SkillWorks

PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

SkillWorks Incumbent Worker Pathways: A Qualitative Investigation

MAY 2009

SkillWorks Funders

Contents

Introduction

A critical element of the SkillWorks workforce development model has been its emphasis on helping incumbent workers develop, embark, and advance upon career trajectories. In the final year of the SkillWorks evaluation, the Funders Group asked the Evaluation Team to study how this program element was implemented and to document incumbent workers' experiences with the model. Specifically, the goals of this study were to explore:

- Participants' goals upon enrolling in the SkillWorks program
- Types and importance of services received by incumbents
- Employer actions that encourage continued career development
- Barriers to ongoing program participation
- Benefits garnered through SkillWorks experiences

This memo provides a brief description of the types of services offered by the SkillWorks-funded workforce partnerships as well as an in-depth discussion of the study's key results and lessons learned.

Survey Methodology

Fifty-five participants from across four of the SkillWorks partnerships were interviewed in the study: The Hotel Career Center (HCC); Partners in Career and Workforce Development (PCWD); Building Services Career Path Project (BSCPP); and the Healthcare Training Institute (HTI—formerly the Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute).[1] The participants were selected using purposeful, stratified and random sampling, which ensured that the sample included individuals from all partnerships and with sufficient variation in the amount of time individuals had been involved in the program.[2]

Table 1. Sample by partnership and cohort.

Partnership Name	Cohort 1 (Participants enrolled in Year 1 or Year 2)	Cohort 2 (Participants enrolled in Year 3 or Year 4)	Total
The Hotel Career Center	5	4	9
Partners in Career and Workforce Development	8	7	15
Healthcare Training Institute	5	9	14
Building Services Career Path Project	7	10	17
Total Across Partnerships	25	30	55

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[1] See the Partnership Profiles for in-depth descriptions of each of these partnerships.

[2] For details about the sampling process, see Appendix 1.

The information presented in this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews with incumbent workers.[3] Members of the research team conducted most interviews over the phone, though a few were done in person to increase the response rate.[4] The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions designed to gather information about their experiences with the SkillWorks program, from enrollment until present.[5]

Summary of Career Pathways

For the purposes of this report, we divide the classes offered through the partnerships into two general pathways: 1) courses leading to the building of foundational skills; and 2) courses leading to technical certifications. Classes focused on foundational skills do not offer job-specific competencies but rather, enhance the participants' broader knowledge base and prepare them for further education. Classes offered by SkillWorks partnerships in this area included basic computer literacy, ESOL, pre-college courses, financial literacy, citizenship, etc. Technical certification classes result in, or contribute to, a recognized credential. Examples of such classes available through the SkillWorks partnerships included Building Maintenance or HVAC certification, as well as medical certifications, e.g., Radiology Technician, Nursing Assistant, or Nurse Practitioner.

All four partnerships offered classes that promoted foundational skills. Three of the four partnerships also provided classes leading to technical certifications. In an effort to maintain the anonymity of the study participants as well as the partnerships, this memorandum does not break out any of our data or findings by partnership.[6] Instead, notable differences in incumbent outcomes that emerge along "foundational" and "technical" lines are highlighted.

Participant Characteristics

In order to understand interviewees' opinions and outcomes it is important to understand incumbents' tenure with partner employers, their reasons for enrolling in program services, and the services that they received.

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[3] While three partnerships provided limited background information about the incumbents, e.g., classes taken through the program and starting salary, this information was inconsistent across the sample, making any analysis of this data untenable.

[4] Eleven face-to-face interviews were conducted on site with two of the partnerships during the final phase of data collection (five at one site and six at the other). This change in protocol reflected efforts to increase the sample size in a timely and cost-efficient manner.

[5] See Appendix 1 for a detailed explanation of our methodology, Appendix 3 for the interview guide, and Appendix 6 for a discussion of the data analysis process as well as some of the limitations of this research.

[6] Given the breadth of services offered by individual partnerships, an analysis of incumbent experiences in each may be of interest. As discussed in the final section of this report, this may represent a viable area for future study.

The majority of the individuals interviewed for this study are still working with the same employer as when they enrolled in the SkillWorks program (Table 2).[7] However, most individuals no longer consider themselves a part of the SkillWorks program. As is discussed later in the report, employees had many reasons for no longer participating, including personal barriers like scheduling issues and health problems as well as programmatic concerns like not offering classes of interest. No striking differences existed in the program and employment status of the incumbents who enrolled in the program three to four years ago (Cohort 1) and those who enrolled one to two years ago (Cohort 2).

Table 2. Employment and SkillWorks program status of interviewees.

	Cohort 1 (N=25)		Cohort 2 (N=30)		Total (N=55) (Cohorts 1 and 2)	
	Number of Incumbents	Percent	Number of Incumbents	Percent	Total Number of Incumbents	Percent
Still at SkillWorks Employer	22	88	27	90	49	89
Still in SkillWorks Program	8	32	13	43	21	38

Participant Goals

In order to illuminate some of the factors that motivated the incumbent workers to enroll in the SkillWorks Program, the interviews probed participants on the factors that initially drew them to the program.[8] The most common themes that emerged are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Incumbent workers' goals for enrollment in a SkillWorks partnership.

Goal	Total Number of Respondents (N=55)	Percentage of Respondents
New Job/Promotion	42	76
Improve English Language Skills	18	33
Further Education	24	44
Wage Increase	10	18
Increase Self Confidence	7	13
Increase Computer Skills	7	13
Achieve Licensure/Credential	5	9

Most incumbent workers joined the SkillWorks program with the goal of advancing their careers (i.e., "New Job/Promotion"). It is important to note, though, that more than half of those who stated this initial goal (55%) were unable to articulate *specific* career goals; rather, they expressed a general sense of wanting "*to move on and move up*" into new opportunities or positions.

