

Rural Workforce Development Strategies

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF



INTRODUCTION TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Columbia Basin-Boundary region, like many rural regions, is confronted with a growing gap between the types of skills that workers have obtained and the skills that are required by employers. A [recent survey](#) of employers in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region conducted by the Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute (RDI) highlights concerns related to key aspects of workforce development, including training, recruitment, and retention challenges.¹

Workforce development is defined as “the co-ordination of public and private sector policies and programmes that provides individuals with the opportunity for a sustainable livelihood and helps organizations achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the societal context.”² It is focused not only on job training and recruitment, but also long-term retention and career advancement.³

The types of workforce development strategies used vary between sectors and regions. Some of these strategies are easily replicable, while others are not. For example, business and training in the information technology cluster in Silicon Valley has been extensively studied but there has been limited success in applying these strategies in other parts of the world.⁴

There is no one formula for a successful workforce development strategy in rural areas, just like there is no one formula for economic development.⁵ However, being aware of and understanding existing strategies can help to guide and inform new strategies. **This knowledge brief provides an overview of challenges in workforce development and strategies that practitioners can take to reduce the skills and training gap.**

CHALLENGES

In recent decades, five interrelated factors have presented challenges to workforce development²:

- Globalization (e.g., global market connections and competition),
- Technology (e.g., advances in communication technology),
- The new economy (e.g., economic shifts leading to new job classifications and training needs),
- Political change (e.g., increased openness to foreign and private ownership, and declining influence of unions), and
- Demographic shifts (e.g., aging baby boomers).

Different demographic groups can experience these challenges differently, which requires employers and workforce development practitioners to develop strategies that accommodate the needs of target groups. For example, a study of a program that retrains people laid off due to automation of work, globalization, or their employer's declining competitiveness found that it is more difficult for these individuals to get job offers than it is for other students in the same program, which indicates that trainees who have been laid off may benefit from customized services within the program.⁶ As another example, the RDI has prepared [knowledge briefs identifying the challenges and opportunities to engage youth in workforce development](#).

Rural employers face additional challenges such as low population size and density, and fewer customers and skilled workers, while workers face obstacles such as access to childcare, transportation, and housing.⁷ Many rural economies are reliant on low wage resource and manufacturing industries that limit growth in high skilled jobs that attract highly educated workers.⁵ The [Kootenay Regional Skills Training Plan 2013-2020](#) summarizes research on labour market demand in the region, workforce development challenges, and recommends actions for aligning workforce skills with key economic drivers.

STRATEGIES FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS & RESEARCHERS

In general, the most effective workforce development strategies “target higher wage jobs, mix job readiness and contextualized skill training, provide post employment services and supports, and provide upgrade training in the context of identified career pathways.”³ However, as noted above, there is no single successful workforce development strategy, and a strategy should be tailored to suit the regional context.

To be effective, it is critical that a region's workforce development strategy is coherent, aligned with the regional economic development strategy, and strongly supported by stakeholders.^{5,8,9} It must also take into account the impacts of policies at different levels of government (e.g., national, provincial, and local), changing economic conditions, and the specific needs of each industry sector within the region.⁹ As is the case for [economic development](#), workforce development strategies should include short, medium, and long-term criteria to evaluate their success.²

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of new workers can be particularly challenging in rural regions. Rural regions often face a mismatch between the high skills required by an industry sector and the skills of local workers.⁷ This leads to employers recruiting skilled workers from outside the region, which is less beneficial for local workers and the regional economy.⁷ In the Kootenays, there is also competition with other regions for workers (e.g., trades workers), which may require employers to offer wage increases and other incentives to recruit and retain employees.¹⁰

Attracting skilled workers from outside a region comes with both benefits and risks for regions and its businesses and workers. The in-migration of highly skilled workers into a rural region, such as the Kootenays, can have complementary effects on employment of local people, which is key to building a regional employment base (e.g., expansion of production, lowering production costs, creation of new jobs for local workers).¹¹ However, the in-migration of low skilled workers may crowd out some local workers.¹¹

A strategy that aims to attract higher skilled and higher-educated workers benefits lower skilled and lower-educated local workers.^{11,12} One reason for this benefit is that higher income workers are more likely to hire services provided by lower skilled workers, including cleaning, maintenance and small repairs, gardening, shopping, and babysitting.¹²

