THE WORKFORCE BEHIND WORKFORCE

Investing in the Professionals Who Power America's Workforce System

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Foreword

America invests billions of dollars each year in workforce development. Those investments support job seekers, employers, training programs, apprenticeship, youth employment, career pathways, dislocated workers, and regional workforce strategies. They are essential investments in economic opportunity and national competitiveness.

Yet one part of the workforce system is consistently overlooked: the professionals responsible for making the system work.

Workforce professionals help businesses address talent shortages. They support workers navigating career transitions, respond to economic disruption, connect individuals to training opportunities, strengthen talent pipelines, and help communities adapt to changing labor market demands.

In recent years, expectations for workforce systems have grown dramatically. Policymakers, employers, educators, economic developers, and community leaders increasingly look to workforce systems as essential partners in addressing the nation's most pressing economic challenges. At the same time, the work itself has become more complex.

Workforce professionals are now expected to understand labor market trends, emerging technologies, talent development strategies, economic competitiveness, workforce policy, data analytics, and employer engagement. They must build partnerships across sectors, navigate evolving funding and policy environments, and respond to workforce challenges that rarely have simple solutions.

Despite these growing expectations, conversations about workforce development continue to focus almost exclusively on programs, policies, funding streams, and outcomes. Far less attention is given to the professionals responsible for delivering those outcomes-and, almost no attention is given to what it takes to develop and sustain their expertise.

As leaders of state workforce associations from across the country, we believe it is time to change that.

Strong workforce systems do not happen by accident. They are built by dedicated professionals who bring expertise, leadership, innovation, and commitment to their work. The conversation about workforce development must include a serious conversation about the workforce behind workforce.

United States Workforce Associations

Executive Summary

America's workforce system is increasingly asked to solve complex economic problems. Employers are struggling to find skilled talent. Workers are navigating rapid technological change and shifting career pathways. Communities are responding to demographic shifts, economic disruption, and intensifying competition for talent. And policymakers are looking to workforce systems to support business competitiveness, expand apprenticeship, strengthen talent pipelines, and connect more people to economic opportunity.

As these expectations have grown, the role of the workforce professional has fundamentally changed.

Today's workforce professionals are no longer simply administrators of publicly funded programs. They serve as strategists, conveners, employer partners, data-informed decision-makers, career pathway experts, and cross-sector leaders. They are expected to understand labor market trends, engage employers, build partnerships, respond to emerging technologies, and implement increasingly sophisticated workforce strategies.

We have professionalized the expectations placed on workforce leaders. At the same time, we have not yet fully professionalized the investment in them.

This issue brief makes a direct argument: workforce development should be recognized and supported as a profession. Like education, healthcare, economic development, and human resources—all fields that require specialized expertise and ongoing learning—workforce development depends on professional networks, leadership development, peer learning, and communities of practice.

Professional development is not an administrative luxury. It is a strategic investment in workforce system performance. Conferences, associations, certifications, peer learning networks, and communities of practice help workforce professionals remain current, share innovations, strengthen partnerships, and improve outcomes for workers and employers.

Restricting or eliminating funding for these activities does not reduce waste. Rather, it reduces capacity. And reduced capacity means weaker outcomes for the workers, employers, and communities that depend on the system.

The strength of America's workforce system depends on the strength of its workforce professionals. If we expect stronger outcomes, we must invest in the workforce behind workforce.

Key Findings

1	**Workforce development is a profession.** The field has evolved far beyond program administration. It requires specialized knowledge, professional judgment, continuous learning, and systems leadership capacity.
2	**Workforce challenges are accelerating.** Artificial intelligence, demographic shifts, changing educational pathways, and labor market disruption are rapidly reshaping what workforce professionals must know and do.
3	**Outcomes depend on skilled professionals.** Programs, policies, and funding do not implement themselves. Workforce professionals build partnerships, engage employers, support workers, interpret data, and translate policy into practice.
4	**Professional development builds system capacity.** Ongoing learning, leadership development, peer engagement, and knowledge sharing are not optional features of a high-functioning system. They are essential components.
5	**Innovation spreads through people.** Many workforce innovations begin locally before being adapted elsewhere. Conferences, associations, peer networks, and communities of practice are how ideas move across regions and states.
6	**The next generation requires new capabilities.** Future workforce professionals will need stronger skills in systems leadership, data-informed decision-making, employer engagement, economic development alignment, and technology adaptation.
7	**Investing in professionals is investing in outcomes.** When workforce professionals gain knowledge, build relationships, strengthen leadership, and share effective practices, workforce systems become stronger and deliver better results.

