

# **STRENGTHENING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, IN A TIME OF BUDGET STRINGENCY, THROUGH ATTENDING TO INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Current focus of workforce development.** Workforce development is one of the pillars of economic development. Holistically defined by Ronald Jacobs of Ohio State University, it is *the coordination of school, company and governmental policies and programs such that as a collective they enable individuals the opportunity to realize a sustainable livelihood and organizations to achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the history, culture and goals of the societal context.*

This definition focuses on institutions, organizations, programs and policies assisting individuals, not the development of individuals, themselves, over time. The focus on career pathways is also oriented to following a established, external format for development. In general, these approaches suggest an ideal of workforce development to be sought, in which government, labor, workforce development intermediaries, employers and schools collaborate. Existing institutions and organizations lead the way.

In contrast, this paper suggests a complementary ideal: giving parallel attention to honoring the complexity of individuals and preparing them for professional and personal self-sufficiency, as they define it. Although of potential value to all who participate, the approach may assist especially those people whose backgrounds predispose them to staying stuck at or near minimum wage employment.

This is not to say workforce development programs don't have built-in individual development opportunities. Recent examples based on sectoral strategies provide hope and career opportunities for low-income workers. They include Seattle's, Port JOBS, Nevada Partners in Las Vegas and Jane Addams Resource Corporation in Chicago. Another approach is the Business and Professional Women's Foundation effort to assist women veterans. One of its interests sees women veterans as a heterogeneous group, best served by programs and policies tailored to meet their differing needs.

**Why add focus on the individual?** Despite many current, effective workforce development programs, continuing emphasis on programs and policies only can miss a benefit from attending to individual development in focused ways. Emphasis on getting a job, meeting employer's immediate needs, program metrics and even career paths and ladders distract from what speaks to the unique needs and possibilities for individual workers and specific employers --- as well as the long-term economic and social benefits of having increasingly well-employed, ambitious people motivated and able to continue learning because they are inspired by their own vision for their future.

The emphasis on job titles, job ladders and job paths certainly provides an important neatness for analysis and planning. But individuals do not lead linear lives, nor does their development necessarily flourish from assuming they want to and will fit into what

is needed or what exists. Perhaps the seeming lack of understanding and challenge about how to honor and express individual complexity contributes to the preference for labels.

In 2008, there are cuts of 17% proposed in the Department of Labor job training and related workforce development programs budget and 69% in the Department of Education vocational education and adult education budget. Perhaps this surgery reflects, in part, dissatisfaction with a recent audit of the past seven years related to a \$271 million program for training high demand workers. Money was given to industry and nonprofit groups “with almost no competition and little oversight,” according to an April 30, 2008 report in the Washington Post.

Sadly, these criticisms and proposed cuts to current programs make it all the more important to consider complementary efforts. For example, the menu for individual development presented in this paper may be adapted to a community-based level using local resources and the people themselves as well as public-private partnerships.

This menu is geared to giving workers the tools, insights and experiences so they can develop and act on their own version of self-sufficiency. Over time, they will have the motivation to continue learning and adapting to new work situations. The evolution of their own vision of engaging work that’s a good match with their abilities, interests and needs for security will contribute to their confidence to let go of a past that is not working for them.

Part of their transition and evolution requires a longer-term view of how they can earn their living, or how who they are creates a foundation for what they want to do, not how they can get a job or even climb job ladder. The hope, energy and strengthening commitment generated by this view, assisted by tailored guidance and resources, leads eventually to self-directed, incremental growth over the years. The flourishing of individuals in time will benefit employers and society. In other words, there is no quick fix to stimulating a resilient workforce, especially from among potential workers who do not currently have the education and training to continue learning and earning at higher levels.

Developing programs and policies that attend to unique individual development also provides opportunities for additional research on who flourishes and under what circumstances. That information is especially useful for encouraging people not served effectively by generic approaches to workforce development where creaming, or preparing and training those with the best potential, can occur.

Building trust with and getting to know such workers in-depth may promote better understanding of the complexity --- the multiple, interactive factors --- of why they drop out. Rather than ending up with “statistics of the lost,” such qualitative information may provide a bridge to reframing and improving policies, programs and processes for the underserved.