Accompanying their expressed desires for career advancement, incumbents were also seeking to further their education, with a notable interest in both English language skills and computer skills. In

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[7] This may be a product of the sampling process as it is plausible that the contact data provided by the partnerships was more accurate for individuals who were still at with their SkillWorks employers than for those who had left partner employment.

[8] This was done in an "unaided" manner; without respondents being given a sample list of goals.

the minds of many of the participants, these goals were closely linked to the aim of career advancement.

> "*I needed to improve my English, and maybe if I need to get a better job, I knew I had to take the time to learn. I need to know a lot of English and if I want to get another job, I need to know a lot more [English]."*
>
> "*I wanted to learn more English and look for a promotion.… Because, first I don't know a lot of English, second I don't know a lot about computers, and third because I need to take a better job or position."*

Gaining self-confidence through the acquisition of new skills and knowledge also emerged as a common theme when participants discussed their initial SkillWorks goals.

Of the respondents who indicated that they entered the program with a specific career goal (45%), the vast majority (all but four individuals) were working along a technical certification pathway. Given that two of the partnerships were healthcare focused, it is not particularly surprising that a majority of those who were able to articulate a specific career goal were interested in nursing or allied health occupations such as radiology technician (25% of those with a specific career goal cited this as a goal). As seen in the quotations below, this may in part, suggest that the pursuit of a nursing position (a "real career" as described by one) is an occupational progression that is at least intuitively understood by incumbents in the healthcare field.

> "*I wanted to improve my knowledge. I'm a very caring person and I saw that I could give more as a nurse than as a secretary and I really wanted to help so that's why I changed my mind. I love people.*"
>
> "*[Nurse training] is a chance for a better job, and a better job leads to better treatment, and better treatment leads to more money."*

The fact that most incumbent workers who joined the SkillWorks program with the goal of advancing their careers did not enroll with a *specific* goal in mind suggests that they may have lacked a specific understanding of the options (i.e., promotions, certifications, lateral moves, and different career tracks) available to them within their particular workplace or sector. This highlights the important role of career coaches and underscores the importance of partnerships working closely with employers to fully define career pathway options and the specific developmental steps required to progress.

Services Received

Table 4 shows the distribution of the respondent population across the two career pathways discussed above.

Table 4. Incumbents by career pathway, based on the type of class accessed.[9]

Class Type	Number of Incumbents (N=55)	Percent
Foundational Skills	28	51
Technical Certification/Degree	23	42
No Classes Taken	4	7

The sample distribution across pathway type is roughly even, with slightly more than half engaged in foundational skills classes. Among those pursuing this developmental track, the most common course of study is English language training (approximately 36% of all incumbents interviewed noted that they took an ESOL class through their partnership). Among those engaged in certification/degree-based training, the most common pursuits are in the medical field with a particular emphasis on nursing.

All of the partnership models were designed to offer some type of career coaching to their participants. More importantly, the vast majority of survey respondents (81%) acknowledged receiving some type of career coaching through the SkillWorks program.[10] Themes that emerged during discussions about the available career coaching services ranged from provision of social and emotional support to aid in identifying and applying for specific educational opportunities.[11] The most common activities reported were developing a career plan (29%), help identifying classes within SkillWorks (13%) and outside of SkillWorks offerings (13%), and help looking for financial aid (7%) (see Appendix 5, Table 5.1). While individuals on the two pathways answered the questions fairly similarly, individuals pursuing a technical certification were more likely to recall assistance identifying classes and less likely to mention resume assistance.

The most common coaching activity reported by incumbents (29%) was the creation of a career development plan. Given that this information is self-reported and requires the participant to recall an event that may have occurred up to four years ago, it is likely that this is an underestimation of this practice. Additionally, at least one partnership had written career plans on file for all of their SkillWorks participants, which is another indicator that the existence of these documents is likely underreported by the incumbents interviewed for this study. It is also plausible, however, that these plans are not being created in a manner that provides an adequate level of ownership or understanding among participants.[12]

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[9]   All of the participants we interviewed were considered program participants by one of the partnerships. It is possible that the four individuals who said they had taken no classes might have only accessed coaching and/or that the individuals did not associate classes they took with the SkillWorks partnership.

[10]   The form and role of this coaching varied from one-on-one meetings to classrooms visits by a coach to answer general questions. This variation in services makes it difficult to tease out the most effective practices or even to make comparisons across those who were focused on 'skills' and 'credentials.'

[11]   Participants were not given a list of coaching activities to choose from; rather, they created their own descriptions of the coaching they received.

[12]   Interestingly, 75% of the individuals (12 out of 16) who reported that their career coach helped them develop a career plan also noted that this plan was written down. It is possible that the act of putting this plan on paper makes it more salient to the participant.

Key Findings

Incumbent workers' interview data presented below provide insights into the trajectories and outcomes of a sample of workers who participated in a SkillWorks workforce partnership. Specifically, the discussion focuses on 1) program features that successfully engaged participants as well as barriers to engagement; and 2) individual outcomes.

Effective Program Features and Barriers to Participation

Incentives to Enroll

While career development may be a compelling reason for participating in a workforce development program, there are many potential barriers to its pursuit, including personal issues, limited time, and limited finances.[13] In order to gain a better understanding of the factors that were most influential in "enticing" incumbent workers into joining the SkillWorks initiative, participants were asked a series of questions about the factors that "allowed" or "convinced" them to enroll.

Table 6 summarizes the most common incentives that incumbents identified as motivating them to move from investigating to *actually enrolling* in a given partnership.

Table 6. Partnership incentives that were seen as effective by incumbents.

Incentive	Number of incumbents (N=55)	Percentage of Incumbents
Partial or Full Compensation for Wages	21	38%
Tuition Reimbursement	10	18%
On-Site Classes	9	16%

Not surprisingly, financial incentives were the most often mentioned motivators for participating in the SkillWorks program. Receiving either partial or full wage compensation for class time was noted as an effective incentive by many (38%) of participants: *"The best advantage is having the chance to work and study at the same time."* In a similar "financial" vein, reimbursement was mentioned as an enticement by 18% of incumbents interviewed.

