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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

POLICY BRIEF

Implementing the WorkAdvance Model

Lessons for Practitioners

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In today's polarized labor market, there is a critical need to identify middle-skill jobs that pay good wages with benefits. WorkAdvance, a sectoral-focused advancement program, is designed to find and fill such jobs, serving workers and employers alike. For unemployed and low-wage working adults, the program provides occupational skills training in targeted sectors that have good-quality job openings and opportunities for upward mobility. For employers in those sectors, WorkAdvance identifies and trains workers who are prepared to meet technical skill and work readiness expectations and grow into second and third jobs.

WorkAdvance is one of five evidence-based programs that were implemented as part of the 2010 Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant to the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City and the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity in collaboration with MDRC. MDRC led the WorkAdvance evaluation and gave technical assistance to the providers; the box on page 3 gives an overview of the providers and participants in the study.

The WorkAdvance model combines elements of sector-based initiatives with postemployment retention and advancement support. It has five components:

1. **Intensive screening** of program applicants for motivation and readiness
2. Sector-appropriate **preemployment and career readiness services**, including orientation to the sector and career advancement coaching
3. Sector-specific **occupational skills training** aligned with employer needs and leading to certifications that are in demand in the regional labor market
4. Sector-specific **job development and placement services** based on strong relationships with employers
5. Postemployment **retention and advancement services**, including ongoing contact, coaching, skills training, and rapid reemployment help if needed

The program resulted in very large increases in participation in every category of services, as well as in training completion and credential acquisition. WorkAdvance also improved targeted-sector employment and earnings, delivering clear evidence that the program can work. Yet effects varied widely; impacts on earnings ranged from a 26 percent increase at the most effective provider to no gains at another.[1] This breadth of effects offers useful lessons. Higher wages and employment levels for WorkAdvance participants appear to be the result of providers' success in delivering the following combination:

Training in a sector with strong local employer demand + High rates of training **completion** and receipt of **credential** in targeted sector + **Placements** in targeted sector jobs that provide **better wages and benefits** than individuals could obtain on their own

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This brief offers lessons from MDRC's experience evaluating WorkAdvance and advice from leaders and staff members at the four providers involved in the study.[2]

TRAINING IN A SECTOR WITH STRONG LOCAL DEMAND

The first step in launching an initiative like WorkAdvance is to ensure that planners identify one or more industry sectors that meet the following criteria:

- Demonstrate high current demand for workers to fill middle-skill and entry-level jobs with opportunities for advancement
- Expect candidates for those jobs to possess skills that can be gained from short-term technical training (without necessarily requiring a college degree)
- Pay qualified hires more than they would be able to earn without training

Once the sector is identified, providers must ensure that the training program meets the specific needs of local employers in that sector.

How Should Providers Identify Industry Sectors to Target?

Look for sectors where employer demand is strong for entry-level or middle-skill employees and relatively short-term training is needed.
Identifying the local sectors best suited to benefit from an initiative like WorkAdvance requires finding the "sweet spot" that balances the needs of employers in industries that have high demand with the capability of program developers to deliver appropriate training and support. Training needs cannot be too extensive to fulfill (such as a two- or four-year nursing degree), and projected job openings cannot be so few that the costs of program development and operations are prohibitive.

The best targets are sectors that are growing and are important to the local economy. Educational and skill barriers to entry should be relatively low, but potential new hires should be expected to have some short-term technical training and industry know-how. The sector job categories that generate the largest earnings gains will be those where wages are higher than what participants could secure on their own without training.

Combine real-time labor market data and deep employer knowledge to generate the most useful demand information.
Up-to-date, accurate labor market data are critical for identifying appropriate sectors to target; but to make sound decisions, practitioners need information that is local and granular. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections, while easy to secure, are of limited use beyond a broad initial assessment of potential targets. Real-time labor market information from companies such as Monster or Burning Glass is much more helpful, since it is based on current demand, not past trends and modeled projections. Fairly informal analysis of available Internet job posting data (on Indeed or Monster, for example) helped several WorkAdvance providers winnow potential local sectors.

