
Collective Impact Case Study: Partners for a Competitive Workforce



Discovering better ways
to solve social problems

This case study accompanies a [video interview with Ross Meyer](#), the former executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

Summary

Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW) supports a collective impact initiative that marries workforce development with employer demand – accelerating the ability of each to solve their own challenges and those of the region.

Problem

The skills gap in the tri-state area of Northern Kentucky, Cincinnati, and Indiana was growing. Even with high unemployment, employers could not find the talent that they needed to fill critical positions. Partners for a Competitive Workforce reported that in 2010:¹

- 50% of local businesses expected to struggle to fill positions with qualified workers.²
- In October 2011, the regional unemployment rate was 8.6%.³
- 50% of the regional workforce lacked education beyond high school and lacked both the technical skills and professional skills (e.g., professionalism, work ethic) to qualify for open positions.⁴

If the skills gap was eliminated nationwide, the unemployment rate would decrease by 2-3%, but all projections showed that the problem was getting worse. The US Chamber estimated that by 2018, seven million jobs will go unfilled nationwide due to the skills gap.⁵

Key Facts

Initiative / backbone name: Partners for a Competitive Workforce

Year initiative formed: 2011

Mission: Employers have the talent they need to compete, and people have the skills they need to get good jobs and advance in their careers

Geography: Tri-state area of Northern Kentucky, Indiana, and Cincinnati

Impact area(s): Employment / Workforce Development

¹ Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network, *Workforce Trends in Greater Cincinnati: Key Findings of the 2010 Employer Survey*. Accessed June, 2013. http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/files/GCWN_Employer_Survey_Report.pdf

² "Challenge," Partners for a Competitive Workforce. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/Challenge.html>

³ "Partners Will Help Link Jobs with Jobless," *The Enquirer*. Published December, 2011. Accessed June, 2013. http://www.competitiveworkforce.org/files/Enquirer_12-16-11.pdf

⁴ "Challenge," Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

⁵ "Challenge," Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

Collective Impact Beginnings

PCW grew out of a long history of collaboration between workforce stakeholders in the region. For example, the region's four workforce investment boards had collaborated for more than 10 years to serve employers, and industry sector initiatives had a similarly long history. In 2008, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation launched the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network aimed at accelerating progress in developing workforce skills to match employer needs in key sectors. Then, in 2011, the leaders from different regional collaborations came together to discuss how they could better align their efforts. This planning process resulted in the creation of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, a backbone organization and common agenda to bring all actors together as a collective impact initiative.⁶

Structure

PCW serves as the backbone organization for this collective impact initiative (which is also called Partners for a Competitive Workforce), focused on workforce development efforts in the tri-state area. A cross-sector steering committee, called the Partners Council, serves as a central board, providing oversight and high-level strategic guidance to the initiative. This strategic guidance is outlined in a common agenda and activities are grouped to align with the agenda's priorities.⁷

The initiative is funded by local, state, and national funders including the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, United Way, and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.⁸

Results

PCW has demonstrated impressive early results. Since 2008, results in the tri-state area include:

- 6,400 individuals were trained for in demand jobs.⁹
- Over 87% of trainees completed training: 82% got a job and 75% kept a job for at least a year.
- Training graduates who secured employment increased their annual earnings from \$3,000-\$9,000 dollars / year (on average).¹⁰

⁶ Meyer, Ross, Email exchange with FSG. June, 2013; "History," Partners for a Competitive Workforce. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/History.html>

⁷ "History," Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

⁸ "Funders," Partners for a Competitive Workforce. Accessed June, 2013 <http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/Funders.html>

⁹ Meyer, Ross. Interview March, 2013.

¹⁰ Meyer, Ross. Interview March, 2013.

- Over 750 employers served, with more than 50 actively engaged as partners in the collective impact initiative. Early data suggests positive ROI for employers due to reduced recruitment costs and increased retention.¹¹

Additionally, the collective impact initiative has earned national recognition from the White House Council for Community Solutions, U.S. Department of Labor, United Way Worldwide, and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, among others.

Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Common Agenda

PCW's common agenda was an output of an evaluation of the previous Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network and a series of stakeholder input sessions. The common agenda articulates a shared vision that "employers have the talent that they need to compete, and people have the skills they need to get good jobs and advance in their careers." In support of this vision, the agenda outlines 3 priority objectives: (1) connect businesses with qualified workers, (2) align education with employer needs through sector strategies, and (3) improve work readiness services to help individuals obtain and retain gainful employment. The agenda also includes three supporting objectives to identify the data, communications, and policies needed to achieve the priority objectives.

Shared Measurement

PCW worked closely with funders, partners, and an external evaluator to define shared outcomes and indicators for each priority objective. A shared database system, initially developed by the Southwest Ohio Region Workforce Investment Board, is now used by over 50 partner organizations to track and analyze over 100,000 client records.¹² This data is primarily entered directly into the database by providers. Additionally, PCW contracted with state governments to access unemployment insurance data.¹³ PCW is in process of building a dashboard to aggregate initiative-wide data which they will be able to analyze for initiative wide trends, successes, service gaps, and barriers to success.¹⁴

¹¹ PCW Scorecard Q2 2012; "Results" Partners for a Competitive Workforce. Accessed June 2013.

