we’re attempting now.”

Lessons from the HCD are guiding new programmatic approaches. For example, focus group participants talked about the importance of various types of mentors, who teach, support and inspire them in different ways. Their insights explored “levels of complexity that I hadn’t thought about before,” said Mr. Jackson, who is working with #YWC counterparts to re-design and

Human-centered design (HCD) is a creative approach to problem solving that involves listening deeply to those affected by the problem, generating multiple ideas, testing solutions, and getting feedback from users to refine the approach.

Industry-centered design (ICD) refers to a similarly creative problem-solving approach that involves listening to and getting feedback that reflects the needs of an industry sector, in order to design solutions to the industry’s challenges.

prototype career navigation and network development services.

Concurrently, NOVA is using industry-centered design (ICD) to engage with tech employers through the SlingShot initiative, building relationships of trust and co-creating new cultural norms of embracing diversity. According to Phil Jordan, Executive Director of EARI, "SlingShot is driven by the 'voice of customer' concept: the customer is the employer." NOVA and EARI are now collaborating with the Boston Private Industry Council on the broader-scale pilot of a HCD/ICD-driven "Tech OneStop of the future." Says Mr. Jordan, "It's the most innovative work we're doing with any WDBs in the country, between those two programs [SlingShot and WAF].... NOVA feels an ability to innovate in this space because they can take risks they wouldn't otherwise take. The only way to learn and adapt is to have the flexibility to try new things and see if they work, ...tolerating some failures and continuing to push for better outcomes."

Industry Leadership Creating a Virtual Hub for Employer-Workforce Service Provider Dialogue

***"It's a new paradigm in working with the public sector. They are... interested in new ways of doing work, and allowing organizations to look at each other to collaborate and share."
– Linda Bidrossian, Senior VP, Bay Area Council***

The Bay Area Council's Accelerator project responds to a priority voiced by its employer members: bringing visibility to talent supply and demand in the Bay Area region. The website now under development by the Council — ourfutureworkforce.org -- will centralize demand data for 53 occupations prioritized by the Council's Workforce of the Future committee, as well as supply data on community college and university courses that train for these positions. Designed for statewide scalability, the website prototype will be shared with a universe of 100 regional training and service providers who, when surveyed, affirmed its contribution toward their mission to train and prepare a diverse workforce. "[CBOs] are saying they want businesses to tell them what they want from their candidates," says Linda Bidrossian, Senior VP of the Council, "but there's a disconnect in our approaches, a lack of dialogue, almost a culture gap."

Accelerator resourced the Council to step into a leadership role on the project. Their industry-centered design process invited "occupational champions" to provide direct input on hiring practices and training needs, and convened structured dialogue between employers and training providers. Recordings of these "expert conversations" will be posted on the website, where education and service providers from across the region will be able to interact virtually with industry leaders as they develop responsive training curriculum.

Accelerator has provided critical seed funding for this unique public-private-nonprofit partnership to get off the ground; the longer-term challenge will be sustaining and growing the impact of this highly adaptable tool. In the opinion of the Council's Vice-Chair, Glenn Shannon of Shorenstein Properties LLC, the tool could become a cost-effective and scalable way for employers and workforce service providers to create relationships and

a feedback loop. “All these organizations are like compasses,” he says, “and their true north is directed by their own internal sense of what they’re doing. All these compasses can swing to a fixed point, well-defined by employers as the true target they should aim at.” The expected results, says Ms. Bidrossian, are better-defined career pathways and an increase in direct hires out of the region’s education and training programs.

Opening “Hearts, Minds, and Doors” to the Transgender Workforce

“As we move forward, instead of just building workforce centers, it’s important that the State partner with CBOs that have the connections with communities, not just fishing to figure out how this could be done, but making the connections where organizations are already doing the work.”