Ultimately, however, choosing the right sector and specific job categories to target for training depends on close working relationships with regional employers in high-growth sectors and with organizations that understand employer needs. There is no substitute for employers' own assessments: Program developers should rely more on employer intelligence than on elegant labor market analyses when making their final sector selection.

Towards Employment in northeast Ohio found industry association meetings to be a good place for honest conversations about changing labor markets and about employer recruiting and retention "pain points." According to a Madison Strategies Group staff member in Tulsa, the most effective way to assess opportunities is to ask employers "where they hurt," what specific frustrations they are experiencing in trying to hire. This line of questioning can help identify subsectors or niches where the regional pipeline is particularly ineffective — resulting in em-

ployer willingness to pay a wage premium to workers with appropriate preparation.

Consider the current state of training programs, population characteristics, and the interests of local stakeholders.
While sector selection should be guided by careful analysis of labor market demand and the provider's ability to deliver a quality program, the "supply side" context (including characteristics of both the population and training providers) cannot be ignored: Is the demand for quality, affordable training already being met by existing organizations and schools? Do local poverty and unemployment rates justify developing a sectoral program? Similarly, a thoughtful stakeholder assessment is needed: Is there sufficient business, civic, and political interest to warrant launching such a program?

Per Scholas uses these questions to frame its decision-making process:

- Which sectors look like they have strong demand for workers with some technical skill?
- Are there enough job openings to justify developing a sector-based training program (three to four job openings per trainee)?
- Do existing education providers already have sufficient training slots to meet employer needs? If not, do they have the capacity to increase slots?
- Is there sufficient public and private support for a training and placement program in this sector?

How Can Program Developers Ensure That Training Is Aligned with Employer Needs?

At all WorkAdvance sites, targeted sector employers play an active role in the design of the training program (and often in aspects of its delivery). Technical skills training is critical; but so, too, is training in work readiness and other "soft" skills required for success in the sector's workplace culture. Some providers turn to outside experts such as community colleges and community-based organizations for curriculum design; others develop employer-focused training in-house.

Engage employers early, on their terms, and consult with them regularly on key aspects of design and delivery.
Employers are not automatically drawn to participate in sectoral initiatives. They need to hear messages that reassure them that the effort will yield a stable source of quality hires. WorkAdvance providers have found a simple message to employers to be effective: "At no cost to your firm, you can shape this program to your specific needs."

Engaging employers should not be an afterthought. WorkAdvance providers favor front-end brainstorming that brings interest-

THE WORKADVANCE DEMONSTRATION

Four providers were part of MDRC's randomized controlled trial of WorkAdvance, launching programs in a range of sectors in 2011.

PROVIDER	LOCATION	SECTOR(S)
Madison Strategies Group	Tulsa	Transportation, manufacturing
Per Scholas	New York City	Information technology
St. Nicks Alliance	New York City	Environmental remediation
Towards Employment	Northeast Ohio	Health care, manufacturing

WorkAdvance targeted unemployed and low-wage workers with a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Almost all participants entered with a high school diploma or equivalent; roughly 20 percent had earned a college credential. Yet participants had significant barriers to employment: Only one in five was working; over a third had been unemployed for at least seven months before enrolling in WorkAdvance; and one in four had a criminal conviction.

The results confirm earlier studies showing that sectoral programs can increase earnings among low-income individuals. Detailed research findings, including a cost analysis, are available at www.mdrc.org.* Longer-term follow-up data will be collected at the three-year and five-year points, and a full benefit-cost analysis will be conducted.

*Hendra et al. (2016).

ed employers together to share their views: What should the curriculum include? Which curricular units might not be essential? If possible, at least some employer partners should assess the relevance of each section of a proposed curriculum and be encouraged to suggest additional or different content.

Tulsa employers advised Madison Strategies Group as it redesigned a two-year diesel mechanics degree program into a shorter certificate program. Employers identified skills in the traditional program that new hires were unlikely to use in their first two years on the job and advocated cutting those. Employers also suggested that additional training in mill and lathe skills and shop math would increase machining trainees' employability.