Workforce Development Is a Profession

For many years, workforce development was understood primarily through the lens of program administration. Success was defined by compliance, service delivery, eligibility determinations, funding requirements, and performance measures. While those responsibilities still matter, they no longer capture the full scope of the work.

Today, workforce professionals are being asked to help solve some of the most complicated challenges facing communities and employers. They support businesses experiencing talent shortages, help workers navigate career transitions, and connect education and training providers to industry needs. Additionally, workforce professionals respond to layoffs and economic disruption by designing sector strategies, career pathways, apprenticeship models, and regional talent solutions.

The work has moved from program administration to systems leadership, but that shift has not been matched by a corresponding shift in how the profession is supported.

Most recognized professions share several characteristics. They require a specialized body of knowledge, rely on professional judgment in complex, contextual situations, have standards, networks, and communities of practice, require ongoing education, and serve a broader public purpose.

Workforce development meets every one of those tests.

A workforce board executive must understand funding, governance, public policy, employer engagement, data systems, economic development, and regional strategy. A business services representative must understand industry needs, labor market conditions, training resources, and employer pain points. A career coach must understand career pathways, supportive services, labor market information, training options, and the human dimension of career transition.

These roles are not interchangeable and require distinct expertise that is consistently developed over time.

They also require judgment. Workforce professionals routinely operate in situations where there is no single correct answer. Two communities may face similar talent shortages but require very different strategies based on industry mix, demographics, educational assets, transportation access, employer demand, and local partnerships. Success depends on the ability to assess conditions, build trust, align resources, and adapt solutions to local realities.

That is professional practice, not program administration.

Workforce professionals also serve a public purpose. Their work influences economic mobility, business competitiveness, community resilience, and regional prosperity. They operate in the space between individual aspiration and economic need.

Yet the profession itself is consistently underrecognized. Workforce development is discussed in terms of legislation, funding streams, performance measures, and program models. Those things are important-but they are not the whole system. The system is ultimately powered by people.

If workforce professionals are expected to operate as strategists, conveners, and systems leaders—and they increasingly are—they must be supported as professionals. That means investing in the knowledge, networks, and leadership capacity that make strong professional practice possible.

Building Capacity in the Workforce Profession

Expertise does not develop automatically. No professional enters a field fully prepared for every challenge they will face.

For example: Teachers continue learning after earning their degrees. Healthcare professionals complete continuing education requirements. Economic developers participate in certifications, leadership institutes, and professional networks. Human resource professionals pursue credentials and ongoing training. These fields have built infrastructure for professional development because they understand that expertise must be continuously cultivated in a changing environment.

Workforce development should be viewed through the same lens. The field changes too quickly for professionals to rely only on what they learned when they entered it. New policies emerge, labor markets shift, employer expectations evolve, technologies reshape work, educational pathways change, and communities face new economic pressures.

How Professional Learning Happens

Professional learning in workforce development takes multiple forms, each serving a distinct function.

- Formal training builds technical knowledge of policy, funding, data systems, and program requirements.
- Leadership programs prepare professionals to manage change, facilitate collaboration, and guide organizations through uncertainty.
- Certifications establish shared competencies and signal professional credibility to employers and partners.
- Mentorship supports newer professionals and accelerates the transfer of institutional knowledge.
- Communities of practice help practitioners solve problems together over time, building shared expertise across organizations and regions.
- Professional associations create infrastructure for all of the above: serving as hubs for learning, connection, knowledge sharing, technical assistance, policy education, and peer exchange.

This matters because workforce professionals rarely have the luxury of solving problems in isolation. A workforce board developing a new employer engagement strategy can learn from a region that has already tested one. A state exploring apprenticeship expansion can learn from another state's implementation challenges. A professional navigating a new federal initiative can benefit from peers who are working through the same questions.

Peer learning is not a side benefit of the workforce system. It is one of the primary mechanisms by which the system improves.

Membership Organizations and Professional Networks

Workforce professionals do not work in isolation. The challenges they face are increasingly regional, cross-sector, and constantly evolving. No single local workforce board, state agency, or service provider develops every solution independently, and progress depends on the ability to learn from peers, share promising practices, and adapt innovations developed elsewhere.