-- Bamby Salcedo, Translatin@ Coalition

The Translatin@ Coalition, a national network of advocates for the needs of the trans community in the U.S., had no formal relationship to the public workforce system prior to receiving an Accelerator grant; but its members identified employment challenges as among their greatest concerns. Trans job-seekers face barriers to accessing public workforce services (such as requirements to register by legal name), discrimination in hiring, and misunderstanding in the workplace, and California needed formal channels to raise awareness and protect trans workers’ rights. “Education is the main component,” says the Coalition’s Executive Director Bamby Salcedo. “If we can’t open people’s minds and hearts in some way, there are ethical and also legal implications.”

The Coalition, funded by the Accelerator, partnered with the California Restaurant Association (CRA) on a far-reaching information and awareness-building campaign to change hiring practices in the industry. With a strong advocate in Michaela Mendelsohn, a trans woman restaurant owner and CRA member, the Coalition has begun presenting a new manager training video at regional CRA board meetings and intends to disseminate it to the CRA membership of 94,000 restaurants. “We can’t afford, as restaurateurs, to exclude qualified employees,” says Ms. Mendelsohn. The Coalition’s video bolsters understanding of trans employment issues and legal rights, and Accelerator funds subsidize on-the-job training of new trans hires.

As Ms. Salcedo describes this work, “There is a vision for changing the hiring practices of an entire industry, but it will take a long time. It will take longer than we envisioned at first.” There have been initial setbacks: CRA committed to a different strategy to train restaurant owners and managers, requiring the Coalition to renegotiate its campaign efforts. And as the Coalition deepens its own understanding of members’ employment challenges, it uncovers greater need for coaching and training of job-seekers than was anticipated. Now, the Coalition is expanding its partnership with a network of community-based LGBT Centers across the state to strengthen job search assistance, while exploring ways the public workforce system can reform policies and partner with CBOs to better serve the trans community at scale.

Keeping Employers in the Driver's Seat of Career Pathway Design

"We joined forces with a group of healthcare CEO's... to capitalize on a major opportunity. The groundwork the group has accomplished in the past two years intersected perfectly with the SlingShot funding opportunity."

***-- Cindy Harrington,
Humboldt Workforce Development Board***

Humboldt County's Community Health Alliance -- an association of healthcare CEO's, convened by Humboldt State University's Center for Rural Policy -- has met monthly for more than two years to evaluate and address the region's healthcare-related issues. A major concern is a shortage of skilled workers: with unemployment being low, many industries are challenged to hire employees to meet existing needs, and the high schools offer no formal pathways into the medical field. When the Humboldt Workforce Development Board proposed a SlingShot effort to develop healthcare career pathways, the Alliance saw potential to deepen its relationships with the regional K-12 districts, adult education providers, community colleges, and One-Stop Career Centers. What emerged was a uniquely-structured relationship between the industry group and the workforce system. "Usually, with WIOA funding, everyone has to fit into the workforce system puzzle," says Cindy Harrington, Executive Director of the Humboldt WDB. "Now, putting industry at the center is key to our strategy. This could possibly lead to different outcomes, since business is defining the game... and we're allowed to take risks."

The WDB and the Alliance are now working hand-in-hand, but the development of allied health pathways is a big lift in Humboldt. The high schools' career technical education landscape has changed, funding has declined, and today health care employers are crying out for help to prepare the future workforce. Says Connie Stewart of the Center for Rural Policy, "Given the great need for workers among healthcare employers, if a new program can be shown to be viable using SlingShot funds, then employers over time will pick up the costs of maintaining high school academies or some form of partnership with K-12 and community colleges." Collaborative training program design will be an iterative process – and an ongoing effort to identify resources and build capacity along the way – but at the center is the commitment of industry, education and the workforce system to work together. Flexible SlingShot funds aim to help this collaboration to establish roots and a fresh approach to workforce development in the region.

Centralizing Job-Seeker and Employer Data to Make the Match for Immigrant Professionals

“It is rare to have funding to design and test a product, to not just be accountable for job placements. [Accelerator] creates space to design it, test it, and learn from it.”

