

Effective Workforce Training on the Frontline

**Observations from the
Industry Partnerships Project**

October 2005

**Jobs With a Future
Center on Wisconsin Strategy**

Introduction

What is JWF?

Created in 1996, JWF brings together leading stakeholders in South Central Wisconsin — including the City of Madison, Dane County, Madison Area Technical College, the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison — to build and pursue a strategic vision for workforce development in the region. Ultimately, the partners are investing together in building “jobs with a future” for all area residents.

The partners know that such work requires both stronger shared vision among the institutions, and a stronger role for the region’s leading employers in implementing it. First, then, JWF is a strategic collaboration of leading institutions in the region. JWF allows partners to pursue joint efforts to make our workforce development system more efficient and responsive to area workers and employers.

Understanding that employers need to be brought into the system, JWF partners have invested heavily in building stronger employer organization in the region. So JWF is a strategic collaboration of leading institutions, but it is also partnerships of local employers and leading industries — health care and manufacturing most recently — that are working with those institutions on solving practical skill, training, recruitment, and retention problems.

From strategic discussion to on-the-ground training development, JWF is building a stronger workforce system for South Central Wisconsin.

Many low-wage workers need good training to move forward in the labor market. Many employers have a hard time designing or accessing the sort of training that they need to raise productivity. A central challenge to workforce development funders, practitioners, and policy makers, then, is to capitalize on the opportunity for mutual gains, and build systems that help increase training and productivity for the frontline workforce. Recent experience in Wisconsin shows that partnership, private sector leadership, and public investment can substantially increase training available to incumbent workers.

From 2002-04, Jobs With a Future (JWF) — a partnership of leading stakeholders in South Central Wisconsin’s workforce development system — provided free skills training in health care and manufacturing to incumbent and dislocated workers across the region through the Industry Partnerships Project. The project, funded by a \$1.14 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin (WDB), a key JWF partner, involved over 100 local employers and trained nearly 1,000 area residents.

The Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) — a policy and research center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison — has produced several reports evaluating the Industry Partnerships Project. In those reports, we have examined the “how, who, and what” associated with the project: How was the project designed and implemented? Who participated? What was its effect? (For a full list of reports related to the project see the Appendix.) Here, we examine the question “what does this project mean?” We seek to offer the most important and applicable lessons from implementing a large-scale training program, one that involved two distinct groups of workers, two separate industries, and a wide array of institutional partners.

First, however, we present a brief overview of the project goals and outcomes.



Project Overview

The Industry Partnerships Project sought to achieve three main goals:

1. To provide training to incumbent workers that would enable them to take on new responsibilities and/or advance beyond entry-level positions in health care and manufacturing. The project aimed to overcome skill gaps in these industries by bringing together employers and public-sector educators to develop curriculum and deliver training relevant to incumbent workers' needs.
2. To improve employment opportunities for the growing number of dislocated workers in the region. With plant closings and mass layoffs on the rise in South Central Wisconsin, the project adopted strategies to increase dislocated workers' awareness of and access to job training. In particular, the WDB and its collaborators sought to connect these workers to training that could lead to new jobs in health care and manufacturing, in areas of occupational and skill shortage.
3. To build and strengthen relationships between employers and institutional partners. By bringing public- and private-sector stakeholders together, the project intended to help key collaborators better coordinate strategies and align resources for delivering effective workforce training in the region.

Initially, project collaborators planned to involve 50 health care and manufacturing employers and provide training to 480 incumbent and dislocated workers at no cost. In the end, project outcomes far exceeded these projections. Specifically, they were able to:

- Secure the participation of 102 health care and manufacturing firms in the region, 74 of which sent at least one worker to training.
- Provide free training to 987 individuals, 823 (83 percent) of whom were incumbent workers, and 164 (17 percent) of whom were dislocated workers.
- Develop and deliver 41 distinct training courses — on topics ranging from business writing and leadership development to electrical controls and phlebotomy — accounting for 28,803 hours of training.
- Strengthen participation in partnership-model training and joint workforce development programming among public-sector institutions in the six counties of South Central Wisconsin (Columbia, Dane, Dodge, Jefferson, Marquette, and Sauk).