On a broad scale, attracting skilled workers from other regions does not help make the overall size of the provincial or national talent pool any larger,⁸ which can be a problem for rural communities that want to support growth of industry sectors that must compete with other regions for the same pool of workers. Companies looking to move or expand may find it too risky to enter a region where the recruitment strategy is dependent upon attracting skilled workers from outside the region.⁶ Additionally, such a strategy does little to set a system in place that learns how to develop, nurture, and sustain talent locally.⁸

There is an increasing emphasis on inclusivity (e.g., cultural, generational, gender, and religious diversity) as a cornerstone of employee recruitment and retention strategies.^{9,13-16} Recruitment campaigns should be developed to target a diversity of groups for part-time and full-time work, including immigrants, Aboriginal people, parents with children at home, people with disabilities, semi-retired people, and students.^{9,13,15,16}

RETENTION

Creating opportunities for career advancement and training help rural businesses, including small businesses, retain workers and reduce turnover.⁷ Workers can be motivated to stay with an employer that explores opportunities for employees to continue to learn from their jobs.¹⁷ The *Education and Training* section below discusses this topic further. This section briefly highlights a few other strategies for employee retention.

To retain and re-attract workers with family related responsibilities (e.g., time and costs associated with care for children and elderly family members), industry sectors and individual companies need to foster a supportive environment.¹⁸ For example, business and government

PROVIDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR WORKERS IN THE TOURISM AND HOPITALITY INDUSTRIES

Ensuring that affordable housing is available for workers may be an effective recruitment and retention strategy for service industries such as tourism and hospitality. Stakeholders (e.g., industry, municipalities, provincial government, unions, etc.) can collaborate to ensure conveniently located affordable housing is created for tourism workers.^{13,37} For example, [Whistler Housing Authority's Home Run](#) program matches business owners with property owners to provide workforce housing. Unite HERE, Toronto Community Housing, and the Co-Operative Housing Federation of Toronto partnered to build an [affordable housing building](#) for hospitality workers and displaced local residents in downtown Toronto. The building also houses the Hospitality Workers Training Centre.

support for affordable childcare services so that employees with children can stay in the workforce.^{13,14,18}

WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

Western Australia has experienced a boom in the natural resource sector – mainly mining – and related manufacturing sectors in many rural communities. The Government of Western Australia has developed a state-level [workforce development plan](#), and each region of the state has subsequently developed a [plan](#). The overarching state-level strategies to attract and retain workers in the natural resource and non-resource sectors (e.g., health, community services, education and scientific services) include:

- working with private and non-profit sectors to provide an affordable housing strategy aimed at students, lower income, service, and non-governmental workers;
- leverage government and private funding to build regional infrastructure and amenities that encourage people to live and work in the region; and,
- providing information and resources to small and medium companies to support them in workforce planning and development.⁹

Retention strategies in the tourism and hospitality industries can be applied elsewhere too. For example, encouraging an inclusive workplace (e.g., cultural, generational, and religious diversity)¹³ and gender balance across occupation types, including in technical and managerial leadership positions.¹⁴ Employers should also be aware of generational differences (e.g., skill sets, workplace expectations) among a workforce and adapt accordingly.¹⁹ This includes creating opportunities for mature employees to continue to work (e.g., part-time/flexible hours, as mentors and trainers).¹³

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Post-secondary education is rapidly becoming a necessity for workers. It is increasingly becoming difficult to find unskilled and lower-skilled jobs that pay a living wage.²⁰ Many rural communities have also seen a decline in demand for low-skilled workers.²¹ In British Columbia (BC), over the last decade the economy has seen a substantial shift towards jobs being filled by people with post-secondary education, while jobs previously held by workers with high school or less education are declining.²²

To attract high-skills and high paying job growth to rural communities, strategies need to be developed to raise the educational level of community members and the quality of education available locally.^{5,8,23} Industry clusters are almost always located in regions with higher education levels (i.e., completion of a college or university program).²³ Higher levels of education and training serve as a defense in times of economic instability and facilitates the adoption of new production methods and services by local businesses.^{23,24}

Secondary school

Whitener & Parker point out that “Efforts to reduce high school dropout rates [in rural areas], increase high school graduation rates, enhance student preparation for college, and increase college attendance are all critical to improving local labor quality.”⁵ Three of the seven school districts in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region consistently achieve higher than provincial average high school completion rates, while the others have a more mixed success rate.²⁵ Improving the quality of early education in rural areas also raises the labour market performance

level of graduates, and can attract new residents and former residents who return to raise children, find jobs, or for other family reasons.²³