Yet this emphasis on the individual is not new. Many case managers have long tried to work one-on-one, attending to individual differences and complexity, especially when they are given time and resources to do so. But is it really known how long it takes to encourage different individuals with little or no positive employment experience to join and remain in the workforce? How can a short-term training and placement program of several months to a even a few years replace decades of exposure to other values and ways of surviving that serve neither the individual's nor society's interest? And in today's interdependent, competitive world can we afford to ignore any person who could work?

**Specific approaches for focusing on the individual.** Since starting with the uniqueness of the individual does not typify workforce program and policy development and design, this paper suggests specific actions in menu form that can be adapted to particular situations, whether programs, group or individual efforts. While recognizing that not all components are manageable, appropriate or cost-effective, the menu addresses that missing or downplayed dimension of the individual in workforce development.

The suggestions below are designed to assist prospective employees in becoming ready for development and work, for consideration by policy and program creators as well as use by communities and prospective employers.

This menu format recognizes there are many possibilities and limited resources and time. Take aspects that are useful and adjust them to the individuals and cultures being assisted. Perhaps choose one or two top priorities, especially those that could be multipliers in particular situations. Ideally, program participants should be involved in making those choices and adapting them.

### **MENU OF DESIGN COMPONENTS TO STRENGTHEN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES**

**Note: This menu does not include attention to content skills which are best determined by considering individual interests and experience, training and education as well as employer needs. The development of content skills can be added to the menu or addressed separately.**

- **Dealing with isolation and lack of experience with cultures, opportunities and processes outside the person's immediate world:**

*Orientations:* Visiting work places and talking to workers about experiences and adjustments

*Support Groups:* Creating a tight and committed small group that meets regularly to vent, share information, support and educate one another, solve problems together

*Mentors:* Identifying one or two people who are willing to be on call, cheerlead

and guide in exchange for tangible (services) and/or intangible (thanks, appreciation) contributions that all parties agree to

*Shadowing*: Observing and learning from people who cope well with daily routines and challenges of living

*Role models*: Listening to detailed stories and asking questions about how individuals have "made it" at various levels, traditionally and not

- **Learning about getting assistance (mental, emotional, practical, spiritual):**

*Impersonal sources of assistance*: government agencies, nonprofits, churches, mosques and synagogues, computer software, Internet, libraries, books, magazines, newspapers, etc.

*Guidance and practice in using resources*: how to approach new sources, deal with frustration and glitches, establish relationships, make sense of complex information, say thank you

*Creation of personalized menu of resources* to expand each person's repertoire, designed to meet particular needs, style, level of development, capacities and goals

- **Building knowledge and understanding of oneself:**

*Guidance in appreciating self*: Learning how to name, analyze and synthesize information related to unique skills, values, passions, interests and strengths

*Identification of personal issues and blocks* such as fear and anxiety, including learning a variety of ways to deal with them

*Feedback from and collaborative problem solving* with respected and trusted people on strengths and ways to modify habits that get in the way of using capacities; taking action on what's learned

*Telling own story* to trusted listeners who will provide supportive comments and useful feedback on patterns of behavior and strengths

- **Integrating information about self, environment and resources for life design and renewal:**

*Learn how to express goals for self-sufficiency that provide meaning and hope*, bridging the practical and ideal with a viable vision

*Develop manageable action plan* with incentives to encourage meeting self-defined objectives through modest steps, supported by mentors and others

*Take action while acknowledging roadblocks as well as successes with confrontation, tough love, stipends, goods and services, rewards and recognition by others of progress*

- **Training in work search skills, including self-presentation, research, informational interviewing, focused résumé writing, interview techniques, job applications, networking, follow-up, alternatives to conventional employment:**

*Develop individual learning plan, based on modest steps, to improve current effectiveness and expand options for the future*

*Role play to develop skills for cultivating contacts, including audio-visual feedback and peer comments*

*Practice interviewing, including feedback from prospective employers*

*Develop information on sources of work and application processes*

- **Training in transferable and soft skills such as critical thinking, planning, observing, maintaining records, effective listening, making arrangements, organizing, estimating time, generating ideas, dealing with feelings, negotiating, decision-making, reading, writing, implementing, group dynamics, developing confidence in intuition, assessing information and expediting:**