Membership associations and professional networks provide the infrastructure that makes this possible. They create communities of practice where professionals exchange technical assistance, discuss emerging policy, solve implementation challenges, compare strategies, and build relationships that extend beyond organizational boundaries. Questions that might otherwise take weeks to answer can often be resolved through trusted professional networks built over years of collaboration.

As expectations placed on workforce professionals have expanded, the value of these networks has grown as well. Today's practitioners are expected to understand employer engagement, labor market intelligence, sector partnerships, performance accountability, technology, economic development, and an increasingly complex policy environment. Membership associations help professionals stay current, translate change into practice, and ensure that innovation spreads throughout the workforce system rather than remaining isolated within individual communities.

Professional Development, Training, and Credentialing

Modern workforce systems require professionals with increasingly specialized expertise. Youth practitioners, career coaches, business services representatives, fiscal managers, performance specialists, one-stop operators, workforce board staff, and executive leaders each bring distinct knowledge and responsibilities that cannot be developed through experience alone. As workforce systems become more sophisticated, the need for intentional professional development becomes more important, not less.

Professional development equips workforce professionals to meet rising expectations through structured learning, technical training, leadership development, and recognized credentials. Training helps practitioners understand new policies, emerging technologies, employer needs, data systems, and effective service strategies. Credentialing establishes professional standards, reinforces competency, and demonstrates a commitment to continuous learning. Together, these investments strengthen both individual expertise and organizational performance.

The expectations placed on workforce professionals have changed dramatically over the past decade. They are no longer expected simply to administer programs, but to serve as strategic partners, systems leaders, data-informed decision-makers, and trusted advisors to employers and communities. Meeting those expectations requires ongoing investment in professional learning. Workforce outcomes ultimately depend on the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the professionals responsible for delivering them.

The Role of Conferences and Convenings

Conferences and convenings are often described as events. Their value is considerably broader than that.

At their best, conferences create structured opportunities for professionals to learn about emerging practices, hear directly from experts and peers, compare approaches, build relationships across organizations and regions, and bring new ideas back to their communities. They are not retreats from "the work." Rather, they are investments in the capacity to do the work better. State associations that survey their members consistently hear the same theme: practitioners leave conferences with specific changes they plan to bring back to their organizations—a new approach to employer engagement, a different partnership model, a policy detail they had not yet caught.

550+

local workforce development boards and nearly 2,400 American Job Centers nationwide depend on professional staff who rely on networks and peer learning to stay current on policy and practice

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration

Innovation in workforce development has consistently spread through people before it spreads through policy. Sector strategies, layoff aversion approaches, apprenticeship expansion models, business engagement strategies, and workforce-economic development partnerships all moved from one community to another because professionals had opportunities to learn from one another at convenings, in peer networks, and through association relationships.

When those opportunities are limited or eliminated, promising practices can remain isolated. When they are supported, innovation moves faster and more communities benefit.

Credibility and Employer Relationships

Employers increasingly expect workforce professionals to serve as strategic partners, not program representatives. They want help solving real workforce challenges related to recruitment, retention, upskilling, succession planning, and workforce planning.

Meeting that expectation requires credibility. Credibility is built through knowledge, preparation, relationships, and demonstrated competence. Professionals who are current in their field, connected to national networks, and fluent in industry trends are fundamentally better positioned to serve employers than those who are isolated from professional learning opportunities.

Restricting professional development does not make workforce systems more efficient. It makes them less capable of serving the employers and workers they exist to support.

Leadership Capacity

Workforce leaders are expected to convene partners, manage competing priorities, communicate across sectors, influence policy conversations, and guide organizations through uncertainty. These are leadership skills, not simply technical skills.

Leadership capacity does not develop through program administration alone. It develops through exposure to peers facing similar challenges, structured leadership development, coaching, mentorship, and the kind of cross-regional exchange that conferences and associations make possible.

The workforce system's ability to respond to complex challenges depends directly on the capabilities of the professionals working within it. Professional development should not be treated as separate from workforce outcomes. It is one of the primary mechanisms through which outcomes improve.

Preparing the Profession for What's Next

The workforce profession is entering a period of significant transition. The challenges facing workers, employers, and communities are broader, faster-moving, and more interconnected than those of previous decades. Preparing for what's ahead will require workforce professionals to strengthen existing capabilities and develop new ones.