Establishing workforce development programs in high schools (e.g., dual high school/college credit options) that allow students to take specific college-level courses can serve as alternative pathways to post-secondary education.⁴ Such programs may appeal to students who would otherwise dropout or face other barriers to entry in post-secondary schools (e.g., lower grades or lower-income).⁴

Post-secondary

It is important to ensure not only that residents have opportunities to enter post-secondary regardless of their past performance, but also that colleges have a system in place to meet students at their level and to support them as they progress to completion and job searching.²⁰ This is particularly critical for people in groups (e.g., lower income families) that have historically been disadvantaged and underserved by the post-secondary education system.²⁰ In addition, improving the quality of education provided in local colleges and universities can provide large benefits to a region's economic growth prospects.^{5,26}

Workforce development oriented programs can be designed to provide tailored training for specialized industry sectors.^{8,21} Such training may even be a more successful way to attract businesses to rural areas than offering them tax reductions because the availability of a well-trained workforce helps company productivity and innovation.⁵ But, colleges and other educators in rural communities need to balance tailored training programs with broader content that will allow workers opportunities for life-long learning (see below) and to adapt to changes in the economy.²¹

By developing specialized training, colleges and other educators can negotiate with employers to hire well-trained new graduates.⁸ A recent study by The Conference Board of Canada found that many employers in BC want post-secondary schools to increase work-integrated learning, such as co-operative education, internships, mentoring, capstone projects, group work, and post-secondary education-based consultancy opportunities.²² Preferences for the specific types of work-integrated learning programs can vary by industry sector. For example, BC employers in the tech sector put greater emphasis on co-ops and paid internships than other sectors.²² Some natural resources sector employers also prefer co-ops, but employers in this sector are more likely than other sectors to use apprenticeships to train new recruits.²²

Colleges and other educators in rural communities are often limited in the programs that they can offer due to a low density of students.²¹ Fortunately, through the inter-institution transfer system in BC, students have the opportunity to attend a local community college for one or two years before transferring to a university elsewhere in the province to complete a degree or vice versa.²² A previous RDI Knowledge Brief on [Youth Retention](#) noted that youth leaving a community can be a good thing – so long as there is thought given to ensuring youth return.

Workplace learning and training

Once people enter the workforce, employers' decisions to invest in both informal and formal training and learning can contribute to a better skilled and more competitive workforce.²⁴ In rural areas, some employers provide on the job training to newly recruited workers who lack the necessary skills. However, employers should avoid becoming over-dependent solely on this form of training because over time it may have a negative effect on their company's competitiveness.²⁷ For example, a study of small and medium sized manufacturing companies in

rural northern England found that unless training involves external, specialist input, then it is “unlikely to result in a significant up-grading of the human resource base.”²⁷

When employers are choosing external training they need to be practical about selecting types of training that are useful to their business, and avoid sending employees to training simply because funding (e.g., government grants) is available.²⁸ Before deciding on what types of training programs to offer, employers should consult with employees about the types of skills and knowledge that would benefit their development.^{8,28} In general, employees are unlikely to buy into training initiatives that they view as threatening or damaging to their interests (e.g., training associated with new technology or organizational change that may threaten long-term job security).²⁸

Multi-skilling

Training a portion of workers to become multi-skilled or cross-trained workers is a workforce development strategy that can help retain experienced workers²⁹ and minimize staffing shortages.^{30,31} Multi-skilled workers are proficient in a main craft/job, and have some training or proficiency in one or more other crafts/jobs. Multi-skilling has been used in a variety of industry sectors including retail,³¹ construction and facility maintenance,^{29,32} technology manufacturing,³³ healthcare,³⁰ and others.

