

Integrating Financial Stability Strategies into Workforce Development Programs: An Implementation Pilot in Boston

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Introduction

In June 2012, a group of service providers, trainers and funders in Boston launched a one-year pilot to integrate financial stability content and methods into workforce development services and settings. This pilot effort came at a time of renewed interest in integrating workforce and financial stability and capability services in Boston and around the country. SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce (SkillWorks) and The Midas Collaborative (Midas) initiated the pilot with a grant from the Citi Foundation and the support of other partners.

The Partners:

SkillWorks, a workforce development funder collaborative in Boston, has supported workforce development training partnerships, capacity building and public policy advocacy since 2003. SkillWorks has a national reputation for successfully bringing together public-private partners to build strong, industry-oriented programs that provide a comprehensive set of job training, placement and supportive services for thousands of low to moderate income, lower-skilled adults in greater Boston.

The Midas Collaborative (Midas), a not-for-profit network of organizations, has promoted and hosted programs in financial security for low to moderate income residents across Massachusetts since 1999. Midas integrates community development and education with asset-building and asset-preservation initiatives, assisting thousands of Massachusetts residents to save money, invest in assets, repair credit, avoid financial predators, and meet meaningful financial goals for their families.

Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), a Midas member and SkillWorks grantee, is the largest workforce development agency in New England. JVS serves as the lead agency for the Healthcare Training Institute (HTI). HTI provides workplace education, college transition, coaching and student support, pre-employment training and placement, and allied

health and nursing pathways with major healthcare employers. Key goals are to: 1) help entry-level healthcare workers and community residents improve their skills, enter and complete college, and fill vacancies in high-demand occupations offering family-sustaining wages; and 2) institutionalize relationships with colleges that will enable continued skill development and career advancement. HTI's partners include Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Children's Hospital, Hebrew Senior Life, Bay Cove Human Services, Massachusetts General Hospital, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and Bunker Hill Community College.

Asian American Civic Association (AACA), another SkillWorks grantee, serves as the lead agency for the Partnership for Automotive Career Education (PACE). PACE provides English language and basic math education customized to the automotive industry, hands-on automotive training, job readiness skills training, computer literacy training, career coaching, and job placement and retention services. In 2011, AACA received a SkillWorks grant to add an expanded hybrid and alternative fuel vehicle component to PACE. Key partners include Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology, Boston Public Schools Department of Adult Education and Community Services, Sullivan Tire, and Direct Tire and Auto Service.

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¹ Two examples of new or expanded investment in integrated service delivery models in the Boston area from 2010-2013 include: Financial Opportunity Centers established by LISC with Social Innovation Funds; and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley's Financial Stability Centers. Both of these efforts build on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families model.

² Additional support for staff training was provided by LISC Boston and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley.

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The Need for Integration:

From the beginning, SkillWorks funders have expressed an interest in connecting skills training participants with financial education and literacy. However, the funders did not prioritize this work beyond encouraging organizations to include financial literacy services in their program designs and allowing funding to be used for these activities. As a result, implementation of these services was uneven, with some but not all partnerships providing basic financial literacy workshops by working with community organizations or financial institutions, hosting tax preparation volunteers, or making referrals for clients on a case by case basis.

Workforce partnerships reported that personal finances were a high priority for participants, but staff felt they lacked the capacity and expertise to address financial topics directly.



At the same time, Midas had financial content and methodology, and was interested in connecting to a larger service infrastructure that would allow it to increase focus, scale, and impact in its delivery and tracking of financial stability services.

At the beginning of the pilot, JVS and AACA reported that personal finances were a high priority for their program participants, but their staff felt they lacked the capacity and expertise to address financial topics directly. Employers working with SkillWorks and Midas also reported that financial education is valuable and worth strengthening. Many employees, especially those on the front lines or in entry level positions, need help navigating the increasingly complex choices they face in choosing and managing benefits. More financially stable employees are better prepared to deal with unexpected financial stresses before they become crises and are less likely to miss work. Employers see financial education as part of the solution.

These experiences, as well as research documenting that adults who receive an integrated set of financial education services while enrolled in workforce programs have better long-term economic outcomes, led the partners to pursue a model of training and equipping coaches within existing workforce partnerships with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide basic financial education and coaching for their clients.

A model for the pilot emerged after a few conversations that considered:

- What if we could provide additional training and capacity in financial education and coaching to existing staff, particularly career coaches?
- Could this be a sustainable model for integrating two types of services that everyone agreed were important?

The Intervention

Integrating Financial and Career Coaching within Sector Partnerships

SkillWorks has ten years of experience preparing adults for success in training, education and the workplace, and working to change the adult basic education, workforce and higher education systems to better support these non-traditional students. SkillWorks has invested heavily in providing coaching and guidance to low-income adults in order to help them navigate the complex education and workforce systems, which were not always aligned.