-- Anne Kirwan, Western Region Director of Development and Strategic Partnerships, Upwardly Global

The non-profit Upwardly Global (UpGlo) partners with the public workforce system toward its goal of eliminating employment barriers for skilled immigrants and refugees and has helped more than 4,000 new Americans to find and retain professional employment. But to keep pace with evolving tech skills needed in the Silicon Valley, UpGlo sought a more strategic, nimble, and industry-aligned process of assessment, counseling, training, and placement assistance. With Accelerator funds, UpGlo partnered with NOVA Workforce Board and Virgil, the developer of a web-based career navigation tool, to design a better way to work for immigrants, refugees, and ultimately all professionals.

Virgil's tool zeros in on the precise skills, competencies and experiences required for the job and enables the job-seeker to communicate their competitiveness through a competency-based skills profile. Going beyond job posting and O*NET data, the staff at Virgil interviews employers to create comprehensive portfolios of each occupation, then develops short-form assessments that can be completed online by a job-seeker in under 2 minutes. The 500 occupation-specific assessments are educational for the job-seeker, who receives instant and personalized action steps to enhance competitiveness, as well as information on relevant openings in the region. The Virgil-generated action plan can be a guide for job-seekers and their workforce counselors, mentors or coaches, and can be shared with and searched by recruiters, who can more quickly identify candidates with the specific skill sets they require. “The workforce development system isn't systematically giving employers a voice in terms of the screening criteria for candidates,” says UpGlo's Western Region Program Director, Mary Voelbel. “This work could be transformational, creating really targeted action plans related to training gaps, moving our job seekers to full employment faster.” UpGlo is piloting the tool with a cohort of immigrants and refugees, while NOVA is testing it with a cohort of dislocated tech workers.

If the tool proves to be successful, not only will a population of skilled immigrants be better equipped to market its skills and competencies to broad audiences of employers, but the public workforce system may gain a cost-effective way to connect qualified workers to available jobs. Says Ron Mitchell, CEO of Virgil, “this project is a model for public-private partnership. We have implemented an agile process that lets us quickly assess what is working and what is not and then iterate on both the technology and the service delivery in real-time. Our goal is to deliver real impact through a model that can be replicated across the entire workforce ecosystem.”

Uniting Workforce, Education, and Industry to Grow Work-Based Learning

“We didn’t start out with this exact focus. An industry-driven process became the driver.”

– Michael Cross, Executive Director, NorTEC

For the Northern Rural Employment and Training Consortium (NorTEC) – which supports businesses and oversees America’s Job Centers in an eleven-county region in Northern California – SlingShot is an opportunity to systematize Industry Advisory Councils over a remarkably large geographic service area and across multiple sectors. Reflecting a deep commitment to industry leadership in this process, NorTEC provides staff support to convene both supply- and demand-side partners, yet steps back to let the Councils define their own priorities and set direction. NorTEC’s Executive Director Michael Cross contrasts this to the previous “wild west” approach to one-on-one business services, while noting that it requires a new style of WDB flexibility and adaptability. “From an institutional point of view, it’s hard to know where you will land up,” he says. “This is the key to success but also makes it more difficult along the way... Momentum-building is hard sometimes when you don’t know precisely where you’re going.”

Under the sponsorship of NorTEC, the region’s Manufacturing Leadership Council has established the “Grow Manufacturing Initiative” (GSI) to help train the region’s future workforce. Working with two dozen school districts, three community colleges, and Chico State University, GSI trains high school and college teachers in the latest computer-driven fabrication equipment and software currently in use in advanced manufacturing firms in Northern California. “It’s up to us, the manufacturers,” says Bill Gains of Transfer Flow, Inc., a Chico manufacturer and GSI partner, “to help with developing these trainings and, critically, to follow up with teachers after the training.” With GSI’s added staff capacity of a Project Assistant and college interns, teachers now have access to on-going GSI technical assistance via phone and email, and their students are invited to take part in manufacturing facility tours, job shadowing, an annual Manufacturing Expo, and internships supported by SlingShot funds.

