

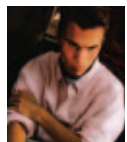


skillworksSM

PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

In December 2003, 12 months after an acrimonious strike that pitted the union representing the men and women who clean Boston's office buildings against the companies that manage many of those buildings, the Voice and Future Fund, a non-profit arm of SEIU Local 615, and seven employers entered into an innovative partnership.

They agreed to begin developing career ladders for the people who clean the city's office buildings every night. The plan? To help the management firms develop skilled custodians, supervisors, painters, electricians, and groundskeepers by providing the part-time cleaning staff with easily accessible English language instruction, skill training, and career coaching.



This partnership is one of the early products of SkillWorks, which seeks to rethink the way labor markets operate in Boston so that workforce needs can be met by building the skills—and thereby increasing the incomes—of low-skilled and under-employed entry-level workers. The initiative is an ambitious effort on the part of philanthropy, government, community organizations, unions, and employers to change how workforce development is done in Boston. The goal is to create a system that:

- Helps low-skill, low-income residents move to family-sustaining jobs; and
- Helps employers find and retain skilled employees.

SkillWorks engages in three key systems-change strategies:

Workforce Partnerships: These industry-sector or occupationally based intermediaries offer a broad array of educational and other resources that lead to career-oriented first jobs and to advancement opportunities that help low-income individuals progress toward economic self-sufficiency.

THE INITIATIVE IN BRIEF

Strengthening Capacity: Technical assistance strengthens alliances, builds the infrastructure, and enhances the knowledge base of staff in community-based organizations, community colleges, and other members of the workforce development network in order to effectively meet the workforce needs of businesses and low-income job and skill seekers.

Public Policy Advocacy: The goal of public policy advocacy is to achieve long-term, sustainable improvements in the workforce development system's ability to help low-skill and low-income individuals achieve family-supporting incomes. It seeks to mobilize diverse stakeholders to institutionalize successful innovations emerging through the activities of the Workforce Partnership and Strengthening Capacity components and other workforce development research.

Scope

SkillWorks has attracted substantial interest, particularly for its new and innovative approaches in six areas:

Ambition: The initiative is more than a workforce development program; it is an effort to substantially improve Boston's workforce development system. Over a minimum of five years, it is investing in on-the-ground workforce services through sectoral and occupational consortia, capacity building for community-based organizations and other consortia members, and public policy and advocacy on a statewide level.

Collaborative funding: SkillWorks brings together philanthropic and public investors who have merged funds into a common pool, with a common set of investment principles. Together, they will inject nearly \$15 million new dollars into improving Boston's workforce development system. Each investor has made multi-year commitments to the initiative, using a "mutual fund" approach: the funders—both private and public—pool their resources into a single fund.



One philanthropic partner manages the funds, but investment decisions are made equally by all investors. Initiative investments are flexible so they can better meet the needs of Boston residents and employers, overcoming funding restrictions that can constrain public workforce programs.

Continuum of services: To effect systemic change, SkillWorks invests in a range of efforts that build participants' skills, beginning even before a job placement and continuing as needed as a person advances in a career. In contrast, many other workforce development efforts focus on one aspect of employment and training, such as pre-employment or placement. The advantage of the initiative is the five-year time-frame of the grants, which is uncommon in publicly-funded workforce development efforts.

Intermediaries: SkillWorks invests in labor market institutions—existing and new—that can organize the resources and services that low-skilled residents and employers need to advance to family self-sufficiency. These workforce intermediaries, which include the Boston Private Industry Council, community-based organizations, and employers themselves, receive support for operations, service delivery, and capacity building.

Systems change: SkillWorks is fundamentally about two things: growing high-quality workforce services that advance low-skilled, low-income residents to family self-sufficiency *and* institutionalizing those practices within the workforce development system to gain significant scale and long-term sustainability. Toward both ends, the initiative invests resources in program models and in statewide public policy advocacy to imbed the initiative's principles in public policy and the workforce system.

Theory of change: SkillWorks design is based on the belief that its components, operating interdependently, offer an excellent chance of producing sustainable improvements in the workforce development system and its ability to help low-skill, low-income workers achieve family-supporting incomes. The initiative's theory of change is reflected in the three initiative components:

- *Workforce Partnerships* demonstrate that the initiative's service design strategy succeeds.
- *Strengthening Capacity* builds the ability of service providers to implement best practices.
- *Public Policy Advocacy* leads to policies that support best practices.

Financing

The Funders Group is composed of eight foundations and two public agencies. The members are the Boston Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development, the

Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation, Fleet Charitable Trusts, the Hyams Foundation, the Mayor's Office of Jobs and Community Services, the Rockefeller Foundation, the State Street Foundation, and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay.

Initiative Management

The Funders Group contracts with several organizations to help implement the Public Policy Advocacy, Workforce Partnerships, and Strengthening Capacity components. Jobs for the Future helped design the initiative and now oversees its implementation, coordinates the work of the other consultants, is the liaison on Public Policy Advocacy, and supports the funders' planning. The Boston Private Industry Council manages the Workforce Partnerships, coordinates the selection process, oversees their implementation, and provides technical assistance. Management Consulting Services manages the Strengthening Capacity work with five community-based organizations, building their capacity to provide effective services to low-income constituents. The Operations Team is comprised of these consultants, along with the evaluators, the City of Boston, and the Workforce Solutions Group, the public policy grantee.

Lessons

SkillWorks offers start-up lessons for workforce development reform efforts throughout the nation—and for any community that recognizes the need for new approaches to workforce development. The initiative has built upon Boston's assets in order to analyze and address deficits in the workforce development system, deficits that many other communities share. More unusual is that Boston's philanthropic and public leaders had a history of successful collaboration, making it easier for the initiative to summon up the civic will needed to tackle systems reform. Going further, local leaders took the time for research and planning that would identify common principles, and this planning process reinforced trust among the partners. That same history also opened up city and state agencies to the idea of entering a collaboration led by foundations, with the latter's greater ability to be flexible in designing a project and managing resources.

SkillWorks has set ambitious goals, yet it also shows that it is possible to move quickly beyond demonstrating a model to improving systems and changing public policy. The initiative has found ways to integrate opportunities as they presented themselves, including searches by two national foundations for sites to make major investments related to the initiative goals. These national investments, in turn, have proved to be a strong motivator for keeping people engaged in solving complex problems, and they significantly add to the resources available to make a major impact on Boston's workforce development system.