Career coaches develop a close relationship with training participants, helping each to set goals,

develop a plan for achieving the goals, and plan for next steps in a career pathway. Along the way, coaches help participants address obstacles, and SkillWorks' experience has been that many participants have financial questions or issues, whether related to debt, housing, health care, financial aid, transportation, child care or benefits. Unfortunately, coaches were not always equipped to help participants deal with relevant financial topics, nor were they comfortable talking with participants about their finances.

With the support of the Citi Foundation, Midas proposed a new collaboration with SkillWorks to pilot a financial stability project over a one-year period (June 2012-June 2013) with two workforce development sites in order to:

- Assist up to 120 low-income participants in the fields of healthcare and automotive maintenance to increase their financial capability, as measured by educational, behavioral and financial indicators;
- Improve integration of financial skill-building services with existing workforce training direct service partner organizations through training and consultation by Midas;
- Evaluate strategies and measure outcomes related to the pilot of this integrated, sectoral approach; and
- Distribute findings to stakeholders in a white paper.

Structure of the Partnership

Citi Foundation, Midas and SkillWorks chose the two pilot partnerships—the Healthcare Training Institute (led by JVS) and the Partnership for Automotive Career Education (led by AACCA)—based on the partnership's interests, capacity, and previous experience with providing financial education.

Midas served as the project lead and developed memoranda of understanding with each partner to outline roles, responsibilities and funding terms. Midas coordinated and/or delivered the training modules on financial education and provided consultation to the sites as needed to customize training/curriculum and integrate financial education concepts into existing program design, curricula and coaching models.

SkillWorks convened the workforce partnerships, developed measurement criteria with the service provider sites and Midas, and committed to sharing lessons learned with local and national funding partners, in part through the development of this case study.

The workforce partnerships recruited and enrolled participants, identified which cohorts would receive enhanced financial education and coaching services, employed and supervised the career coaches, and agreed to send the coaches to training. They also committed to tracking and reporting (to SkillWorks) participation and outcomes data and additional qualitative data such as reviews and feedback on the training and implementation process.

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Structure and Content of Training

Midas scheduled and delivered the training for career coaches. The pilot was able to leverage other training being delivered at the time for staff of Midas member organizations and local Financial Opportunity and Stability Centers. SkillWorks coaches, Midas member staff and partnership directors built peer supports and networks in the following trainings between June and September 2012:

- Adult learning and workshop facilitation skills (one-day training led by Midas). Key resource: Margaret Miley, “Expanding Financial Skills in Low Income Communities; A Framework for Building an Effective Financial Education Program,” Massachusetts Community & Banking Council.
- Basic financial education content & coaching techniques (four-day training with alternating skill-building sessions led by Central New Mexico Community College). Key resources: “Co-Active Coaching,” Davies-Black Publishing, 2007; and other materials provided by CNMCC.
- Special topics in financial products/services to assist with reducing debt and risk (led by Midas). Key resources: MassSaves.org website; “Surviving Debt,” National Consumer Law Center, 2013.

The “coaching method” introduced by Midas was key to the project goal of integrating financial capability coaching with career coaching. Many of the coaching approaches and techniques introduced by Midas were new to the career coaches. The concept of “coaching” draws from disciplines as far afield as psychology, new-age religion, athletics, and medicine, converging in the “executive coaching” movement of the 1980s, with a few national organizations promoting, training and certifying practitioners of the model across many disciplines. Though not formally defined, this strengths-based approach generally combines a set of affirming principles, such as “people seek value, have a choice, are inquisitive,” with techniques for coaches to help participants envision and develop

a sequence of actions to pursue a dream, and to address obstacles and stay on track. This is achieved through a participant-centered process—as opposed to a list of external directives—designed to cultivate reflection, personal development and action.

Midas offered additional technical assistance to each partnership to help coaches integrate the new knowledge and methods into their practice and service delivery strategy. The capacity of the project director and staff bandwidth and stability were key factors in how the pilot was structured, and the partnerships rolled out the enhanced service model in different ways:

- JVS and the Healthcare Training Institute experimented with two models. Utilizing classroom instruction, they built financial education topics into their Bridge to College pre-employment program in the form of modules from the typical financial education workshop curricula. Utilizing workplace coaching sessions, they also integrated financial topics into regular coaching sessions with clients employed in healthcare settings.
- AACA and the Partnership for Automotive Career Education also integrated financial education into coaching. Additionally, they provided financial literacy workshops on a variety of topics including budgeting, money management, savings, investments, and credit to new cohorts in the PACE program who started training during the pilot period.