*Develop individual learning plan based on priorities of needed skills*

*Use small learning groups and opportunities to practice needed skills with focus on experiential, adult learning processes; self and group assessment of progress*

*Provide short courses and work assignments that help participants experience success*

*Identify apprenticeship and other practice opportunities to reinforce learning and confidence*

- **Encouraging new habits and insights to continue self-development and build self-sufficiency:**

*Discussion of articles, videos, art, tapes, movies, poetry, music, stories and books related to own culture and experience, including identifying new and future learning interests*

*Specification of benefits and costs of former versus new approaches to managing one's life*

*Reinforcement of progress* with rewards, acknowledgment of tangible and intangible accomplishments, honest, useful feedback, assistance and training to guide others; benchmarks for defining future progress

**The context, future and past: attending to employer needs and avoiding reinventing the wheel.** Of course, attention to individual development cannot be done in a vacuum. Attention must be also paid to immediate as well as expected skill needs of prospective employers. What underpins such crucial, practical concerns is important. Examples are:

- employers' resources and interest in supporting work transitions
- the employment culture including how employees and supervisors from different cultures mesh
- the trade-off between wanting to assist people in need and the bottom line

There are many ways to serve the needs of both potential employees and employers that can be explored and tailored to particular situations. And there are decades of experiences --- many useful, and many unproductive and repetitive --- to learn from.

In addition to integrating attention to the individual in workforce development policies and programs, here are other suggestions, some no doubt already being used, for avoiding re-inventing the wheel:

- community-developed design or at least input to designing workforce development processes and programs
- qualitative, quantitative and action research on what's working, what's not and why, with pre and post study design
- identification of progress and problem-solving along the way, engaging prospective and current employers and employees as well as program providers in discussion and action
- increased participant input and responsibility, including each-one-teach-one, and attention to longer-term follow up and information gathering
- experimentation with program designs from experience outside workforce development such as leadership development and use of the arts to promote human development

**Continuing attention to basic, holistic considerations contributing to individuals' work readiness:** As already demonstrated in existing programs, preparation and development for the individual to work effectively often includes:

- counseling
- health promotion and benefits
- transportation
- child care
- work readiness and skills training

- assessment of what they know already, can learn and want to do in the longer run

Behind these practical considerations is the need to attend to what gives each person hope for and confidence about their future. One way of increasing confidence is honoring how participants already deal with challenging circumstances. In fact, each person's experience with sheer survival can be a starting point for appreciating and expressing their unique selves in their own words. This process can also include clarifying and integrating their values, transferable skills, passions and interests.

The resulting descriptions can be used to highlight and specify participants' strengths in new ways. This combined information about what makes each person unique provides a foundation for describing who they are and what they want to do. Experience with how to do this gives individuals the tools to continually strengthen their self-concept, goals and learning independently. And saying what they want in viable ways contributes to their commitment and persistence, keeping them going as they enter new and perhaps daunting situations.

**Concluding Ideas:** To ensure the medium is the message, policies and programs will serve longer term goals when they also attend to what makes each individual they serve unique. Therefore, whatever processes are chosen and adapted from this menu or added will ideally include individual, program participants', employers' and program providers' input and assistance. This could involve program design, implementation, refinement and assessment.

Guidelines and requirements for involvement, accomplishment of objectives and continued participation should also be partially determined by the people served. Sequences and time frames, related to what individuals are likely to absorb and integrate into their lives, can be modified over time based on periodic check-ins and discussion.

Finally, this community-based approach provides leadership opportunities for both prospective employees and employers by turning the process over to them as much as possible. Nevertheless, operating guidelines must be fair and firm, with useful discipline and assessment observed. All stakeholders will have responsibilities and benefits related to their needs and motivations as much as possible.

Note: The ideas above reflect recent independent study and participation in the Workforce Learning Group sponsored by the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. Previous study of workforce development included the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA), Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and Joint Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and design of a community-based effort. Other relevant experiences are human resource consulting, including 25 years as a career and life management consultant; living in a range of cultures such as India, Ecuador, Guatemala and New York City; teaching human resource management subjects at several universities; management consulting; learning through clients' experiences and advanced degrees in public administration, personnel and "manpower" development.

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