While these findings underscore the importance of financial incentives in promoting in workforce/skill development activities, it is notable that two individuals who took advantage of tuition reimbursement also felt that the condition of being reimbursed only upon *completion* of the class posed a financial strain: "*[My employer] reimburses me for the classes, but I still have to pay the tuition upfront. It's not easy*." This incumbent felt that vouchers (rather than reimbursement) would provide more flexibility: "*I wish [the partnership] would provide a [credentialed] program on the premises or at least offer vouchers to study elsewhere*." It is plausible that some incumbents were unable to take a particular class due to a lack of financial resources for upfront tuition payments.

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[13] Conway, Maureen et al., *Sectoral Strategies for Low-Income Workers: Lessons from the Field.* Workforce Strategies Initiative, a project of the Aspen Institute, 2007, pp 58-63.

On-site classes were another program feature that incumbents viewed as an effective enticement to join the program. This typically reflected a transportation issue or was simply seen as a time-saving measure: *"I just heard about the nursing program they were offering [at the hospital], and since I wouldn't have to travel to school after work, I just decided to take it."* Clearly, this incentive allowed incumbents to save both time and money, which is a particularly critical priority for those employed in lower-skill occupations.

Keeping Incumbents Engaged: The Role of Teachers and Coaches

While attracting incumbent workers to enroll in a SkillWorks partnership is the first hurdle, an equally important challenge is keeping them engaged. Respondent feedback underscores the importance of participant/staff relationships, particularly those that were formed with high-quality teachers and engaged career coaches.

Approximately one-third of the incumbents mentioned the role that effective and dedicated teachers played in keeping them engaged and/or interested in the program. Their comments emphasized the quality of instruction and the provision of moral support.

> *"So far, all the teachers have really helped me [achieve my career goals]."*
>
> *"I liked the way the teacher taught and how she seemed interested in helping us. She is very easy to understand and explains everything very well."*

Career coaches were also cited as a factor that kept incumbents engaged; 25% of the respondents felt that their career coaches played a role in motivating them to remain in the program. One participant emphasized that her career coaches helped her to refocus and finish tasks that she "would have ordinarily quit." Another spoke of his reliance on his coach for ongoing support.

> *"She was always helping me and giving good advice…. Every time I got stuck on something, I went right to see her."*

While the quality of instructors and counselors is critical to keeping participants engaged, feedback also confirms that the opposite can be true. That is, teacher turnover resulting in inconsistent quality or lack of follow-through on the part of a counselor can undermine student engagement, motivation and commitment.

Several participants stated that a change in instructor quality impacted their overall experience in the program. For example, one incumbent attributed her declining interest in the program to a change in teaching quality: *"Everything was better before [we got a new instructor]. She [the first instructor] was more enthusiastic, but she could control everything, made sure nobody was distracted."* These experiences underscore the potentially invaluable role that engaged, qualified teachers play in keeping incumbents engaged.

While the incumbents' commentaries about their career coaching experiences were generally positive, three participants cited lack of consistent follow-up by their career coach as a factor that influenced their decision to leave the program. For example, one incumbent stated that she was unhappy with

her career coach and the information (or lack thereof) that she was provided: "*They* [my career coach] *didn't contact me anymore…. I fell though the cracks…. They dropped the ball.*" While these three experiences were clearly outliers among the surveyed participants, they do serve as a reminder of the critical role that a career coach can play in keeping an incumbent on a career path.

Barriers to Continued Participation

In order to assess the factors that incumbents felt were barriers to continued participation, they were asked a number of questions that explored the challenges that they experienced while enrolled in the partnership. The most commonly cited barriers included lack of classes of interest, finances, health issues, and time availability (see Appendix 5, Table 5.2). Individuals on the two career pathways were more likely to cite different barriers: participants pursuing a technical certification most frequently mentioned finances; individuals on the Foundational Skills pathway were more likely to mention a lack of classes of interest and personal or familial health issues.

The most common reason that incumbents provided for their decision to leave a given partnership—a lack of classes (either they were full, too basic, or simply not of interest to the incumbents)—is a "supply" side issue that can be directly addressed by the Partnership.

> "*I want more advance classes and classes that they do not offer. I am looking at Microsoft certification.*"
>
> "*My level [of English language proficiency] is too high. We actually talked to them, the guy who's in charge, about offering a higher level course.*"
>
> "*[There were] too many applicants and not enough spots [in the classes of interest].*"

The remaining barriers more reflect the social challenges faced by many lower-income, low-skilled workers. For example, financial constraints were perceived as a barrier to participation by almost 20% of the incumbents. An illustration of how this played out comes from a single mother of three who holds an Associate's Degree. Throughout her interview she repeated that if money was not an issue she would have continued in the program and would "probably have graduated already." She assured the interviewer that as soon as her financial situation improved she planned to resume taking classes and participating in the program.

Individual Outcomes

In order to assess the benefits that incumbents accrued through participation in the SkillWorks program, they were asked a series of questions that aimed to elicit discussion about a variety of potential benefits and outcomes, including increased job skills and employment opportunities, changes in salary, and impacts beyond the workplace.

Job Related Measures of "Success"

Wage gains and promotions are the most obvious potential benefit that accrues to participants in Workforce Development programs. The distribution of these outcomes among the interviewees is summarized in Table 8.

Nearly two-thirds of incumbent workers (63%) reported receiving a wage increase since their date of enrollment in SkillWorks. While the wage increase is in part attributable to continued employment over an extended time period, only one-quarter of this group attributed their wage increase to program participation.[14]

While fewer incumbents reported a promotion over this timeframe (27%), two-thirds of this group (66%) attributed this to their SkillWorks experience.

Table 8. Promotions and wage gains amongst incumbent workers.