It should be noted that SkillWorks, Midas and the service providers chose to train existing career coaches and instructors rather than hire new financial literacy or coaching staff for two primary reasons. First, career coaches needed more expertise to be able to help clients that were already asking them questions related to personal finances. Second, SkillWorks and Midas hoped to make the project more sustainable by building the new financial education expertise into existing staff and structures, as others had considered.

The Results

Population Served

This pilot effort served low to moderate income working adults employed in the healthcare sector, unemployed and underemployed participants enrolled in HTI and the JVS Bridges to College program, and unemployed and underemployed participants enrolled in the AACA/PACE automotive technician training program. A total of 112

individuals were served, just shy of the project goal of 120; about 50% of participants were immigrants. Of the 112 individuals, 20 enrolled in a matched savings program over the course of the year, and 44 preserved assets by avoiding or terminating high cost financial services.

Key Findings and Recommendations



The focus of this pilot was to test the implementation of integrated services, with the understanding that participant financial outcomes would be modest in the determined timeline. Therefore, the pilot focused on staff training and the process of integrating financial coaching and workforce development content and methods. Data on financial outcomes was collected at a high-level and did indicate some promise in our approach. The pilot came close to achieving the stated financial outcomes goals of 120 enrolled; 100 achieving savings or debt goals; 20 enrolled in matched savings; and 50 preserving assets. Issues of staffing and timing, described below, limited the results as well as the partners' ability to describe outcomes in greater detail.

Training was valued and useful to coaches, yet more was requested

To a person, all of the coaches and project managers spoke of the utility and value of the provided training. Both the training on coaching and learning methods as well as the specific financial content increased the coaches' comfort level and gave them more confidence in speaking with clients about their financial issues. Some coaches mentioned gaining an ability to pick up on new cues and opportunities to talk with their clients about budgeting or finances when they might not have

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I felt more confident [speaking with clients about financial issues]. It helped me. Having more confidence and resources to back us up opens up the conversation.

Key Findings and Recommendations

noticed the opening before, or when they might have felt too nervous to jump into the conversation. Many indicated that the training on the coaching method, which was particularly participant-directed, was new and compelling. Coaches reported that the strengths-based philosophy and techniques that Midas introduced were important to their overall professional development and helpful throughout all of their services.

The training helped put things in the back of my mind [so] that I [could] find ways to incorporate particular [financial] topics in the conversation. It raised my awareness.

At the same time, coaches felt that they had just skimmed the surface of many of the financial topics. They recognized that they were not experts, and that they likely did not “have depth to dive into the topic.” When asked, coaches suggested that additional, more focused training on specific topics that reflected clients’ financial needs and concerns could be helpful. However, coaches expressed greater interest in having an expert to call when they or clients had questions. Coaches generally felt that given the wide range of topics to cover, a consultative approach to building capacity would be more effective and efficient than building internal staff capacity.

As for other training or preparation, coaches suggested that more information or training on how various cultures talk about or handle money and more tips on how to talk with people specifically about budgets could be beneficial.

Program Profile 1: Talking About Money

All interviewed coaches spoke about how they felt much more comfortable talking with participants about finances after the training provided during the pilot. One coach shared the following story with SkillWorks and Midas:

“We had talked about credit during training and then introduced the topic in coaching meetings with clients. I had one participant who was just really resistant to seeing her credit report. She just did not want to open it, thinking it would reveal all sorts of bad news that she didn’t want to hear.

“Before, I’m not sure what I would have done; maybe I would have let it go. But I remembered what I learned in the training about credit: ‘Credit is not something out of your control, and it’s not permanent. Credit is something you can change and manage.’ This lesson helped me empower my client to face her fears and pull the report. In the end, it wasn’t even bad news, and she could feel good about her credit!”

Program Profile 2: Making Better Financial Decisions

SkillWorks career coaches talk with participants all the time about training and education options in the context of career pathways and advancement. One coach shared the following vignette with us after he completed the coaching methods training:

“One of my clients came to me one day with the news that she was thinking about enrolling in a for-profit school. My immediate instinct was to tell her not to go, that she would be wasting her time and money. What the coaching training helped me do was use an individual-directed approach to help her think through her options and decision. Eventually she decided not to enroll in that school.”

⁴ Participants were employed at Boston Children’s Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard Vanguard, and Faulkner Hospital.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Organizational capacity, support, and buy-in are key

Like any new pilot, the success of the initiative was driven not only by the quality of the training or content, or the design of the pilot itself, but also by the capacity of the host organizations to implement and sustain the work.