WorkAdvance providers developed a range of tactics for engaging employers. Some assembled an employer advisory group — particularly including individuals with direct hiring responsibilities — to help identify technical and soft skills to be included in the curriculum. By specifying the characteristics of preferred applicants and the skills profile of those likely to get hired, employers helped providers strengthen outreach strategies, the quality of the applicant pool, job development activities (that is, identifying job openings and marketing participants for those jobs), and advancement support.

Employers were commonly asked to participate in program delivery — to come to class, introduce their industry or firm, and explain their expectations of new employees. Employers at the Tulsa and northeast Ohio sites provided facilities tours so trainees could learn about the work environment they would be entering. The more that employers are involved in training delivery, the more likely it is that trainees will meet a future employer, program operators will stay up to date on industry trends, and employers will have accurate expectations of participant skills and readiness.

Per Scholas crafted a five-step sequence for progressive engagement of participating employers, starting with the opportunity to volunteer their expertise to program managers, then advancing to providing feedback on the curriculum and applicants, taking a leadership role in an employer advisory group, committing to hire graduates, and investing corporate resources to increase program size and improve its quality.

Incorporate both technical and work readiness skills into training.

At each site, WorkAdvance training emphasized both technical and work readiness skills. When participants lost their jobs, it was rarely because of technical failings: Perhaps they didn't show up predictably, or walked off the job without explanation, or had trouble managing anger. For this reason, training included coaching on workplace culture as well as the foundations of career readiness and advancement. In general, the kinds of soft skills that employers prized — from punctuality to teamwork to clear communications — were generic and did not require customization to the sector. Still, employers want to lower the risk of a hiring mistake in any way they can. Rather than generically "work ready" candidates, they want new hires with the requisite technical skills and a clear understanding of what is required to succeed in their particular workplace.

Decide case by case whether to keep training in-house or rely on third parties.

WorkAdvance providers took different approaches to training. Some built employer-responsive training programs in-house and some partnered with external providers. Keeping it in-house allows for more control over the curriculum and greater flexibility to change and customize it, but organizations may not have the necessary staff or space, and third parties are often better equipped to design and deliver a high-quality curriculum. Madison Strategies Group had good industry relationships but lacked curricular development expertise, so the organization partnered with Tulsa Tech, a public technical school, to create its diesel mechanics certificate program. Per Scholas, on the other hand, developed its own information technology (IT) curriculum.

In the end, local conditions should dictate the choice:

- Do local training institutions have adequate quality and capacity?
- Do employers already trust certain local providers?
- Are third-party providers such as technical colleges willing to adapt curricula to meet employer requirements?
- Do ease of access and public transportation tip the balance toward training delivered in-house or at another location?
- Does training require a special environment? It is relatively easy to set up IT training in an office setting, but an advanced manufacturing program needs expensive, up-to-date equipment typically found only in a school or training facility.

HIGH RATES OF TRAINING COMPLETION WITH CREDENTIALS

Across all providers, WorkAdvance training completion rates were high.[3] Providers attribute this to innovations in recruitment, more intensive pretraining screening, and proactive support and reengagement during training.

What Recruitment Strategies Help Providers Increase the Odds of Training Completion?

Tap new recruitment sources so that the applicant pipeline is robust and reaches potential participants who are a good fit for training.

According to WorkAdvance providers, sectoral programs require more creative and intensive recruitment than traditional workforce programs because of their emphasis on career advancement and on meeting employers' quality expectations. Using their usual referral strategies, some community-based organizations were afraid that the high bar for eligibility would lead to rejection of too many applicants. (WorkAdvance had a relatively low rate of program acceptance, at 20 percent.)[4] Instead, WorkAdvance providers assigned dedicated recruiters to search for individuals with a good chance of being interested in and succeeding in a sectoral program. Recruiters went to local community organizations, job fairs, and other venues where large numbers of potential participants congregated, looking in particular for low-income individuals who were working or seeking employment, had the requisite reading and math background for the targeted sector, were interested in the industry, and saw upgrading their skills as a route to better employment and earnings. Providers also turned to new sources: Craigslist was helpful, and some providers used tech-savvy Internet search engine optimization strategies. Per Scholas decided to partner with — and actively recruit at — large public institutions, including unemployment offices and public housing projects, in order to expand its applicant pool.

