

ENDNOTES



Overcoming Barriers to Employment in a Tight Labor Market

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CONDITIONS FOR THE UNDEREMPLOYED CALL FOR MULTIPRONGED STRATEGIES. THESE INCLUDE ACCELERATED LEARNING FOR ADULTS WITHOUT POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, MORE ROBUST JOB-CONNECTION PATHWAYS FOR YOUNGER WORKERS, AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS THAT PROVIDE TRAINING FOR JOBS IN DEMAND.

INTRODUCTION

As we face one of the tightest labor markets in more than 16 years, this issue of *MassBenchmarks* explores the state of youth employment and paid family and medical leave policy in Massachusetts. While our overall unemployment rate is at a historic low—2.8 percent as of December 2016—younger workers 16-24 and workers with only a high school diploma are disproportionately unemployed and labor force participation has declined since the early 2000s. Alan Clayton-Matthews, Senior Contributing Editor for *MassBenchmarks*, has often noted labor force constraints that Massachusetts will face as baby boomers retire and our workforce continues to age. Our residents who are unemployed today (more than 100,000) and those who have had limited or no attachment to the labor force face significant barriers to employment. They include navigating online applications and prehire assessments,¹ managing the financial tightrope associated with public assistance benefit “cliff effects,”² and mastering the skills necessary to meet the demand of employers throughout the state. In a tight labor market, policy makers, educators, workforce development professionals and businesses have a tremendous opportunity to work together to support and integrate these workers into our economy. In addition to the solutions proposed in this issue, here are a few additional strategies that the Commonwealth could test, strengthen or expand.

BUILDING A TALENT PIPELINE THAT RESPONDS TO INDUSTRY DEMAND

Driven by technology and globalization, the fast pace of change in the skills and credentials sought by industry requires that the Commonwealth continue to identify ways to accelerate learning and skill acquisition, build robust communication loops with industry, and create more effective on-ramps for younger workers. Economic data indicate that employers use a college degree as a proxy for a set of desired skills, including critical thinking, problem solving and work readiness. The Commonwealth can build career pathways that lead to degrees. It can also experiment with other demand-driven strategies like apprenticeships and competency-based education to test whether they—when developed in close partnership with industry—can be effective in moving people without college degrees into higher skilled careers.

The data further show that opportunity in the Commonwealth is skewing toward industries that are predominantly staffed with workers with bachelor’s degrees and also toward careers that require a bachelor’s degree or higher, like health care, education and finance. Given that educational attainment is spread unevenly across racial/ethnic lines in the Commonwealth, we should continue to address the achievement gap in education

and target employment and training programs to serve populations that face chronic unemployment or under-employment. That will allow us to build a pipeline of skilled workers to fill jobs in demand.³

In Massachusetts a cross-secretariat body, the Workforce Skills Cabinet, coordinates strategy among housing and economic development, workforce development and education. In addition, leaders across state agencies use the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to connect services through a career pathway framework. Regional sector partnerships, such as those funded through the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF), provide training for jobs in demand across the Commonwealth, albeit on a small scale.⁴ Massachusetts, through its YouthWorks program, is the only state to invest state dollars in subsidized employment and work readiness training for low-income teens.⁵ By continuing to invest in what works while also moving forward with new strategies, Massachusetts invests in its biggest asset—the talent of its people. Here are some critical strategic areas:

Accelerated learning for adults without postsecondary education: With increasing skill demands, it is critical that adults with high school degrees or less and non-native English speakers have opportunities to engage in learning that advances their numeracy, literacy and work-readiness skills. That includes timely preparation for success in the workplace and in postsecondary programs. States are experimenting with mobile technology, competency-based education, accelerated learning, personalized learning and digital badges to increase the timeliness, scale and effectiveness of adult educational pathways. In Massachusetts, job seekers at community colleges, one-stop career centers and adult basic education programs have opportunities to remediate literacy, numeracy and soft skills using Career Ready 101, a product of ACT.