With industry helping to set the compass, NorTEC, community college and K-12 district partners are embracing new priorities and taking new risks, refining the focus of their work as they go. “The work-based learning component is actually a new area of work for the WDB,” says Mr. Cross. “School has been preparing students for more school, not work or career technical training... This is an opportunity to leverage CCPT [California Career Pathways Trust] funding to address this issue.” A key lesson from SlingShot is that it is fine to “change up” in response to the employer dialogue; in fact, by investing in new areas of industry-centered design and system-building work, NorTEC and its partners believe they are gaining the insight and infrastructure they need to target direct service dollars more effectively.

Embracing Flexibility to Create a New “Business as Usual”

The examples in this brief illustrate emerging lessons from the State Board’s SlingShot and Accelerator grant initiatives about how a new “business as usual” may emerge from an environment conducive to innovation and risk-taking. Partners have embraced the initiatives’ signature flexibility in several key ways:

- Conducting **human-centered design (HCD)**, or gathering and analyzing participant input to establish baselines and targets and to inform the design of service strategies. Investment in HCD has been a focal point of many Accelerator projects as they tailor solutions to the needs of target job-seeker populations.
- Moving to center stage the needs of targeted industries through **industry-centered design (ICD)**. SlingShot and Accelerator grantees are breaking out of old modes of business services, listening to employers in order to create responsive workforce programs.
- Investing in the **structures, staffing and systems necessary for sustained communication and collaboration** across a region’s workforce stakeholders, making creative use of technology where appropriate. In addition to expanding regional industry sector partnerships, SlingShot and Accelerator projects have invested in coalition-building that supports learning and collaboration beyond the region and/or the state.
- Pursuing **innovation itself, including the prototyping of new service models, learning, and adapting over time**. Grantees have taken risks that will lead to long-term impact on job-seeker placement outcomes. They have accommodated changes in the environment and in targeted industry sectors, letting go of established plans and shifting their program model or focus.

Establishing and scaling new ways of doing business takes time, requires multiple iterations, and likely involves some failures along the way. The steps being taken by local and regional innovators illustrated in this brief help us understand the processes that lead to lasting results down the road. Now, how may we continue to foster a flexible environment that invites innovative practice? How may we help scale and sustain new approaches that demonstrate statewide relevance?

Experience gained by participants in the SlingShot and Accelerator initiatives suggests several broad areas for State-level consideration:

- Continue to **incentivize and build capacity for:**
 - Human-centered and industry-centered data collection and analysis
 - Structures necessary for communication and coordination, making improved use of technology as appropriate.
 - On-going processes of planning, adapting, prototyping, learning, adapting, taking risks, and failing if needed.
- Consider ways to lengthen grant terms and minimize funding requirements, since **innovative practice takes time and benefits from flexibility**.
- Encourage and provide resources necessary for grantees to **bring effective**

- **practices to scale** through regional, statewide, and national networks.
 - Support documentation and **sharing of lessons learned from iterative prototyping, and evaluation** of the long-term impact of innovations on job-seeker, worker, and employer outcomes.
-

INTERVIEWEES

Stephen Baiter, Oakland WDB
Tina Ngo Bartel, San Diego WDB
Linda Bidrossian, Bay Area Council
Robert Bloom, Brian Hooker, Cheryl Joseph, Solano WDB
Michael Cross, NorTEC
Alissa Freedman, Opportunity Junction
Bill Gaines, Transfer Flow Inc.
Cindy Harrington, Humboldt WDB
Luther Jackson, NOVA
Phil Jordan, Economic Advancement Research Institute
Anne Kirwan, Mary Voebel, Upwardly Global
Stephanie Maxbury, LA County Community & Senior Services
Ron Mitchell, Virgil
Shermaene Roemhildt, Merced WDB
Bamby Salcedo, Translatin@ Coalition
Glenn Shannon, Shorenstein Properties LLC
Connie Stewart, Center for Rural Policy, Humboldt State University
Donna Van Wert, WDB of Contra Costa County
Jeffery Wallace, Leaders Up

RESEARCH, ANALYSIS AND DOCUMENTATION

Linda Collins, Luis Chavez, Peter Simon, Jennie Mollica – Career Ladders Project