Sharpen recruitment messages so that motivated individuals apply and know that the program is legitimate.

Many community-based workforce programs highlight program logistics and details when recruiting but do not do enough to convince individuals of the value of signing up for training. WorkAdvance providers emphasize the importance of positive but realistic messages. Recruiters convey clearly both the benefits and the realities of enrolling in a program like WorkAdvance: Persistence can result in higher wages, but participants first have to attend and complete a demanding training program. They focus on advancement from the outset, using career planning templates to structure goal setting and planning for advancement as early as applicant intake.

Potential participants in a no-cost program like WorkAdvance may need to be convinced that the opportunity is not a scam, since some are likely to have been recruited in the past by for-profit programs costing thousands of dollars. Offering free information sessions or open houses for applicants and their families, as some providers did, can help recruits get to know and trust the organization.

How Can Providers Screen Effectively Without Screening Out Applicants Who Could Succeed?

Finding the right balance between meeting employer needs and helping low-income individuals expand their career options is not easy. Research on WorkAdvance found that the long-term unemployed or those who were only semiattached to the labor market when they first came to WorkAdvance benefited the most from participation.[5] This makes sense. If a program enrolls only individuals who could have secured the target job without additional training, then it is not adding significant value.

Yet if a program enrolls individuals without the ability to succeed in the training or on the job, it will lose employer support. Employers in a sectoral initiative need to feel confident that they will get a steady, predictable flow of qualified, motivated new hires. To that end, sectoral programs implement rigorous, transparent screening procedures and set their admission standards higher than traditional workforce programs do. Rigorous screening also contributes to high training course completion rates.

Use screening criteria that balance objective and subjective assessments of readiness.
Screening at WorkAdvance sites combined objective eligibility criteria such as income guidelines and math and literacy test scores with subjective staff assessments of applicants' barriers to employment and motivation to persevere. WorkAdvance employers insisted on certain screens: IT employers in New York would hire only individuals with high school credentials; other sectors would not accept applicants with a criminal conviction. Failing a drug test was typically an automatic disqualifier, as was observable indication of other substance abuse problems. On the subjective side, one provider created a behavioral screen for motivation: The application process required individuals to make multiple visits to the office. Interviews were also used to assess readiness and motivation:

- Is the applicant interested in employment in this sector?
- Does the applicant want to be in training or is he or she looking for quick access to any job?
- Are the applicant's personal and economic goals somewhat realistic?
- Does the applicant have a plan for financial support while in training?

Be alert to screens that may inadvertently eliminate qualified candidates.
Some WorkAdvance providers set initial screening criteria too high, making it difficult to fulfill enrollment expectations. Madison Strategies Group initially screened out all uninsured, unlicensed drivers from their commercial driving program, until they realized how many potential applicants had to pay outstanding parking fines they could not afford before they could get their licenses reinstated. Rather than reject these applicants, the program helped them develop a budget and plan for paying off fines.

To assist individuals who are not qualified for sector programs, alternative programs can be offered, or individuals can be referred to other services that may be able to help them become more competitive candidates. One approach, implemented by Per Scholas, is to create a bridge program for potential trainees who might be able to qualify for the program if they strengthened their literacy, numeracy, and essential workplace skills.

How Can Providers Reduce Attrition During Training?

Engage and motivate participants through family-friendly and informative orientations, early and regular contact, and conveying the sense that they are on an important path forward.
WorkAdvance providers implemented a variety of engagement tactics, including open houses for applicants' families before the start of training; evening training times for those currently working; regular, prompt feedback to trainees on their performance; weekly meetings with ca-

reer coaches at training sites; and, in one case, paid internships.