Over the course of the twelve-month pilot, one of the sites lost both of its career coaches and went through an extended period before new coaches were hired. This dramatically impacted the ability of the service provider to implement the project, to track participation and results over time, and to fully buy into the work. It is clearly impossible to predict turnover with any certainty, and projects will always have to deal with challenges brought about by staffing changes. However, in a project like this, where so much training is invested in specific staff at the beginning, the loss of staff members is particularly and more deeply challenging. SkillWorks, Midas and partners would have benefited from engaging in specific succession and sustainability planning upfront to identify champions for the work and strategies to continue it even in the event of staffing changes.

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SkillWorks also could have done more to integrate the financial education pilot into the primary work and outcomes expectations of the initiative. As it was, the timing (in the middle of SkillWorks' fourth grant year), structure and scale of the project positioned it as an additional rather than core component of SkillWorks' mission. Moving forward, planning for pilots or implementation efforts should give greater consideration as to how these variables might impact success.

Program Profile 3: Integrating Financial Coaching

When prompted, one of the project directors shared her perspective on the pilot and lessons learned from a program management perspective:

"I went to the trainings with the hope of being able to go back and train the staff, mostly because, for logistical reasons, we couldn't manage to release all of our teaching and coaching staff for multiple days of training at once. In hindsight, I realize that even though the trainings were excellent—some of the best we had all year—I still did not understand the material well enough to teach it. We really should have had as many of the direct service staff as possible attend training. In the future, I might recommend on-site trainings or trainings in smaller chunks (rather than full days) to make it a little easier to schedule.

"In terms of program design, we learned that the model of following a strict financial education curriculum in the classroom just didn't work for us. This approach took time away from our core training curriculum and goals, and it stressed out staff and students because the academic material still needed to be covered for clients to be successful. In the end, no one really looked forward to covering the financial education material in class. Our clients really wanted and responded better to individualized financial coaching, which allowed them to explore and address issues specific to their situations in a more holistic, immediate way."

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Data Collection and Outcomes Measurement

The measures that SkillWorks and Midas hoped to analyze for the pilot seemed relatively simple, but still proved challenging for the workforce partnerships to collect, especially in any level of detail. Difficulty seemed to stem from a lack of familiarity with the proposed metrics, which resulted in uncertainty about how to best capture and categorize the necessary multiple data points. One project manager expressed confusion about how to define terms and count outcomes in the asset building/financial literacy “world.” In addition, neither the SkillWorks reporting database nor the workforce partnerships’ internal database systems were set up



primarily to capture financial indicators. The time and cost involved in adding these measures to the workforce databases, due to some inherent structural inflexibility, exceeded the scale of the pilot. As a result, it was more challenging for all partners to track services and outcomes. Future initiatives would do well to consider upfront the design, flexibility and capabilities of data collection systems to determine the costs involved in adding more and different types of measures.

Though the initial results met proposed benchmarks, a longer timeline could have afforded more robust outcomes.



The length of the pilot also posed challenges to data collection and measurement. Partnerships needed more time to realize and measure the asset building/debt reduction outcomes that we hoped would result from the integration of services. Though the initial results met proposed benchmarks, a longer timeline could have afforded more robust outcomes. Just as the coaches started feeling more comfortable with the material, the pilot was concluding.

Conclusion

There is great promise in integrating financial education and coaching into sector workforce development efforts, particularly around career coaching. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, the pilot demonstrated that an integrated model can work and add value.

Coaches shared stories of how increased knowledge and confidence allowed and encouraged them to review credit reports with clients and to deal with basic financial issues that they never would have addressed before the training. In some cases, this led to dramatic discoveries and the resolution of thorny financial issues. The data reported by the partnerships showed that many people benefited from the relatively small investment. The training added real capacity to the organizations, built staff's expertise, and better connected the organizations and staff to financial stability and capability resources and networks across the state.

Providing additional relevant tools to coaches who are already working intensively with clients to address barriers to economic mobility makes intuitive and practical sense, as does providing a durable connection to more technical and focused resources on financial topics that are organized for easy access by coaches. For example, in Massachusetts, in addition (and prior) to the service integration pilot, Midas and the Mass Financial Education Collaborative developed the MassSaves.org website.



It is important to build thoughtful connections between the financial education and workforce development sectors. We must increase staff capacity through training and collaboration that respects the mission of both the workforce and financial education organizations..

It is clear that there is a promising model in leveraging financial education knowledge and expertise by bringing it into the workforce partnership, which should include the provision of some basic level of training in financial coaching. Concurrently, we need to build indicators of improved financial capability into core workforce measures, and train funders—and program leadership—in how to measure and capture pertinent information.

Public and private funders at the local, state and federal level hold high expectations for workforce training organizations in terms of outputs and outcomes. If we are to expand this work, we can do so thoughtfully, in a way that continues to add value to workers, job seekers and employers—as well as to the organizations with which they partner. We are pleased that this pilot has demonstrated the positive potential of an integrative model, and recommend further exploration and investment in this efficient, holistic approach.



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