

Big Ideas in Workforce Innovation: Catalyze Change, Accelerate Impact

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) aims to promote individual and regional economic growth “through innovation in, and alignment and improvement of, employment, training, and education programs.” More so than in the past, today’s workforce development landscape invites practitioners and policymakers to innovate, while aligning the priorities of businesses, communities, and workers, particularly individuals who face barriers to employment. What is innovative on the workforce development frontier, and what can be learned from these innovations?

Listening to the field and hearing a need to allow strategic risk-taking, the California Workforce Development Board (State Board) launched the Workforce Accelerator Fund (“Accelerator”) to fund innovative, “ground up” solutions to the challenges that keep Californians from achieving industry-relevant skill attainment, career advancement, and intergenerational income mobility.

Accelerator incentivizes problem-solvers and change agents around the State, both at the individual and organizational levels, to research, design, and prototype unique approaches and strategies to introduce new and scalable practices, programs, and products. Often, the innovation is not a new technology, but a way of linking more seamlessly across workforce and education systems and aligning service delivery and resources.



In the two years since the Accelerator's inception, the State Board has invested more than \$10 million in 71 innovation projects leveraging more than \$13 million in public and private investments and serving 7,600 Californians.

Out of these project-specific experiences have arisen visible changes that are both cultural, in approaches to workforce development practices, and structural, in responses to the real constraints and barriers that confront workforce practitioners. Emerging from the innovation process are intersecting elements that appear to contribute to an innovation's success and potential for eventual scale, sustainability, and replication. Accelerator is a catalyst for change in the workforce system, and this brief describes projects that exemplify four key intersecting elements:



Employing listening strategies, assessing need, and taking action in real-time



Taking risks, leveraging failures, and sharing lessons



Linking across workforce and education, achieving greater alignment, and accelerating service delivery



Prototyping to scale, developing sustainable products and programs, and replicating what works



Accelerator Examples Across the State

Paid Externships for Displaced Tech Workers

Staff of the NOVA Workforce Board frequently support displaced tech workers, whose re-entry into this fast-changing industry can be imperiled by a gap in work history. Responding to input from job-seekers that they needed to refresh their skills in an actual work environment, and from employers that they would pay wages for a "trial run" of pre-screened and promising job candidates, NOVA prototyped a 6-8 week paid externship with small to mid-size employers in the Silicon Valley. To address employers' concerns about liability, human resources and payroll needs, NOVA partners with the Foundation for California Community College's Career Catalyst to serve as employer of record. An early learning from the pilot was that matching appropriate externs was key to employer satisfaction, so NOVA works with employers on the front end to establish externships, then conducts targeted recruitment of displaced workers. Building on what works, displaced workers from the initial cohort have now completed externships and have been placed in jobs. In partnership with the California Workforce Association, NOVA is engaging networks of workforce boards via webinars, conference presentations, and personal contact with local board leadership to disseminate and replicate the externship model.

Entry Points for Underserved Female Veterans

Los Angeles and Ventura Counties are home to 167,000 female veterans, the largest concentrated population in the country, yet few utilized the services of the Verdugo Workforce Development Board. Through connections with community-based agencies and elected officials, the workforce board set up focus groups with female veterans and listened to their interest in employment and training services. They heard a mistrust of government bureaucracy, but a high need for counseling and support. The vets had strong interest in connecting to their peers, and in furthering their education and skills through the GI Bill. Out of these conversations grew a website dedicated to the region's female veterans, as well as a social MeetUp group where women began to connect with and support each other. These resources are highly utilized today, and the Verdugo Workforce Board has seen a sharp increase in female vets enrolled in WIOA, training, and job search services.

Apprenticeship for the Healthcare Industry to Meet Hiring Need

Kaiser Permanente needed highly-specialized medical coders, but entry-level coders who took the self-study training modules and placement test required for advancement were consistently failing. The Shirley Ware Education Center (SWEC), a labor/management partnership founded by SEIU UHW-West to provide healthcare worker training, met with low- and high-skilled coders and management to learn about work processes and required skills. Critical to the success of a specialized coder, they learned, was a combination of didactic training and applied practice with close observation and feedback. SWEC proposed the design of an innovative Medical Coding apprenticeship, a model they had researched extensively using an Accelerator 1.0 grant. Though it felt exceptionally well-suited to the present hiring need, apprenticeship in Medical Coding was without precedent, requiring new development from the ground up. SWEC worked in tight partnership with Kaiser management – deepening this relationship in the process -- to prototype a training program that could be tailored to upskill entry-level coders or to onboard new employees. To mitigate the risk of trainees working with live medical records, Kaiser hired an outside firm to audit trainee work products, and invested in dedicated coaches to closely supervise and instruct each apprentice on-the-job. Of the first cohort of apprentices, 90% completed initial training, with an audited 98.56% accuracy rate for live medical coding. With ever-growing interest in the apprenticeship model nationally and in the healthcare field, the Medical Coding apprenticeship is poised for scale.