Artificial Intelligence and Technological Change

Artificial intelligence and automation are already reshaping the nature of work across industries. New technologies are changing job requirements, automating tasks, creating new occupations, and altering skill demands in ways that are still unfolding.

Workforce professionals do not need to become technology experts. But they must understand how technological change affects workers, employers, and training systems, and they must be able to translate disruption into actionable strategy for the communities and employers they serve. That requires ongoing learning. It cannot happen in isolation from the broader field.

57%

of current U.S. work hours could theoretically be automated using technologies that exist today — directly expanding the scope of workforce system responsibility

SOURCE: McKinsey Global Institute, “Agents, Robots, and Us: Skill Partnerships in the Age of AI,” November 2025

Workforce and Economic Development Alignment

Business attraction, business expansion, talent development, and workforce availability are now deeply interconnected. Communities that want to compete for investment and jobs must be able to demonstrate a strong talent pipeline. That means workforce professionals and economic developers must work in closer alignment than ever before.

Future workforce professionals will need stronger fluency in economic development strategy, industry cluster analysis, regional competitiveness, and talent attraction. They will need to speak the language of employers, educators, policymakers, and economic developers, and help translate across all of those sectors simultaneously.

Changing Educational Pathways

Apprenticeship, work-based learning, short-term credentials, industry-recognized certifications, skills-based hiring, competency-based education, and Workforce Pell are reshaping how people access training and how employers build talent pipelines. These changes are accelerating, not stabilizing.

Workforce professionals will increasingly serve as connectors among learners, employers, education providers, and policymakers—which is a role that requires fluency across systems that operate with different incentives, timelines, and definitions of success. Staying current in this environment is not a passive activity. It requires active, ongoing professional engagement.

Demographic Shifts

Many communities are facing population shifts, workforce retirements, labor force participation challenges, migration patterns, and changing worker expectations. These trends will influence talent supply, employer needs, and regional strategy for years to come.

Workforce professionals must use data, understand local conditions, and help communities respond with strategies that reflect both economic need and human reality. That demands analytical sophistication and peer exchange with professionals facing similar demographic pressures in different regions.

Leadership Succession

Many workforce organizations are approaching a generational leadership transition. Cultivating the next generation of leaders is not optional: it is urgent. That will require intentional investment in mentorship, leadership development programs, peer networks, and professional pathways that make workforce development an attractive and rewarding career.

The future workforce professional must be adaptive, collaborative, data-informed, technologically aware, and capable of leading across systems. Building that capacity requires sustained, deliberate investment in the profession.

Call to Action: Investing in the Workforce Behind Workforce

The workforce system is frequently described as an investment in human capital. That investment must include the professionals responsible for making the system work.

If we expect workforce systems to respond to talent shortages, support economic competitiveness, expand apprenticeship, help workers navigate change, strengthen employer partnerships, and implement increasingly complex policy initiatives, then we must invest in the people leading that work.

This is a shared responsibility across every level of the system.

Federal Policymakers	Recognize professional development, peer learning, and knowledge sharing as essential components of workforce system capacity: not administrative overhead. Ensure that federal administrative rules reflect this understanding.
State Agencies	Support leadership development, cross-region learning, and professional growth as core workforce system investments. Build professional development into state planning and capacity-building strategies.
Local Workforce Boards	Build staff development strategies and organizational cultures that treat professional learning as essential, not optional. Advocate for the resources needed to support it.
Professional Associations	Continue strengthening the infrastructure that connects, trains, and supports the workforce field. Document and communicate the value of professional networks and peer learning to policymakers and funders.
Employers, Philanthropy & Partners	Recognize workforce professionals as essential partners in regional economic competitiveness. Support investments in professional capacity alongside investments in programs and services.

The goal of these investments is not professional development for its own sake. The goal is stronger workforce systems. Ultimately, this leads to better service to workers, deeper employer partnerships, a faster spread of innovation, and stronger communities.

Workforce outcomes are shaped by workforce professionals. When professionals grow, systems improve. When systems improve, workers gain access to opportunity, employers gain access to talent, and communities become more competitive and resilient.

America's workforce system will not be strengthened by policy and funding alone. It will be strengthened by the people responsible for bringing those policies and investments to life.

The workforce behind workforce deserves to be recognized, supported, and developed. Investing in those professionals is investing in the future of America's workforce system.