	Cohort 1 (N=25)	Cohort 2 (N=30)	Total Number of Incumbents	Percent of Incumbents Interviewed
Received Wage Increase	18	17	35	63
Wage Increase Attributed to Program	6	3	9	16
Received Promotion	9	6	15	27
Promotion Attributed to Program	7	3	10	18
* Any individuals who received both a wage increase and a promotion will be listed in the table twice.				

Interestingly, a participant's career path didn't seem to affect whether a person received a wage increase or promotion but did seem to affect whether she attributed her wage increase to SkillWorks-related activities—two-thirds of those who attributed their wage increases to the program were on a technical certification/degree career path.

Another way to analyze participant accomplishments is based upon the services they received.

- Six of the 9 participants who received a SkillWorks-related wage increase accessed ongoing coaching support, and 5 developed written career plans.
- Eight of the 10 participants who received a SkillWorks-related promotion accessed ongoing coaching support and 6 developed written career plans.

Although not captured in the statistics cited in Table 8, the ability to hold a second job (and thereby increase gross income) was a benefit identified by three participants. These individuals all felt that the skills they garnered through the SkillWorks initiative opened up this possibility. One felt that his improved communication skills helped him to get a second job at an insurance office because: *"I now have a greater ease with communicating."* Another incumbent who gained a credential through his partnership described feeling some disappointment that he did not receive the promotion or wage gain that he expected upon enrollment, but that this was offset by a belief that he could still increase his total earnings: "*And now I'm trying to get a second job since I have my license."* While a *second* job is not necessarily an intended SkillWorks outcome, the opportunity for increased income due to enhanced skill sets was seen as a clear benefit by these participants.

Many of the other benefits noted by incumbents are important precursors of career advancement. These outcomes include increased confidence (33%), communication (38%), and job performance

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[14] This proportion could be higher since it is difficult to precisely distinguish the role that SkillWorks participation may have played.

(9%) (see Appendix 5, Table 5.3). It is interesting to note that these outcomes were overwhelmingly listed by individuals on the foundational skills pathway.

Specifically, the acquisition of English language skills was often linked, by interviewees, to an increase in confidence and an improvement in job performance.

> *"When I first started at my job I was just filing. I had not worked in 10 years and had no computer skills. Since enrolling in the program, I have received four promotions. These were directly related to my participation in the program. I didn't have the self-confidence before, but once I took a computer class, I felt ready, smart enough, and capable enough to take the next step. I went from not being able to use a computer to printing key documents, facilitating calls, burning CDs, etc. It gave me confidence."*
>
> *"I feel like I can write better and speak much better English. You feel more comfortable doing your job."*

Increased confidence was also linked to other program outcomes, including the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. For example, one incumbent interested in nursing described how the SkillWorks classes helped her to overcome her anxiety about math and science, thereby building her confidence to pursue this career goal: *"Once you took a class, you felt ready enough, smart enough, and capable enough to take the next step."* Another incumbent noted that she expected to benefit from her new skills when (sometime in the future) she moved to a new position. She felt the program gave her: *"…more self confidence. I knew the computer classes weren't going to get me a raise or promotion in my current job. It would get me more opportunities after I left that job."*

Some incumbent workers felt that their SkillWorks training was the impetus for taking on increased responsibilities in the workplace. These individuals saw this as a benefit, providing the opportunity to build their skill sets and resumes. For example, an incumbent taking medical classes described the program outcomes as follows:

> *"Now I have my own office. I've taken on more responsibility which shows they do trust my judgment.… The main benefit was gaining the experience. I thought I would just do the course, but I didn't realize everything that followed with it. It was very rewarding. It gave me the courage and the abilities to do what I'm doing now. Now when I look at instruments or someone asks for instruments, now I know what they're talking about vs. just hearing it in conversations."*

Unforeseen Benefits

Many of the incumbents also identified program benefits that accrued outside of the workplace. The most common of these was related to improved English language skills garnered through the ESOL classes offered through the partnerships. Increased language proficiency allows the incumbents to function more effectively within their social realms, e.g., improving their ability to communicate with their children and their doctors.

> *"I can communicate with people at the bank, at the store, everywhere. I'm starting to be able to hear English bit by bit."*
>
> *"Before [taking the SkillWorks ESOL class], when I go to doctor, I have to call a friend or somebody to go with me, now, I can go by myself."*
>
> *"The priority is learning about my daughter's life, and also little things like mail, bills, going to the doctor… the small things I can do for myself without difficulty now."*
>
> *"Yes, it helped me at home—communicate with my kids, to help them do homework. It's very, very good. Now my kids have a good report card, because I learn from them too. They help me."*

Approximately 10% of incumbents noted a second "outside" benefit of the program—the computer skills acquired through their SkillWorks classes. There was a sense that this afforded them increased access to information.

> *"…after I finished [the computer class] I bought a computer and I'm on it everyday… Anytime I have something I don't understand I can search and get more information."*

While effective communication skills and improved Internet savvy do not necessarily fall within the stated goals of the SkillWorks program, they are notable outcomes as they increase the quality of life of the incumbent workers and may motivate them to continue in the program or seek out other opportunities for advancement.

Lessons Learned and Areas for Future Investigation

Lessons Learned

The first finding from this qualitative investigation is that most incumbent workers joined the SkillWorks program with the goal of advancing their careers or gaining additional skills, which is not surprising given that all four partnerships are billed as workforce development opportunities.

More notable however is that the majority of incumbents did not enroll in the program with a *specific* career goal in mind. This confirms a basic SkillWorks assumption that workers lack understanding of what specific options (i.e., promotions, lateral moves, and different career tracks) are possible within their particular workplace or sector. As a result, career coaches play a particularly critical role in the assessment and career orientation process. In addition, partnerships need to work closely with employers to fully define career pathway options and the specific developmental steps required to progress in order to help make advancement pathways clear to employees.