Training, Employment Services and Community Support for Re-Entry

Individuals returning home from incarceration are underserved by the public workforce system, though their need for employment and training services is exceptionally high. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) used a digitally-based customer feedback pilot to zero in on re-employment strategies for this population. In partnership with the San Bernardino Community College District and the San Bernardino Workforce Development Board, CEO facilitated a pilot cohort's WIOA eligibility, orientation to the One-Stop Career Center, and enrollment in a noncredit community college certificate program. Each participant stayed connected to CEO for life skills training, a paid transitional job, and job placement and retention assistance. CEO used Accelerator funds to launch Pathway to Success, an innovative tool for

digital feedback on work performance and areas for improvement. Encouraged by early success, CEO enrolled a second cohort of formerly incarcerated job-seekers, then discovered that many of the piloted services would require systems-level change to be replicated and institutionalized. In some regards, the work has just begun to cement and sustain this significant collaboration, and further listening, risk-taking and innovation will be needed to link these systems.

Model of Community College-Nonprofit Partnership

Opportunity Junction (OJ) works with low-income Contra Costa residents on their path to employment by providing training, support, experience, and employer introductions. When customer feedback revealed challenges navigating and succeeding in training programs, OJ sought Accelerator funds to deepen an existing relationship with Los Medanos College. Building on many years of collaborative experience, OJ and Los Medanos worked together to expand a menu of services for their common customers, including college advising and orientation at OJ, assessment test preparation assistance, and academic counseling, as well as OJ's extensive wrap-around support. With a growing brain trust of education and philanthropic partners, OJ is now exploring sustainable funding sources and scaling opportunities, including a deeper collaboration with the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County (WDBCCC) to enroll disconnected and foster youth eligible for WIOA-funded training and support services.

Tools for Virtual Service Delivery

A series of focus groups with youth and adults led Bay Area Community Resources (BACR) and its partner, Pathways Consulting, to design the CareerHub virtual service model, which uses text messaging and emails to reach geographically-disbursed clients with reminders and encouragement, job announcements, resource connections, skill-building modules, feedback requests, and gift card participation incentives. Despite initial concerns that clients could find the approach to be intrusive, staff transformed the ways they used communications technology and received highly positive feedback from clients. BACR and Pathways Consulting then used a second round of Accelerator funding to train and support a network of seven community-based agencies in San Francisco, serving over 1,200 youth, to adopt and adapt the model, with astounding results: the network experienced a 146% increase in attendance, a 74% self-reported increase in employment skills, and a 125% increase in the response rate for employment and training completion verifications. Recognizing that the CareerHub app could be shared and that other tools could be similarly applied, the team took their story on the road with presentations at six statewide conferences. Among many partners with interest is the Los Angeles County Workforce Investment Board, whose pilot of the virtual service model could soon be scaled to better serve the region's 12,000 disconnected youth.

Routes into Tech for Youth of Color

Large technology companies acknowledge the need to diversify their workforce, but their current practices focus on hiring university graduates and utilizing existing networks. These practices may disadvantage youth who lack connections and professional portfolios, and youth of color in particular may find it difficult to access entry-level positions in companies whose current workforce is overwhelmingly white. The Oakland-based non-profit Hack the Hood used its first Accelerator grant to research the interests of youth of color ages 16 to 24 in

technology careers and the ways tech companies could help support their employability, particularly in entry-level roles. Building from young people’s strengths as well as addressing their relative isolation from professional experiences, staff used a second Accelerator grant to pilot a 5-month workshop/practicum that engaged youth and a team of volunteers from Google AdWords in an interactive follow-up to Hack the Hood’s standard “bootcamp” training, preparing the youth for AdWords certification and short-term paid internships. Based on feedback from youth and volunteers alike, the pilot has now been adapted to create a series of shorter skill-building workshops, prototyping a model of volunteer involvement more easily embraced by a range of tech companies. Both the pilot and the re-imagined workshop series not only build technical skills, but also provide structured and supportive opportunities to pursue further education and employment in the tech sector. Encouraged by initial indications of youth’s persistence along college and career pathways, Hack the Hood is working to sustain and scale both its original bootcamp – through training other youth-oriented non-profits – and the workshop series, now involving additional industry partners such as Adobe, GitHub, Mozilla, Weebly, and WordPress.