In most WorkAdvance programs, participants moved through training together, as a cohort. Providers see the cohort model as a powerful support system, strengthening group identity and partially substituting for emotional support that many participants lacked at home. Providers also focused on reinforcing participants' pride that they "earned their seat" in the program.

WorkAdvance providers found that advancement-focused programs need to abandon the common job services approach of identifying and addressing the barriers to employment that hold lower-income individuals back. At least one provider concluded that too much upfront focus on "fixing" deficiencies — a case management approach — made it hard for participants (and staff members) to focus on strengths and instill a coaching-for-advancement mindset.[6]

Above all else, WorkAdvance providers see strong, stable relationships between participants and coaches and trainers as a key to retention during training. There is no substitute for the personal connection between staff members and participants. These relationships need to be built early, even before training begins, and continue as much as possible through training into postplacement. Making it easy for participants to reach their coach and contact is essential: Providers used cell phone apps and easy-to-access web portals for two-way communication. They made sure that participants knew whom to call when they encountered difficulty.

Offer incentives to reengage struggling participants.
WorkAdvance programs generally placed a high priority on reengaging struggling participants. Two providers that focused intently on reengagement — Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment — encouraged staff members to suggest relatively simple ways to reengage, such as joining a future cohort or signing up for another class. Both organizations created financial and other incentives to restore the motivation of wavering participants. Madison Strategies Group sent birthday cards that included staff photos. Participants could win prizes at a Thanksgiving dinner giveaway — but they would have to see a job developer or coach before claiming the prize. The use of incentives stretched into the postplacement period: The organization gave participants a $20 gift card when they received a promotion if they met with a career navigator at the program office and updated their goals for advancement.

PLACEMENTS IN JOBS WITH BETTER WAGES AND BENEFITS

Perhaps the most important finding of the WorkAdvance evaluation is that strong outcomes from sectoral initiatives derive from placements in targeted sector jobs where demand for qualified workers translates into a wage premium — a significantly higher wage than the jobs low-income workers could secure without sector-specific training.[7] WorkAdvance providers experimented with various approaches to increase the likelihood of such placements:

- Job development efforts targeting better first jobs and jobs that can lead to higher-quality positions at the next level
- Program flexibility to respond to changing labor markets by shifting sector targets
- Systematic postplacement support to help new hires stay longer, build experience, and position themselves for the next job

Effective approaches require a highly capable and flexible staff, able to build long-term working relationships with both employers and program participants.

How Can Providers Structure Job Development to Secure Placements That Provide a Wage or Benefit Premium?

Work hard to engage employers and their networks and get effective feedback on candidates and hires.
A range of tactics helped WorkAdvance programs secure jobs for their participants that

provided a wage premium and more generous benefits than are typical in entry-level jobs. Providers offer the following lessons:

- Build deep working relationships with industry associations in the targeted sector, in order to identify receptive employers.
- Keep expanding the network of potential employers.
- Look specifically for employers that offer better-than-average benefits and that are comfortable talking about advancement opportunities for participants who persist and perform well.

Providers created regular channels of communication between program staff members and industry contacts, so that staff members could obtain useful information about how candidates performed in job interviews and how to strengthen training and coaching. The best made sure to be in the field often, at employment sites, so they could identify specific jobs that were well suited for specific graduating participants and help introduce candidates to the employer.

Honesty about trainees and their strengths and weaknesses is important. Employers who feel they are not getting the quality candidates they were promised will lose their enthusiasm and the program will suffer. At the same time, honesty about employer treatment of new hires is also important. Programs should be ready to decline to work with employers that do not seem supportive of program goals or participants or willing to invest time in providing feedback on candidates and program improvement.

Finally, WorkAdvance programs developed ways to present candidates to employers to maximize trust and minimize consequences if anything went wrong. Weaker candidates can be "sandwiched" between strong candidates, so employers remember the strong ones. Another approach is to start with outreach to smaller firms, minimizing the risk of losing a large potential customer until the program's outreach methods are proven.

How Can Providers Ensure Responsiveness to Changing Labor Market Demand?