Our evaluations of the Industry Partnerships Project indicate it was a success for all involved. Workers felt more confident and better able to perform their jobs as a result of training. Employers witnessed improved job performance among those workers they sent to training, and rewarded some with promotions and/or pay raises. And employers and workforce development institutions got much better at sharing information and aligning resources through their participation in the project. (For a full summary of project results, see "Industry Partnerships Project Outcomes at a Glance" in the box on page 3.)

In addition to identifying these concrete results, our evaluation of the project has led to some broader insights into the implementation of workforce training programs and the targeting of incumbent worker training. We present these insights in the pages that follow.

Industry Partnerships Project Outcomes at a Glance

Outcomes for incumbent workers who participated in the Industry Partnerships Project were very positive. Among those who completed follow-up surveys about the impact of training:

- 82 percent said that the information shared during training has been useful to them.
- 70 percent said they were better able to perform their job because of the skills acquired.
- 69 percent felt more confident in their ability to perform their job as a result of training.

Employers also reported a high level of satisfaction with project training. For example:

- 99 percent of employers completing follow-up course assessments said they would send employees to training in the future.
- 82 percent of employers completing final surveys said they are more likely to pursue shared training with other firms in the future because of their involvement in the project.
- 78 percent of employer survey respondents reported that workers who participated in training were better able to perform their job.
- According to employer course assessments, over a third of incumbent workers (36 percent) received a pay raise and/or promotion because of training.

Dislocated workers who attended Industry Partnerships Project training posted gains as well:

- 61 percent of dislocated workers who completed follow-up course assessments found that the training helped build their confidence.
- According to data from area Job Centers, half of all dislocated workers served by the project went on to enroll in educational programs leading to a degree or other credential.

Finally, the project helped institutional partners build their capacity to deliver effective joint training, and strengthen connections to area employers:

- 86 percent of employers responding to a final survey said the project improved their knowledge of resources available at area Job Centers, technical colleges, and the Workforce Development Board (WDB).
- 94 percent of employer respondents indicated that they will continue to participate in the public- and private-sector partnerships that operated under the grant.
- 82 percent of Job Center staff who responded to a final survey said their understanding of the training opportunities available to dislocated workers at local technical colleges grew.
- 77 percent of Job Center respondents agreed that the project increased their knowledge of jobs available in health care and manufacturing, and the skills workers need to get them.
- The WDB has expanded its efforts to deliver education and training through the sectoral partnership model.
- Technical colleges continue to restructure course offerings to better serve employers and workers.

Lessons Learned in Brief

Based on our assessments of the Industry Partnership Project, we have five main observations that may be useful to others involved skills training and workforce development programming:

- *With the right infrastructure and relationships in place, a large and timely public investment in training can pay off in significant and lasting ways for workers, employers, and the public sector.*
- *When an industry experiences a labor or skills shortage, as health care did during the course of this project, employers will actively participate in workforce training, especially training that involves intensive and technical skills. (However, the cost of technical training may be prohibitive for some firms, once public funding disappears.)*
- *Even when an industry is suffering substantial setbacks, as manufacturing was during the period of this project, employers will participate actively, especially in training that is geared toward leadership and communication skills development.*
- *Dislocated workers benefit from training programs designed for incumbent workers by developing the skills local employers need. To better serve dislocated workers, however, training must be delivered differently than it is to those with jobs.*
- *A limited-term, publicly funded investment in worker training can help build long-term relationships between employers and public partners.*

The Importance of Infrastructure

With the right infrastructure and relationships in place, a large and timely public investment in training can pay off in significant and lasting ways for workers, employers, and the public sector.

In many regions, a significant infusion of dollars to support incumbent worker training would have no natural home, no ready takers, and no chance of really increasing training for incumbent workers in the field, especially given a fairly short timeline. The necessary partners — training institutions, WDBs, and employers — would have neither the relationships nor the joint experience that could allow for rapid and dramatic expansion in incumbent worker training efforts.

However, in just six weeks time — from the announcement of the grant award in August to the Industry Partnerships Project's start date on October 1, 2002 — the WDB and its collaborators got a major training program up and running. And in the two years that followed, project partners far exceeded their goals in terms of the number of employers involved and workers trained. How was this possible?