While multi-skilling a portion of workers can have added costs (e.g., training costs, increased wages), there are many benefits. For instance, when multi-skilled workers form part of a construction team they reduce construction times, costs, and hiring requirements.^{29,32} Multi-skilled construction workers also have increased opportunities for career advancement and they are more likely to remain steadily employed within the same region.²⁹

Life-long learning

Policymakers are concerned about the effectiveness of the current adult-learning sector in Canada at providing the skills and knowledge that adult learners need for future changes in the global economy.²⁴ There is a growing emphasis on lifelong learning, which requires workers to upgrade their skills throughout their working life.⁸ This includes employers and training providers actively supporting the training needs of older workers.³⁴ In general, this is particularly important in rural areas because if many of the younger workers migrate to urban areas then the available pool of workers tends to be older.⁷ New approaches (e.g., e-learning) to the delivery of education are increasingly contributing to skills and knowledge development, including essential, technical, administrative, and managerial skills.²⁴

Graduated training programs allow people to advance their career paths over time.⁸ This can be mutually beneficial for employers and employees. When combined with credit programs, non-credit education can be tailored to meet both the immediate skills needs of students and employers, and the long-term degree interests of students.³⁵ [The District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund](#), a health care sector training service in Philadelphia, works with local employers and other educators to provide graduated training programs that allow employees to advance their education in a consecutive order (e.g., from entry-level training to Ph.D.) as they advance into higher level jobs throughout their career.⁸

COLLABORATION

Companies, educators, community-based agencies, governments, and other stakeholders all have a role to play in workforce development. It is important for professionals in each of these

areas to avoid working in silos.² Instead, they should seek to understand how their individual work can contribute to a broader collaborative effort in the development of workforce strategies. A key component of workforce development is bridging individual, organizational, and societal interests in a mutually beneficial manner.²

Many areas are suited for collaboration in workforce development. For example, when community colleges in a region (or across the province) work together they are able to share knowledge and resources, and effectively build their areas of expertise, which in turn can enhance student learning opportunities, economic development, and innovation.²⁰ Governments and funders should encourage and reward collaboration among colleges.²⁰ Developing strategies to stimulate job growth and up-skill workers in industry clusters requires collaboration, leadership, and coordination among public and private stakeholders.⁴

Workforce Development Networks

In rural sector clusters where employers have similar needs, taking a collaborative approach to workforce development enables them to provide training to a larger share of their workforce while spreading the costs of training over more companies.²¹ As one study observes, companies must learn not only to compete, but also to strategically cooperate with one another.³⁶ By increasing their overall investment in training employers help maintain a region's competitiveness, expand the pool of regional talent, and promote a culture of lifelong learning.⁸

Workforce development networks are partnerships, collaborations, or alliances that typically involve community-based organizations (e.g., community development corporations), education and training institutions, employers, and public sector organizations.^{21,36} The primary objective of workforce development networks is to provide stronger linkages between the supply- and demand-sides of the labour market.⁷ Community-based organizations play a crucial role in workforce development networks because they are well connected to both workers and employers, so they are aware of the skills that are needed and that should be sought in a region.²¹

Green highlights three ways that workforce development networks influence the functioning of a rural labour market²¹:

1. They increase the information available to both workers (e.g., improved information about the availability of jobs and skill requirements) and employers (e.g., work ethic of potential hires).
2. They can smooth the transition of young workers' from school to work by improving information flow between educational institutions and employers (e.g., creating school-to-work and apprenticeship programs). This can prevent young workers from floundering through multiple jobs in a short time, which is a common problem in rural areas.
3. They can help employers overcome the collective action problem of everyone wanting a well-educated and trained workforce, but no individual employer wanting to risk investing in training an employee that they might lose to a competitor. As mentioned above, bringing employers together to set up training in a collaborative effort reduces the risk and cost to individual employers.

Services made available through workforce development networks can provide rural workers with tools to meet their career needs and adapt to changes in the global economy.²¹ Arrangements such as career ladders, which create paths for career advancement within a local economy, can also benefit both small and large companies in a rural region.⁷ Smaller companies are able to hold on to workers and reduce turnover rates, while larger companies benefit from increased access to a skilled and well trained workers.⁷ While employers may only see limited

short-term benefits from involvement in workforce development networks, over time collaborative efforts can improve employee retention and recruitment.²¹

Intermediaries

Workforce intermediaries (WIs) can play a vital role in building partnerships and networks as part of a region's workforce development strategy, in an effort to prepare workers for high growth sectors.^{3,4,6,8} WIs are more than standard job matching organizations.³ Their aim is to establish mutually beneficial relationships between employers, learners (i.e., workers), and education and training providers.²⁸ Lifelong learning, worker advancement, regional competitiveness, and environmental sustainability are ideas that often guide their work.³ Many WIs look to improve opportunities for lower-skill, lower-wage, and recently laid-off workers,^{3,4} including jobseekers who might otherwise be overlooked or seen as under qualified.⁶