Be flexible and ready to shift program priorities with labor market changes. Change is the only constant in labor markets and local economies. Program leaders should expect that over the course of a multiyear initiative, employer demand will shift with changes in technology, competitive forces, macroeconomic conditions, and other factors. Employer demand changed significantly at every WorkAdvance site during implementation.[8]

In Tulsa, the market for aviation manufacturing foundered; Madison Strategies Group responded by shifting its target to jobs in computerized numerical control (CNC) manufacturing. St. Nicks Alliance in New York changed its target from environmental remediation to commercial driving with a hazardous material endorsement, a very different subsector and set of skills but one that took advantage of the organization's understanding of urban environmental jobs.

To build the flexibility to make midcourse corrections in a sectoral program requires staff members to embed themselves in the industry and its regional networks. WorkAdvance providers encouraged staff members to read trade newsletters, go to local employer group meetings, and keep their ears to the ground.

When industry needs change, the curriculum needs to change accordingly; if demand for certain positions dries up, training programs need to adapt or shut down — the sooner the better. Senior leaders must be ready to step in where frontline staff members may be hesitant, using industry and employer information to justify the move away from a program that can no longer secure a sufficient number of good jobs and to quickly identify promising substitutes. Providers should also make sure to keep their funders apprised of the possibility of sector changes.

What Tactics Strengthen New Hire Retention and Advancement?

Plan for steady, ongoing postplacement contact.
The risk of job loss is greatest in a new hire's first 30 to 60 days. During this critical period, communication should be regular and personal, focusing on what it will take to keep the job; but it is still important to deliver messages about advancement planning. This is a moment when the continuity of the relationship can be very important. For this reason, Per Scholas leaders argue against creating a dedicated "retention specialist" for postplacement communication in favor of housing this responsibility with career coaches, thereby reducing the number of "handoffs" of participants from one staff member to another. Providers used multiple methods to communicate with participants once they were employed, including personal contact from coaches but also social media, LinkedIn groups for program cohorts, and alumni groups.

Stress planning for advancement, not just for keeping the first job.
Advancement planning cannot be grafted onto the message after participants are placed in jobs; it will not take. Rather, initial goal-setting and planning activities, including the completion of career maps during intake and their regular updating, are critical. This emphasis reminds participants that while a good first job is great, advancement to the next levels, with more responsibility and better pay, is what will ultimately improve income and economic stability.

Some providers used the hiring firm's employee handbook to help new placements understand the standard routes to advancement, including the firm's performance review process, promotion and raise policies, and performance expectations (such as the acceptable number of excused absences). Providers also counseled newly placed employees to negotiate a raise at performance appraisal checkpoints.

New hires who signal eagerness to learn new skills and help the team are more likely to get noticed and get a chance to advance. They might volunteer for particular tasks or express an interest in working more hours, if they have the time. Per Scholas developed a training module to help new hires find mentors, get noticed, and prepare their case for promotion and raises.

Successful placement can change participants' sense of their future: WorkAdvance participants were more eager to take advantage of continuing education opportunities once they were employed and had a realistic picture of available advancement routes.

Help employers and partners create and expand advancement opportunities.
In addition to providing advancement advice and support for new hires, programs running sectoral initiatives should work with employers and other partners to create advancement opportunities. Close, trusting relationships with employers can lead to discussion of how existing routes to better jobs can be opened up for well-performing program graduates. Coordination with employer associations can result in broader acceptance of skill certificates as a signal of competence and readiness to advance.

TIME FOR PROGRAMS TO MATURE

Recognize from the outset that sectoral programs take time to get up and running.
It takes time and a high level of organizational maturity to build an effective sectoral program. WorkAdvance program managers estimate that it takes at least 18 months to get the various components in place and operating — and closer to three years to run smoothly. The recruitment, screening, training, and postplacement support constitute a whole that is more complex than most traditional workforce programs that place individuals into low-wage entry-level jobs.