An additional lesson about the value of high quality instructors, teachers and career coaches in keeping participants engaged. While the experiences of the three participants who dropped out of the program because of non-responsive career coaches were somewhat atypical, they serve to underscore the invaluable role that a career coach can play in keeping an incumbent on a career path. Additionally, participants comments about the importance of their instructors seemed to be a key factor in keeping them engaged. The level of support that an incumbent receives from their teachers and coaches may be a key factor in successfully navigating the career development process. In fact, those individuals who received ongoing coaching did achieve higher wage and promotion outcomes.

The final lesson relates to the most commonly cited reason that participants ultimately ceased their involvement in the SkillWorks Initiative—insufficient classes of interest. There are various "market" mechanisms that might be used to help address this problem. For example, conducting careful needs assessments and creating customized courses are strategies that may lead to classes that better meet the workforce development needs of incumbent workers.

Many of the other barriers to participation in SkillWorks identified by incumbents can be addressed through the effective program incentives and practices discussed above. For example, lack of finances and time were perceived as primary reasons for exiting the program and can be mitigated, to some extent, through wage compensation and on-site classes. A deeper understanding of both the supply of classes and social barriers to participation represents an important area for future work that will contribute to the design and implementation of workforce development programs that more effectively engage and retain participants.

Areas for Future Investigation

Goals and Outcomes

- **Tracking Outcomes Longer Term:** Most of the incumbents enrolled in SkillWorks with the aspiration of a wage gain or promotion. While the majority did not achieve this goal as a result of their SkillWorks training during the timeframe in question, the majority **successfully** took incremental steps toward this goal, e.g., increased responsibility, confidence and communication skills. Continued tracking of these incumbents would provide an opportunity to assess whether this developmental progress leads to more substantive outcomes such as wage gains, promotions, and/or further education. It would also be interesting to explore whether the individuals who focused on basic skills during their enrollment in SkillWorks were "primed" to start on a career pathway.

- **Characteristics of "Successful" Incumbents:** Participation in SkillWorks was associated with wage increases and promotions among a limited subset of participants. Future research might explore the common participant or program characteristics that appears to contribute to these "successful" outcomes.[15]

- **Alternative Outcome Measures:** In light of the current economic condition it may be valuable to expand future assessment measures beyond wage increases and promotions. For instance gaining the competencies needed to remain productive and avoid a potential layoff might be considered a "success."

Effective Program Practices

- **Teacher Quality:** Feedback from the incumbents indicates the potentially invaluable role that engaged, qualified teachers play in keeping participants engaged in the SkillWorks program. This suggests that partnerships need to be **attentive** to this issue through mechanisms such as the implementation of instructor evaluations, classroom observation and an analysis of the qualifications of their teaching staff. Analyzing the impact of teacher quality on student engagement and outcomes might encourage partnerships to more carefully consider, and potentially increase, the portion of grant resources they choose to invest in teacher compensation.

- **Career Coaching:** The variation in career coaching activities across partnerships made it difficult to identify "promising practices" in this area. However, incumbent feedback indicating its importance in keeping participants engaged in the program (or in rare instances being an impetus for leaving) underscore the importance of a closer examination of the counseling and career coaching function. Potential areas for investigation include an examination of the relationship between incumbent outcomes and the assessment process, level of specificity of career plans, and/or the deployment of and follow-through from career coaches.

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[15] The absence of micro level participant/demographic data precluded this level of analysis as part of this study.

- **Career Plans:** While the data suggests some benefit from a written career plan, it seems plausible that combining this tool with active support and guidance (e.g., reviewing it at each meeting and having incumbents continually contribute to and modify the document) may be an effective way to keep participants focused and on track toward their career goals. Substantively, another critical element might be to establish concrete interim outcomes. Participant experience has shown that many career goals take so long to reach that participants get discouraged and quit the program. Having coaches better define and track incremental career steps in career plans might increase participant retention. Additional research could test these assumptions and help to refine partnerships' use of specific career coaching strategies.

Appendix 1. Interview Methodology

This memorandum presents the findings from research on the career trajectories and outcomes of incumbent workers who participated in the SkillWorks Workforce Partnership Program.

Rationale behind Data Aggregation

While each partnership offered a variety of customized services to its incumbent workers (e.g., types of training and participation incentives), there are a number of similarities that make a cross-site analysis relevant and useful. Many of the similarities that exist across partnerships are captured in the "logic model" (Appendix 2), which illustrates the *conceptualized* theory of change that underlies the SkillWorks Initiative. Key commonalities include:

- **Target Population:** Incumbent workers enrolled in the partnerships were generally low-skilled, lower-income residents of Boston and its surrounding communities.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Incumbents enrolled voluntarily in each of the SkillWorks partnerships studied. The majority of enrollees were full-time employees.
- **Educational Opportunities:** Classroom training opportunities were made available to the incumbents through each of the partnerships.
- **Incentives to Participate:** The partnerships provided incentives to encourage incumbent participation, including tuition reimbursement, paid release time, and on-site classes.
- **Personal Support:** Career coaching was a programmatic element at all four partnerships.

These similarities allow us to explore the incumbent experiences across all four of these SkillWorks partnerships.[16]

Methods

Since SkillWorks' inception, close to 1,700 incumbent workers across the four partnerships under study have participated in the program. The data presented in this report was gathered from interviews with a sample of 55 participants.

Sampling Strategy

We employed a combination of purposeful, stratified and random sampling to select the prospective interviewees. This ensured that the sample included representatives from all four of the partnerships and with sufficient variation in the amount of time individuals had been involved in the program. To this end, the sample was drawn to proportionally represent incumbents who enrolled in the first two years of the program (Cohort 1) and those who enrolled in the third and fourth years (Cohort 2). The distribution of the sample by partnership and cohort is summarized in Table 1.

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[16] However, recognizing that there were also many differences across the partnerships, this paper avoids drawing definitive conclusions about the SkillWorks program. Rather, the focus is on *general* insights into the incumbent experience and the identification of areas for future study.

Table 1.1. Breakdown of sample by partnership and cohort.