The dual customer approach that WIs take to training and work placement support treats both employers and workers (current and prospective) as clients, rather than focusing on one or the other.⁶ They are typically focused on industry sectors or clusters within a region,^{3,4} and are most effective when they have established close and long-term relationships with employers in a local and sub-regional labour market.^{6,28}

There are a wide range of organizations that can either serve as or help set up WIs, including community organizations, employer associations, labour unions, and community colleges.³ Below are some examples of WI initiatives in the United States.

BioWork

Community colleges across North Carolina run an innovative non-credit program called BioWork that was developed and customized in collaboration with biomanufacturing (i.e., biotechnology) companies to train jobseekers for entry-level technician jobs in pharmaceuticals, chemical product manufacturing, and biomanufacturing.⁶ The program is available at 12 community colleges and targets high school graduates, workers who have lost their jobs in the traditional manufacturing sector, and workers in lower-wage jobs.⁶ All eligible applicants are accepted at the community college of their choice, with enrollees typically choosing the college closest to their

WORKFORCE INTERMEDIARIES

Workforce intermediaries perform a variety of functions:

- Serve as entrepreneurial broker of relationships between employers and jobseekers, focusing on outcomes such as job retention, wage progression, and creating pathways for career advancement³
- Design and implement strategies that help employers grow, for example, by identifying and addressing training needs^{3,28}
- Deliver training programs and/or coordinate with employers, colleges, and other training providers in creating training programs, including graduated programs that support lifelong learning and career advancement^{3,6,8,28}
- Bring together private and public funding streams, workforce services, programs, and information sources to better serve the needs of jobseekers, workers, and employers³
- Build networks and partnerships with key workforce development stakeholders, including employers, community organizations, community colleges, funders, and human service providers^{3,4}
- Learn and adapt as market conditions and opportunities change³

residence.⁶ Within sub-regions, individual colleges customized the BioWork curriculum for local employers, which improved local job prospects for participants.⁶

Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership

The [Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership](#) (WRTP) is a manufacturing sector union-employer partnership. The WRTP recognized the need to combine its workforce development strategy with economic development goals.⁸ Garmise explains that WRTP “first worked with manufacturing employers to modernize their workplace, then trained incumbent workers to meet higher standards in redesigned work environments, and finally recruited and trained entry workers from disadvantaged worker populations.”⁸ To increase employee retention and lifelong learning, jobs were restructured and reclassified to enable internal career advancement as employees earn new training qualifications.⁸

Union Mission

It should be recognized that for some jobseekers who face multiple social and financial barriers (e.g., personal/family crisis, addiction, homelessness, etc.), long-term support services are required, which may be beyond what the training and other services that WIs are able to provide.³ An example of a WI service that works with such issues is [Union Mission](#) in Savannah, Georgia, which runs a combined mental health counseling and culinary arts training program for homeless and at-risk clients. The program offers support with housing, addiction, work placement, and life skills. Through the use of case managers that work with both employees and their employers, this program has achieved an 80 percent job retention rate.⁸

CONCLUSION

Workforce development can be challenging in rural regions. To manage these challenges effectively, stakeholders need to collaborate in designing and implementing workforce development strategies that are aligned with the region’s economic development plans for the short, medium, and long-term.

Workforce development networks can improve the functioning of the regional labour market by increasing linkages between educators, employers, and workers. Intermediaries play a key role in brokering these relationships.

For industry sectors faced with labour shortages it may be necessary to increase incentives (e.g., increase wages, provide affordable housing) in order to attract and retain workers. Emphasis should also be placed on creating inclusive and diverse workplaces with opportunities.

A growing number of industry sectors are in need of well-trained and educated workers. Thus, continuously improving the quality of education and training available, working to increase enrolment, and maintaining high completion rates will be essential for Columbia Basin-Boundary to be a competitive region. Paths should also be created to enable life-long learning and career advancement within individual companies and industry sectors.

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The Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute, at Selkirk College, is a regional research centre with a mandate to support informed decision-making by Columbia Basin-Boundary communities through the provision of information, applied research, and related outreach and extension support. Visit www.cbrdi.ca for more information.