Many providers have experience with some aspects of a sectoral program but are less well prepared for other components (such as

subsector labor market analysis, talking with employers about their skill needs, working with training providers to revise curricula to better meet employers' needs, and identifying or hiring staff members who can work well with employers or organize effective post-placement support). Given the complexity, new programs should seek advice and technical assistance from leaders in the field. WorkAdvance providers also recommend finding strong, capable partners (training providers, employer associations) that can help simplify program development and delivery.

Prepare staff for the complexity of the work.

One theme that emerges clearly from WorkAdvance providers' experience is the critical importance of having the right staff members doing the right jobs. Sectoral programs require staff members who understand the industry sector and can work equally well with employer representatives, program participants, and training providers. One program leader argued that sectoral efforts should hire extroverts, because of the constant need to persuade someone to do something: employers to take a chance on participants, training organizations to revise curricula, and participants to persist and complete training.

How important is it for staff members to have deep industry knowledge? Madison Strategies Group believes that industry specifics can be learned, as long as staff members are comfortable with the way employers think about hiring, promoting, and firing; Per Scholas wants its job developers to speak the language of business and have an entrepreneurial, sales-oriented attitude; Towards Employment is committed to hiring staff members with significant experience and relationships in the targeted industry.

Sectoral programs can strengthen and reinforce the staff's industry knowledge by building learning opportunities into daily routine. Staff members can be given tasks that encourage demand-side thinking; the business development team can be asked to present to trainers and coaches in staff meetings; coaches can be expected to attend training sessions; job developers and coaches can attend the same meetings so they align their language and the lenses through which they look at program priorities.

Develop a system for using data regularly for program monitoring and improvement.

WorkAdvance providers used data for several purposes:

- To stay abreast of labor market changes
- To keep the program's scale in line with a realistic understanding of demand
- To track the effectiveness of recruitment strategies and messages
- To track applicants' progress in training, placement, and advancement on the job
- To identify design obstacles to trainee progress and success

In a program that has complex supply and demand dynamics, a supple, robust database is critical to staying ahead of changing conditions and planning for improvement and success.

CONCLUSION

WorkAdvance is a promising strategy to help low-income adults gain skills and credentials, secure better-paying jobs, and position themselves for further advancement. The providers implementing WorkAdvance learned first-hand that sectoral programs that emphasize responsiveness to employer demand in high-growth sectors are complicated and take time to gel into a comprehensive program that can benefit large numbers of low-skilled adults. This brief draws out some of the main implementation lessons for the benefit of organizations and partnerships that aim to build on the best of sector-based training and postemployment retention and advancement support.

NOTES

1 Hendra et al. (2016).

2 This brief was informed by interviews with Plinio Ayala and Miriam McBride, Per Scholas (December 10-15, 2015); interviews with Dale Grant, Doug Cotter, and Chris Bernhardt, Grant Associates (January 27, 2016); and interviews

and correspondence with Angie Kamath, Per Scholas; Rebecca Kusner and Chelsea Mills, Towards Employment; and Karen Pennington, Madison Strategies Group (May 2016).

3 Tessler et al. (2014).

4 Tessler et al. (2014).

5 Hendra et al. (2016).

6 Frieda Molina, internal memorandum, June 5, 2012.

7 Hendra et al. (2016).

8 Hendra et al. (2016).

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Implementing the WorkAdvance Model

Lessons for Practitioners

By Richard Kazis and Frieda Molina

WorkAdvance is a sectoral workforce development program designed to meet the needs of workers and employers alike. For unemployed and low-wage working adults, the program provides skills training in targeted sectors that have good-quality job openings with room for advancement within established career pathways. For employers in those sectors, WorkAdvance identifies and trains workers who meet technical skill and work readiness expectations and can grow into second and third jobs. In a randomized controlled trial, the program resulted in large increases in participation in every category of services, as well as in training completion, credential acquisition, and employment in the targeted sector. The program also boosted earnings overall, but effects varied widely across providers, offering useful insights. Based on MDRC's evaluation of the WorkAdvance demonstration and advice from the providers involved, this practitioner brief presents practical lessons for launching a sectoral employment initiative with a focus on advancement.