Reflections on Innovation

The innovations seeded with Accelerator funds are visibly changing the way practitioners engage and build relationships with partners and clients and potentially transforming a rigid structural apparatus away from short-term compliance and toward long-term innovation. The potential impact on job-seeker and business success has yet to be fully realized as Accelerator innovation is just now beginning to be replicated, scaled, and aligned with regional initiatives in California, such as SlingShot, the Career Pathways Trust Fund, and the Strong Workforce Taskforce. However, the examples in this brief illustrate what are emerging as four intersecting key elements of innovation in successful Accelerator projects:



Employing listening strategies, assessing need, and taking action in real-time

Keeping those they serve at the center of design helps to set these projects off on the right course, while positioning them for on-going iteration and refinement. Successful Accelerator grantees employ various listening strategies as part of the initial research process. These strategies help assess the particular needs of the population served, leading to innovative program design and identification of potential barriers to success.

NOVA Workforce Board incorporated job-seeker and employer input in the design of a new paid externship model customized for displaced workers.

Verdugo Workforce Development Board listened to female veterans to create peer networking strategies that have dramatically increased their WIOA participation.



Taking risks, leveraging failures, and sharing lessons

Developing a culture of innovation requires a little risk-taking. The Accelerator provides examples of grantees leveraging uncertainty and finding success by anticipating and mitigating future risk. Successful grantees involved in multiple Accelerator cycles have taken the learnings from one pilot to apply to the next stage of innovation. Some Accelerator projects work to customize and expand evidence-based models (such as apprenticeship) into new contexts. Others focus on collecting and using data to inform iteration. Not every approach works, and not every opportunity is a success. Building from perceived failure to small wins and on to big victories, lessons are shared not only to inform other potential innovations, but to adapt and iterate in the process of bringing a prototype to scale.

The Medical Coding apprenticeship program designed by the Shirley Ware Education Center and Kaiser Permanente mitigated risk by hiring an independent firm to audit trainees' work with live medical records.

As the Center for Employment Opportunities, the San Bernardino Community College District, and the San Bernardino Workforce Development Board moved to replicate their successful pilot supporting community college enrollment for formerly incarcerated job-seekers, they learned that to further scale would require systems-level changes across the partnership.



Linking across workforce and education, achieving greater alignment, and accelerating service delivery

Successful Accelerator projects are characterized by collaboration across institutions and across public, private, and non-profit sectors to achieve the end goal of accelerating delivery of services for job-seekers and businesses. Successful projects link workforce and education by pursuing innovative work-experience, training and "learn and earn" strategies. They also recognize the importance of leveraging funding and aligning administrative processes to sustain innovations through structural changes at the local, regional, and state levels.

A sustained relationship between Opportunity Junction and Los Medanos College facilitated the integration of education and support services for their common customers. This program partners with the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County to explore leverage points to better support foster youth's participation and success in community college.



Developing new products and programs, prototyping to scale, and replicating what works

Whether an Accelerator grantee develops a product, program or service model, or a new way of partnering or of leveraging funding, they pursue their prototype with a goal of scalability. Scale may be local, regional, or state-wide, and subsequent Accelerator rounds may allow for further testing and replication. In response to client barriers, Accelerator grantees iteratively pilot and learn from innovations that could one day be keys to system-level improvement.

Bay Area Community Resources and Pathways Consulting designed a virtual services model with scale and sustainability in mind, then used lessons from its pilot to replicate adoption across a network of community-based agencies.

Hack the Hood's initial pilot training program morphed into various models responsive to the needs and priorities of industry partners, whose volunteer involvement will help the program grow.

Through the Accelerator, the State Board is fostering a space where forward-thinking public, private, and non-profit leaders can truly innovate to enable solutions to the workforce system's deepest challenges. The State Board has a critical role to play in supporting this environment of innovation by surfacing the elements of successful practice, evaluating impact, identifying opportunities for scale, and championing state-level reforms responsive to insights from the field. Future rounds of Accelerator will continue to surface new ideas and build upon successful innovations.

INTERVIEWEES

- Ruth Barajas-Cardona, Bay Area Community Resources - Sarah Glenn-Leistikow, Center for Employment Opportunities - Susan Mernit, Hack the Hood - Jennifer Cheyer and Cindy Stahl, NOVA - Alissa Friedman, Opportunity Junction - Kim Coulthurst and Amanda Gerrie, Pathways Consultants - Michael Kushner, Shirley Ware Education Center - Judith Velasco, Verdugo Workforce Development Board - Beth Urfer, Jewish Vocational Service San Francisco -

RESEARCH, ANALYSIS AND DOCUMENTATION

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