Partnership Name	Cohort 1 (Year 1 and 2 Participants) (N=25)	Cohort 2 (Year 3 and 4 Participants) (N=30)	Total
The Hotel Career Center	5	4	9
Partners in Career and Workforce Development	8	7	15
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Building Services Career Path Project	7	10	17
Total Across Partnerships	25	30	55

The selection process included stratifying along two dimensions (see below for a schematic of the general sampling design). We first stratified the sample along the workforce partnership program that the incumbent participated in, resulting in four cells or "buckets." Our initial goal was to select 20 individuals from each of the four partnerships, but given limitations in the quality of the contact information we closed out the study with between 9 and 17 interviews per partnership.

We further stratified the sample by year of enrollment; individuals who enrolled in the first two years of the program were grouped together as "cohort 1" and those who enrolled in the third and fourth years were grouped together as "cohort 2." This created eight "buckets" from which we drew the final sample of 55 incumbents.
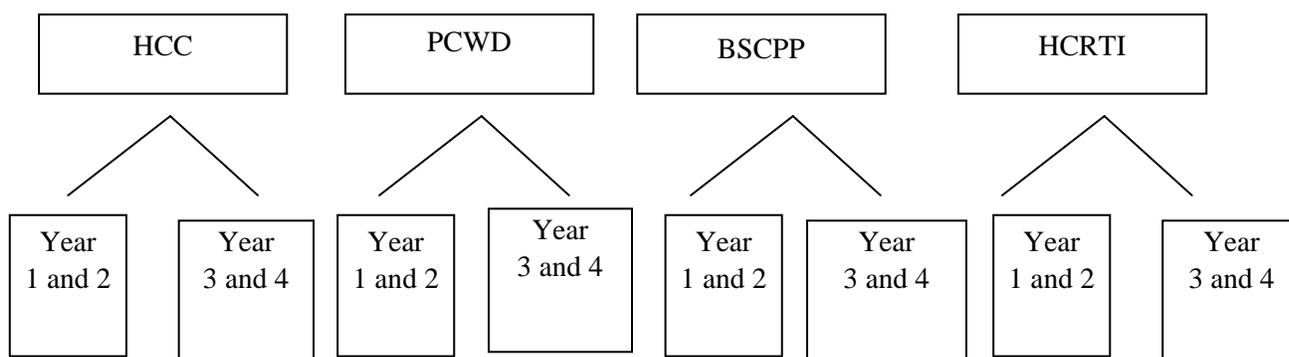
Initially, the plan was to draw the sample from a list of all of the participants from each of the partnerships. Due to issues with contact information, this approach was revised and the sample was drawn from smaller, more accurate lists and on-site visits.

The contact data provided by two of the partnerships contained many inaccuracies, which made contacting the incumbents very resource intensive. In order to increase the sample size from these partnerships, a member of the Abt research team conducted on-site interviews with 11 incumbents who were still enrolled in the SkillWorks program. Five such interviews were conducted at one site and six at the other.

In the case of the other two partnerships, lists of incumbents willing to participate in the study were provided by management at the outset of the study due to concerns about the participants' knowledge about the program and their willingness to participate in this study. One of the partnerships provided the Abt team with 40 potential interviewees and the other provided 20. The final sample was drawn from these two smaller lists.

The result is that while the sample was drawn in the manner described above, the "buckets" from which each sample was drawn was much smaller than initially planned.

The final sample includes representation from approximately equal numbers of individuals from each cohort at each of the four partnerships.

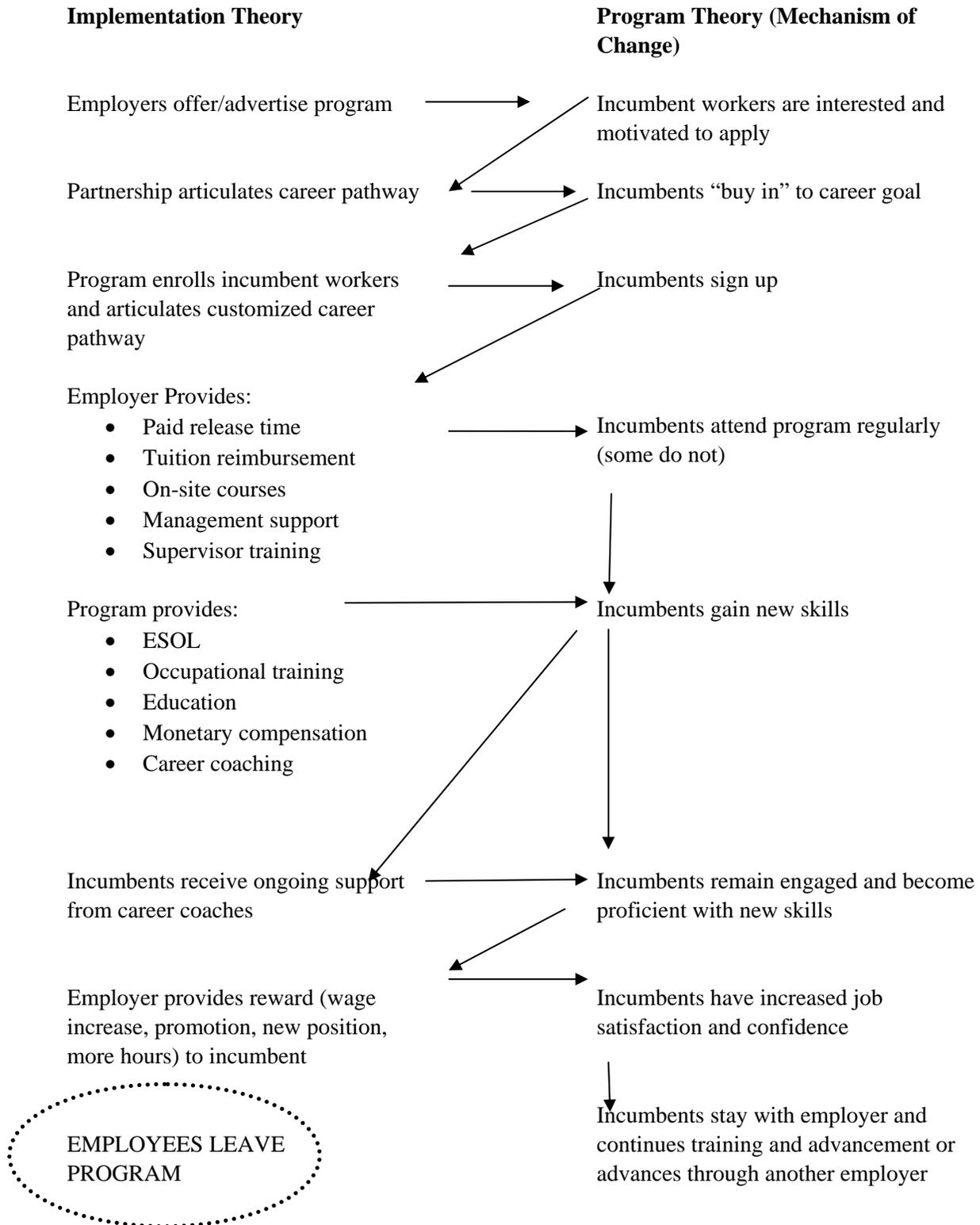| HCC		PCWD		BSCPP		HCRTI	
Year 1 and 2	Year 3 and 4	Year 1 and 2	Year 3 and 4	Year 1 and 2	Year 3 and 4	Year 1 and 2	Year 3 and 4