Both the expediency with which the project was launched and its eventual scale are products of strong existing relationships among workforce development system stakeholders in South Central Wisconsin. Through collaborations like JWF, public-sector educators and institutions have been working with employers in the region's leading industries for several years to deliver relevant workforce training, create pathways to quality jobs, and respond effectively to changes in local economies.

If industry and institutional partners are in the practice of sharing ideas, pooling resources, and working together to supply employment-related services, they are well-positioned to respond to shifts in the local economy and new opportunities for investment. Collaborators in the Industry Partnerships Project, for instance, were able to roll-out training designed to address current labor and skill shortages in health care. At the same time, they were able to meet the needs of dislocated workers — many of them laid off as a result of manufacturing job losses in the region — by offering training in a format that was available immediately (as opposed to traditional semester courses).

The project was successful not only because it built on an existing set of relationships, but because it was jointly owned by those involved. When a single organization is associated with a project, it can narrow its validity and reach. Because participating institutions were equally engaged in the Industry Partnerships Project, and shared in representing themselves as the public-sector "face" of the project, its identity and support were wide spread. This encouraged participating firms to connect to each institution — the technical college, the WDB, and the Job Center — to access the web of resources needed to make incumbent worker training really work.

Training Investments in a Dynamic Industry

When an industry experiences a labor or skills shortage, as health care did during the course of this project, employers will actively participate in workforce training, especially training that involves intensive and technical skills. (However, the cost of technical training may be prohibitive for some firms, once public funding disappears.)

While it is clear that growing industries are often easy to interest in training — their growth makes skills and worker shortages more likely — it is not easy to know exactly what sorts of training such employers will demand. Over the two years of the Industry Partnerships Project, the broad interests of the dynamic health care industry became clear. Health care employers wanted a full-range of training, from basic skills, to leadership and soft skills, and further to intensive technical training. Most interesting may be the intensive technical training that the industry helped design and send students to, as the training often led to direct advancement for workers.

Comparison to manufacturers makes the health care investment in technical training more clear. Of the firms that sent workers to technical skills courses, over sixty percent (23 of 37) were health care organizations and the industry sent more than twice as many employees to these courses as did manufacturing firms (94 compared to 41). Further, health care workers spent 40 percent more hours, on average, in technical skills training than did their counterparts in manufacturing.

In part, of course, the high health care usage of technical training relates directly to the sort of technical courses that were designed. (What manufacturing firm wants a phlebotomist?) But, throughout the project, public partners worked very hard to identify and build all models of training relevant to the participating employers. Quite simply, health care had many more needs in the technical skills area than did manufacturers. This is evident in the courses designed, and the attendance by industry across them. Strained by frontline labor shortages, it is not surprising that the development of technical skills in specific occupations was a high priority among health care companies.

Health care employers saw a noticeable improvement in job performance among workers who attended this training. Among survey respondents, the overwhelming majority (more than 90 percent) agreed that technical training boosted employees' performance on the job. There was also strong agreement among health care firms that technical skills training improved workers' productivity, with 71 percent of industry respondents indicating this was the case.

Despite their extensive use of and satisfaction with technical skills courses, a majority of participating health care firms reported that they might not be able to support such training — which is quite costly and time intensive — in the post-grant period. In fact, in a final survey of the project, just forty percent of responding health care firms indicated a willingness to pay for technical skills courses in the future.

By contrast, nearly 70 percent of health care firms responding to the final survey expressed willingness to assume the cost of future soft skills training. Unlike technical skills courses, soft skills courses do not require special equipment or much one-on-one instruction, and can be taught in just about any location. With the vast majority of survey respondents — in health care and manufacturing alike — agreeing that soft skills courses improved workers' confidence, performance, and productivity, it makes sense that employers would be most willing to pay for this type of training, where per-worker investment tends to be relatively light.

Training Investments in a Contracting Industry

Even when an industry is suffering substantial setbacks, as manufacturing was during the period of the grant, employers will participate actively, especially in training that is geared toward communication skills and leadership development.

It is relatively easy to interest employers in training when they are experiencing labor shortages and difficulty recruiting for open positions. Training provides a direct response to these problems. How to generate interest in training when an industry is in decline, when skills are more abundant in the external market, and when managers are distracted by the stress of layoffs and restructuring, tends to be less clear.