Robust pathways for younger workers struggling to connect to jobs: Many teens and high school graduates, as well as some new college graduates without work experience, find it challenging to connect to the labor market. Preparing teens for the workplace and connecting them to the entry-level labor market provides critical work experiences that studies show lead to better earnings and employment outcomes as adults. The lack of soft skills among new and emerging workers is a mantra repeated by businesses across the Commonwealth. There are opportunities to expand the use of competency-based work readiness training through the Signal Success curriculum or other soft skills curricula for teens and young adults in high schools, non-profit settings and work


settings.⁶ For young adults in postsecondary programs, work experience through internships and co-operative placements provide pathways to employment after graduation and allow them to practice critical work readiness skills.

Leveraging relationships, instructors and equipment in career vocational and technical education (CVTE): CVTE is a proven resource for preparing high school students and adults for skilled jobs in demand in a wide range of fields including STEM, advanced manufacturing, health care, automotive, welding, building trades and information technology. CVTE schools are in constant communication with local businesses through business advisory committees and co-operative placement programs. Continued funding for capital equipment grants and sector training grants can support the scaling of CVTE training capacity and its alignment with employer demand.

Expanding “Learn & Earn” strategies: Apprenticeships and on-the-job training provide skill development, certification and upward mobility for workers who may not have—or need—a college diploma. Apprenticeships are well established in the construction field and starting to gain traction in manufacturing, health care and information technology. On-the-job training (OJT) provides opportunities for workers and businesses to try out an employment relationship while investing in the employee’s skill development. The Commonwealth should encourage and promote apprenticeships and OJTs in new sectors and occupations.

Expanding regional sector partnerships that provide training for jobs in demand: Regional industry sector partnerships are bringing together business, education and workforce organizations to train the unemployed or underemployed for in-demand jobs. The workforce, education and industry are deploying regional planning to determine priority hiring opportunities. The WCTF supports training and convening activities that prepare a talent pipeline for industries experiencing skill shortages. The sector partnership model of training has a proven record of accomplishment of positive employment outcomes for unemployed workers, but the funding to support the model needs to be more consistent to bring the strategy to scale.

Investing in ongoing skill development of employed workers and Massachusetts businesses: The Commonwealth supports training for incumbent workers to meet businesses’ needs and help strengthen their competitive position in the global market through the Workforce Training Fund. Given the challenge of baby boomer retirements, the Workforce Training Fund should be considered a key resource for investing in the skills of frontline workers and planning for leadership succession.⁷

Massachusetts’ greatest strength is its talented workforce. Growing and supporting that talent is both the state’s challenge and opportunity. 

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Endnotes

- 1.) *The Job Seeker’s Challenge: The Impact of Online Applications and Assessments*, Commonwealth Corporation, Released September 2016, http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/resources_2016_the-job-seeker%E2%80%99s-challenge_impact-of-online-job-applications-and-assessments-.pdf
- 2.) Albelda, Randy and Michael Carr. “Combining Earnings with Public Supports: Cliff Effects in Massachusetts” Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, *Communities and Banking*, Winter 2017 Issue. Accessed 1/30/17 https://www.bostonfed.org/-/media/Documents/cb/2017/winter/Combining_Earnings_with_Public_Supports_Cliff_Effects_in_Massachusetts.pdf
- 3.) *Closing the Skills Gap: Meeting the Demand for Skills in a Growing Economy*, Commonwealth Corporation, Released January 2017, http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Resources_LMI-Data-Report_Final_Jan-2017.pdf
- 4.) For more information about the latest WCTF outcomes, see http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WCTF_-_Addressing-Middle-Skills-Gap-Outcomes_Final.pdf
- 5.) For more information about YouthWorks, see http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/YouthWorks-Data-book-Summer-2016_Final.pdf
- 6.) For more information, <http://signalsuccess.org/>
- 7.) For more information, <http://workforcetrainingfund.org/>