<http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/Results.html>; "Health Care" Partners for a Competitive Workforce. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/Health-Care.html>

¹² Meyer, Ross. Interview June, 2013 and Kania, John, Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant and Ellen Martin, "Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Published 2012. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.fsg.org/tabid/191/ArticleId/694/Default.aspx?srpush=true>

¹³ Meyer, Ross. Interview June, 2013.

¹⁴ Kania, Turner, Merchant and Martin, "Value of Backbone Organizations" and FSG Interviews and Analysis and Meyer, Ross. Interview with FSG. March, 2013.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

PCW strengthens the link between employers' needs and workforce needs by aligning the activities of over 150 partner organizations within the high-need industry areas of health care, advanced manufacturing, and construction to benefit both groups. For example, a health care collaborative identified needs at local hospitals and built career pathways to prepare jobseekers for entry level health care jobs. A team of 14 employers, education providers, community organizations, and strategic partners contributed, and 88% of the 3,700 participating jobseekers obtained employment benefiting both the jobseekers, and the hospitals that needed human resources.¹⁵

Continuous Communication

Internally, leaders from different stakeholder groups hold seats on the Partners Council, attending their regular meetings and serving as liaisons between the individual activities and the broader collective impact initiative.¹⁶ Working groups meet regularly around specific initiatives, and LinkedIn groups are used to share information. PCW communicates progress to initiative partners through a quarterly scorecard and regular e-blasts.

Externally, the initiative utilizes strong media exposure to share their story and celebrate partners' successes with the broader community.¹⁷ Through this media attention, they raise awareness among community stakeholders, attract funders, and work to influence policy. Additionally, PCW and many initiative partners maintain linked public websites with information and updates about their activities and results.

Backbone Support

Partners for a Competitive Workforce serves as an accelerator of partner organizations' work in the collective impact initiative.¹⁸ Leaders of partnership organizations complement PCW's work guiding the vision and strategy, noticing trends that may impact partners' work, convening groups to share information and learnings, and functioning as a watchdog for policy shifts and opportunities.¹⁹ Additionally, since 2008 PCW mobilized nearly 30 million in funding for the initiative. The backbone itself functions with two and a half staff people, and a budget of roughly \$1 million per year that is primarily reinvested in partners.²⁰

¹⁵ "Health Care," Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

¹⁶ "Leadership," Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

¹⁷ Meyer, Ross. Interview with FSG. March, 2013

¹⁸ Meyer, Ross. Interview March, 2013.

¹⁹ FSG Interviews and Analysis. March, 2012.

²⁰ Meyer, Ross. Interview with FSG. March, 2013; Kania, Turner, Merchant and Martin, "Value of Backbone Organizations"

Lessons Learned

Shared measurement is a powerful lever for change: Developing and implementing a shared measurement system was “a major challenge” for PCW. It took PCW multiple years to gain partner agreement on outcomes and to train partners on consistent data entry into the shared database.²¹ To gain agreement on outcomes, PCW found that engaging funders was critical. “Part of the issue with system fragmentation was that funders asked for different data, so to get funders aligned around common metrics was important. And when funders drive things, providers care.”²² With a shared measurement system now in place, PCW is beginning to see the tremendous benefits that the system offers. “We can start to understand where are the gaps in services, what kind of services are leading to better outcomes, and what are the major barriers to success.”²³ The newfound visibility into the data enables PCW to build upon successes and pivot to overcome barriers, ultimately improving the ability of the collective impact initiative to drive outcomes.

Get to know the movers and shakers at all levels: One of PCW’s strengths, and most valuable activities, has been getting to know the different actors in the region. PCW built strong relationships with business leaders, community organizations, and funders. A number of PCW’s partners commented on the importance of these relationships: “You have to know them and they have to know you,” the leader of one partner organization said.²⁴ These relationships built trust between the different actors, and fueled the initiative. For example, PCW’s relationship with the local United Way has given the backbone organization a home base, helped establish credibility of the initiative, and has led to critical funding for the initiative.²⁵

Keep the agenda fresh and relevant to avoid fatigue: After a few years as a collective impact initiative, PCW had accomplished many of the “quick wins” they had set out to achieve. The excitement that accompanies the start of a new project had started to fade. Additionally, the community context had begun to shift and PCW needed to assure continued relevancy of the initiative to the region’s evolving needs. To do so, PCW recommended refining the common agenda to be focused and rigid on the big issues, but nimble and flexible on the strategies. This structure allows strategies to shift in response to changes in the marketplace, keeping the initiative relevant and partners on their toes.²⁶

²¹ Meyer, Ross. Interview March 2013; Meyer, Ross. Interview June, 2013.

²² Meyer, Ross. Interview June, 2013.

²³ Meyer, Ross. Interview March, 2013

²⁴ FSG Interviews and Analysis, March, 2012.

²⁵ FSG Interviews and Analysis, March, 2012.

²⁶ Meyer, Ross. Interview March, 2013

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This report was first published
September 10, 2013.



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