Our experience with the Industry Partnerships Project suggests that employers in a contracting industry will invest in soft skills training — training designed to build interpersonal skills, such as communicating effectively, promoting teamwork, or resolving conflicts — with an eye toward building leadership skills within their current workforce. Indeed, in personal interviews, HR representatives from participating firms consistently stressed the need for soft skills to supplement the technical abilities of workers in supervisory jobs and, more generally, to improve communication and team work among frontline employees.

While soft skills courses were extremely popular in both sectors — 75 percent of all employees sent to training attended soft skills courses — manufacturers made much more extensive use of these courses than did health care firms. In fact, 69 percent of all incumbent workers attending soft skills courses came from manufacturing, and fully 85 percent of all manufacturing employees who were trained (419 of 491) attended classes in this skill category.

Not only did manufacturers make extensive use of the soft skills training offered through the Industry Partnerships Project, many indicated that their firm would pay for similar courses in the post-grant period. Twenty-five of the 41 manufacturing firms that utilized soft skills training courses responded to a final survey of the project; of those, 72 percent reported they would pay for soft skills training in the future.

Manufacturers' utilization of courses under the project, and their willingness to pay for these courses in the future, suggests that incumbent worker training should not be abandoned when an industry is in decline. Instead, resources should be targeted to soft skills training to aid firms' personnel development efforts.

Delivering Training to Dislocated Workers

Dislocated workers benefit from training programs designed for incumbent workers by developing the skills local employers need. To better serve dislocated workers, however, training must be delivered in a different format than it is to those with jobs.

Training offered through the Industry Partnerships Project was developed with the input of area health care and manufacturing employers. As a result, dislocated workers interested in entering those fields had access to training designed to develop the skills local firms were looking for. By tailoring courses to fit employer needs, project-sponsored training not only helped incumbent workers upgrade their skills, but helped dislocated workers gain a competitive advantage in the labor market.

Dislocated workers, like their employed counterparts, also benefited from the fact that project-sponsored training was delivered in a flexible, modular format. That is, courses were broken into a series of short (3 or 4-hour) modules (sections), each covering a particular topic. Students could take one or two modules to brush up on certain skills, or enroll in an entire series of modules (a course) for more complete training. This is extremely practical for incumbent workers who are looking to upgrade a certain skill, but don't want or need to be away from work for the entirety of a course, which may run for several weeks. In some cases, dislocated workers looking to refresh particular skills may take one or two modules in a series as well.

In addition to its modular format, project training was not beholden to the typical semester schedule, but offered at regular intervals throughout the two-year grant period. This flexibility meant that courses could be rolled out in direct response to a major lay-off or plant closing in the area. For workers who have lost their jobs, the ability to access training immediately can be key to quickly re-entering the labor force and maintaining financial security.

It is also important to note that a number of dislocated workers trained under the Industry Partnerships Project went on to enroll in broader degree or certificate programs. In fact, Job Center data indicate that this was the case for roughly half of the dislocated workers served through the project. This suggests that project training was a stepping stone: it got individuals back into the classroom — often, for the first time in years — right after they lost their jobs, providing them access to modules or courses (i.e., Foundations for Health Care) needed for an eventual degree or certificate (i.e., Registered Nurse), while waiting for spots in those programs to open up.

That the flexible, modular format of project training served as a bridge to more extensive training for many dislocated workers reminds us that, ultimately, these workers are looking to be retrained in entirely new fields and need timely, but comprehensive instruction. Clearly, dislocated workers' training needs are very different from those of incumbent workers looking to upgrade particular skills without missing too much work. Training programs must be designed to meet each group's unique needs.

Strengthening Relationships between Employers and Public Sector Institutions

A limited-term, publicly funded investment in worker training can help build long-term relationships between employers and public partners.

Employers tend to be unaware of the workforce development resources available to them. Industry-driven partnerships can significantly improve employers' knowledge of and relationships to these institutions and that can pay-off for workers and firms in the system, even after the public money is gone.

While a number of firms and public sector institutions had experience working together in South Central Wisconsin before the grant period — providing the infrastructure needed to successfully and expediently roll out and deliver training — the Industry Partnerships Project enhanced employers' opportunity to connect with staff at local technical colleges, Job Centers, and the WDB. At the outset of the project, participating employers — many of them new to JWF — were not always fully aware of the workforce development resources available to them through these institutions. In fact, initial employer surveys found that less than one-quarter of the 54 responding firms knew of the resources available to them, and that fewer still felt that a good working relationship existed between their firm and these institutions (see the table below).