Data Collection and Synthesis

As noted above, the vast majority of data used in this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews with incumbent workers.[17] Members of the Abt research team conducted the bulk of these interviews over the phone.[18] The interviews were comprised of open-ended questions that aimed to elicit information about the participants' experiences with the SkillWorks program, from enrollment until present. (As discussed below, the majority of interviewees no longer consider themselves active participants in their SkillWorks partnership.) See Appendix 3 for the interview guide.

While the interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, detailed notes were recorded that were subsequently entered into a structured transcript (Appendix 4). This allowed for the information to be aggregated and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package, NVivo 7.0. (See Appendix 6 for a discussion of the data analysis process as well as some of the limitations of this research.)

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[17] While three partnerships provided limited background information about the incumbents, e.g., classes taken through the program and starting salary, this information was inconsistent across the sample, making any analysis of this data untenable.

[18] Eleven face-to-face interviews were conducted on site with two of the partnerships during the final phase of data collection (five at one site and six at the other). This change in protocol reflected efforts to increase the sample size in a timely and cost-efficient manner.

Appendix 2. Logic Model: The Movement of Incumbents Through the SkillWorks Program

Implementation Theory

Program Theory (Mechanism of Change)

Employers offer/advertise program → Incumbent workers are interested and motivated to apply

Partnership articulates career pathway ← → Incumbents "buy in" to career goal

Program enrolls incumbent workers and articulates customized career pathway → Incumbents sign up

Employer Provides:
- Paid release time
- Tuition reimbursement
- On-site courses
- Management support
- Supervisor training

→ Incumbents attend program regularly (some do not)

Program provides:
- ESOL
- Occupational training
- Education
- Monetary compensation
- Career coaching

→ Incumbents gain new skills

Incumbents receive ongoing support from career coaches → Incumbents remain engaged and become proficient with new skills

Employer provides reward (wage increase, promotion, new position, more hours) to incumbent → Incumbents have increased job satisfaction and confidence

EMPLOYEES LEAVE PROGRAM

Incumbents stay with employer and continues training and advancement or advances through another employer

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Appendix 3. Interview Protocol

Hello:

My name is _____and I am calling from Abt Associates. We are conducting a study on behalf of SkillWorks, the career training program offered through _____ (partnership name). _____ (partnership name) provided us with your information and indicated that you enrolled in this program in _____ (year). We are interested in learning more about your experiences working with _____ (name of program). Do you recall being involved in _____ program?
- If no, provide prompts about specific classes offered through the partnerships. If participation is confirmed, continue with script.
- If yes, continue with script.

If you are willing, I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences with _____ (partnership name). The results of this study will be used to write a report that will be used to improve programs like _____ (partnership). I want to emphasize that there will be no names used in the report; though there is a small chance you might be identified because only a small number of individuals will be interviewed

Finally, I want to make sure you understand that you do not have to participate in this interview— _____ (partnership name) will not know if you choose not to. Also, you may choose not to answer certain questions or you may choose to end this interview at any time.

The interview should take about 30 minutes. To thank you for participating, we will send you a twenty dollar Shaw's gift card upon completion of this interview. At the end of the interview I will confirm the address where you would like me to send this card.

With this information, do you feel comfortable continuing this interview?

****

1. I want to begin the interview by making sure that you were you enrolled in the_____ program?
   - Probe: location of classes, contact person

2. I would like to learn more about your experiences in this program. Can you tell me about the classes you took?
   - Probe: Names of classes; how often they met' how many months to complete.

   2.1 Did you get your salary when you were attending classes or did you do it on your own time?
      - If yes, was it the same as your hourly wage?
      - If less, do you know whether it was less than half of your regular wage?

   2.2 Sometimes programs like _____ (partnership name) help you to develop a career plan. A career plan is when you write out your career goal and the steps you need to take, like which classes you need to take, to reach that goal. For example, that you need to take a

computer class to get promoted. Did you work with someone from the program to develop a career plan?
- If yes, Was it written down?

2.3 Sometimes programs like _____ (partnership name) have you work with a career coach. A career coach is someone who helps you to know what you need to do to get a promotion or earn more money. Did you work with someone like that in _____ program?
- If yes to career coaching:
  - How often do you/did you meet with your career coach?
  - Do you feel your career coach understands your career goals?
  - If yes, give an example of how they support you in reaching these goals.
  - If you were in charge of this program, can you think of one thing you would do to make the coaching better?

2.4 Can you describe any other experiences with the program?

3. I know that you are very busy and that participating in _____ (partnership) took a lot of your time. Think back to when you signed up, what made you decide to enroll/take the class?

4. When you started in the program, what did you want to get out of participation?
- Probe: particular career goal, raise or promotion, college entrance, self-confidence, specific skills for existing job

5. Are you still working at [employer name]?
- If yes:
  - Has your job changed because of the classes you took through _____ partnership?
  - Have you been promoted because of the classes you took through _____ partnership?
  - Have you gotten a salary raise e.g., more money per hour because of because of the classes you took through _____partnership?

- If no:
  - Why did you leave?
  - If currently employed elsewhere, who is your employer, position and how much do you earn?
  - Did the skills you received in the program help to get a new, higher paying jobs?
  - If you are continuing your education, did the skills you got in _____ (partnership name) help you get into this school program? Have they helped you during your classes?

6. (If they are no longer at the employer, skip this question) Are you still participating in this program?
- If yes:
  - What is the most important reason that you have stayed involved?
  - Probe: career goal, employer incentives, encouragement from a career coach, courses onsite, compensation for training time, tuition reimbursement policies
- If no:
  - Why did you leave the program?

- Probe: Access to classes, personal issues, achieved career goals, not enough compensation for training time.

7. If you were running this program, what would you do to encourage more success amongst employees?
   - Probe: Career coaching, compensation for training time, more attainable goals, other?
   - If they have left program:
   - If you had had these things (listed above) do you think you would have remained in the program?

8. What was the greatest benefit that you received as a result of your participation in _____partnership?

9. Have you experienced benefits from the program that you did not expect when you decided to do the program?
   - Probe: Enrollment in further education, more involvement with social activities at work, greater comfort speaking with coworkers or supervisors

10. Have the skills that you gained through the _____partnership changed your day-to-day work experiences?
    - Probe: Self-confidence, more experience, more leadership

11. Are there ways that your involvement with _____partnership has helped you outside of work?
    - Probe: If ESOL, increased ability to communicate; second jobs; greater comfort on the job

12. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences in the program?

13. In order to make sure that you receive the Shaw's gift card, could you provide me with a mailing address where you would like this sent?

Thanks so much for your time.

Appendix 4. Transcription Form

Interviewer Name:
Interviewee Name/Client ID:
Date and Time of Interview:
Other comments about interview e.g. limited English language, poor phone connection, etc:
Partnership Name and Cohort:

****

Briefly answer the following questions.

1. Is participant still at their original employer?

2. Are they still in the SkillWorks program?

3. Were they compensated for their time during training? If yes, full or partial amount.

4. Did they receive career coaching? If yes, was it ongoing?

5. Did they receive a wage increase? If yes, how much?

6. Did they receive a promotion? If yes, describe initial position and promotion.

Interview Transcript: Include as many quotes in the interview transcript as possible.

Participant's understanding/vision of their intended trajectory through the program:

Participant's career goals when entering program/Reason for participation:

Progression through program e.g. classes taken:

Benefits of program e.g. wage gains, promotions, confidence:

Employer actions that encourage(d) career pathways work:

Barriers to program participation/Reasons for leaving:

Description and role of career coaching:

Services associated with positive outcomes:

Other Comments:

Interviewee's mailing address for gift card:

After the interview, *immediately* answer the following questions:

1. What are the key themes that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?

2. Do you have new (or remaining) target questions that we should consider for future contacts?

Appendix 5: Additional Data Tables

Table 5.1. Most common career coaching activities discussed by incumbents.

Activities/Actions	Number of Incumbents (N=55)	Percent
Develop Career Plan	16	29
Identifying classes outside of SkillWorks offerings	7	13
Identifying SkillWorks Classes	7	13
Networking with Employers	4	7
Help Locating Financial Aid Opportunities	4	7
Resume Development	4	7

Table 5.2. The most commonly cited barriers to remaining in the SkillWorks program.

	Number of Incumbents (N=55)	Percent of Incumbents
Lack of Classes of Interest	12	21
Finances	10	18
Health Issues	6	11
Time	6	11
Scheduling Issues	5	9

Table 5.3. Commonly cited job-related benefits of participating in the SkillWorks partnerships.

Program Outcome	Number of Incumbents (N=55)	Percent of Incumbents
Improved Ability to Communicate (in the workplace)	21	38
Increased Confidence	18	33
Improved Job Performance	9	16
Increased Job Responsibility	7	13

Appendix 6. Data Analysis and Limitations

The data collected for this study comes from incumbent interviews that were, for the most part, conducted over the telephone. The bulk of data analysis involved the coding of the interview transcript summaries. Prior to analysis, a provisional "start list"[19] of codes was developed. This list was derived from the key research questions and other variables that the research team identified. The transcript data was then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package, NVivo 7.0. As is the case with qualitative research, the coding and analysis process is iterative and results in the emergence of unanticipated themes and insights.

Several cautionary notes are necessary in the interpretation of the data presented in this report. First, while the data is empirical in nature (in that it was systematically gathered and analyzed), the strength of this research method is identifying major themes and providing context for the program. Unlike a survey, the "counts" that are presented should be viewed as providing insights into overall experiences of the workers rather than a quantitative analysis. Second, the data is "self-reported," which means it relies on the incumbents recall and understanding of the structure of the SkillWorks program. It is plausible that some of the interviewees do not remember all of the classes they engaged in or the support services provided by a particular program. While this "skews" the data, the incumbents' recollections reflect the aspects of their experiences that were most salient to them and thus are an important part of understanding the program. Finally, the small sample size for this study requires that caution be used in generalizing any of the findings beyond the group that was interviewed; this does not diminish the valuable insights that are garnered from gaining a deeper understanding of individual participants' experiences and understanding of the SkillWorks program. In summary, the work presented here provides valuable insights into the context and experiences of a sample of SkillWorks participants.

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[19]   Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis (*2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.