Over the course of the project, industry and institutional partners came together on many occasions to brainstorm ideas about how to best design and deliver skills training. Through these “working sessions” employers' knowledge about and relationships with the institutions vastly improved. The table shows that, of 52 employers responding to our final survey, 80 percent or more gained a better understanding of the resources available to them through area technical colleges, Job Centers, and the WDB. Relationships between employers and these agencies also improved markedly over the course of the project as well.

Employer Links to Public-Sector Institutions

	Technical Colleges	Job Centers	WDB
Initial Survey (April 2003)			
% of respondents agreeing with following statement:			
I understand the resources offered to my firm by the:	7%	23%	16%
I feel there is a good working relationships between my firm and the:	7%	16%	9%
Final Survey (October 2004)			
% of respondents agreeing with following statement:			
I gained a better understanding of the resources offered to my firm by the:	92%	87%	80%
Over the duration of the project there was improvement in the relationship between my firm and the:	71%	52%	64%

Employers' ties to the technical college system, in particular, showed great improvement. At the start of the project, the technical colleges received low marks from employers, who complained that course curricula did not meet their needs, that classes were offered at inconvenient times or locations, and that the system's bureaucracy was difficult to navigate. By the end of the DOL grant period, 72 percent of final survey respondents felt that their relationship with the technical colleges had improved. Comments from employers are indicative of the change over time:

"Prior to this partnership, I was reluctant to seek help from the tech college system. I had a disconnect with the person assigned to my county. Now, I feel comfortable contacting [them], and have done so to arrange training for my facility." (Manufacturing firm)

"I worked with people from MATC and was very impressed. I intend to work with them in the future on training needs." (Manufacturing firm)

Final survey data make clear that the Industry Partnerships Project also served as a bridge between employers and Job Center staff. Respondent employers indicated that, by connecting to Job Centers, they had the opportunity to access a pool of qualified workers:

"Job Centers are a real asset to finding qualified talent." (Health care firm)

"Finding a Job Center contact allowed me to talk to the same person over a period of time, and develop a relationship with this center. The center is now aware of our special needs and helps guide people to our company." (Manufacturing firm)

Under the project, relationships between employers and the WDB were also strengthened:

"I think throughout the term of the grant, my relationship with the WDB improved as my level of understanding of the long-term goals of the WDB increased." (Manufacturing firm)

One representative of a manufacturing company summed up the benefits of developing relationships with public-sector institutions:

"Getting to know people at the WDB and MATC, and hearing what they're working on, and learning what is happening across the country, has inspired and challenged us. It has also given us connections to meet some of our needs in the future. I am so grateful to have had a chance to interact with people who are 'in the know' about state dollars and training in industry. What is invaluable asset to be able to connect with them."

Conclusion

The Industry Partnerships Project brought together leading workforce development institutions and employers in South Central Wisconsin to develop and deliver relevant skills training to hundreds of area workers. In previous evaluations of the project, we have shown how health care and manufacturing firms utilized training, what types of training were pursued by incumbent and dislocated workers, the effects of training on job performance and career advancement, and the impact of collaboration on participating employers and institutional partners.

Here, we offered some broader insights into the implementation of workforce training programs based on our observations of the project. We hope that these insights will be useful to other regions or industry partnerships looking to deliver relevant skills training on a large scale or, more generally, to sharpen their shared vision for building and maintaining an effective workforce development system.



Appendix

Center on Wisconsin Strategy Reports on the Industry Partnerships Project:

The Industry Partnerships Project: Overview of Design & Implementation. December 2004.

Skilled Workers, Strong Economy: Preparing for Jobs With a Future in South Central Wisconsin. January 2005.

The Industry Partnerships Project: Final Evaluation. December 2005.

How Employers Win: Meeting Business Needs Through the Industry Partnerships Project. August 2005.

How Workers Win: Building Workplace Skills Through the Industry Partnerships Project. August 2005.

All reports, with the exception of the *Final Evaluation*, can be accessed on the COWS website at www.cows.org. For a copy of the *Final Evaluation* or other information, please contact Kira Dahlk at 608.262.5176 or kdahlk@cows.org.

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