A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in various shades of blue and green. A thick blue horizontal bar is on the left, with a blue shape overlapping its right end. Below it, a green horizontal bar is on the left, with a light blue shape overlapping its right end. Further down, another light blue shape overlaps the green bar. To the right, a darker blue shape overlaps the top of the blue bar, and a medium blue shape overlaps the bottom of the blue bar.

Fostering Sustainable and Equitable Employment
for People Without Four Year Degrees

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**This project was possible because
of the committed leadership
of OhioMeansJobs at Hamilton
County Jobs and Family Services**



About Cohear



WHO WE ARE

Cohear is a community engagement and strategy company

Better decisions happen by getting the right people – **The Everyday Experts** – to the table.



WHAT WE DO

We help leaders develop meaningful solutions to difficult problems

We do this by organizing with community members to engage **with lived experience** that drive insights.



WHY WE DO IT

We believe living an issue everyday makes you an expert

Decision makers need this wisdom to **accelerate impact and produce better results.**

Introduction

The greater Cincinnati region is home to a wide variety of employers in rapidly-growing industries such as construction, logistics, and healthcare. This growth potential makes it an ideal location to pilot regional strategies for transitioning individuals without four year degrees into sustainable, living-wage, career track employment. In an economy with [massive levels](#) of student loan debt holding people back from [buying homes](#) or starting families, it is imperative that more people get access to meaningful, well-paying careers that don't require a four year degree. These strategies should be at the center of any effort to build a more robust middle class in the region.

OhioMeansJobs Hamilton County (OMJ) has recognized that in order to facilitate this change, it is crucial to understand the unique challenges present at every juncture of the current workforce system. This is best accomplished by listening to and learning from the everyday experts: prospective employees, employers, educators, and training providers.

Cohear, in partnership with OMJ, has engaged everyday experts through 23 one-on-one qualitative interviews and nine focus groups with 69 total employers, job seekers, training providers, and other key stakeholders. This report details the current needs for improvement of workforce systems in Cincinnati as reported by these participants, as well as next steps and action ideas that have emerged from these group sessions.

The employers we engaged came from healthcare, construction, manufacturing, logistics, customer service, information technology, and the skilled trades. Most were struggling to hire during a time of expanding labor demand and increasing wage competition. These sectors are experiencing rapid growth; and are in desperate need of employees in entry level positions, many of which can provide opportunities for long-term career growth and wealth building. In addition to broad labor participation trends, some of the additional challenges to hiring are: stigma surrounding some of these industries, recruiting a diverse workforce, and identifying interested workers with the correct skill sets.

Meanwhile, many job seekers are struggling to find childcare, while others are newly prioritizing flexible working hours and environments, e.g. work from home. Transportation to work and training remains a persistent barrier, and may affect certain high-demand industries such as logistics and manufacturing more acutely than others because they tend to be further removed from public transportation infrastructure. Finally, many who have not yet returned to the workforce continue to fear COVID-19, particularly as mask mandates and other restrictions have been lifted nationwide despite inconsistent rates of vaccination by region.

Context

A SHIFTING LABOR MARKET

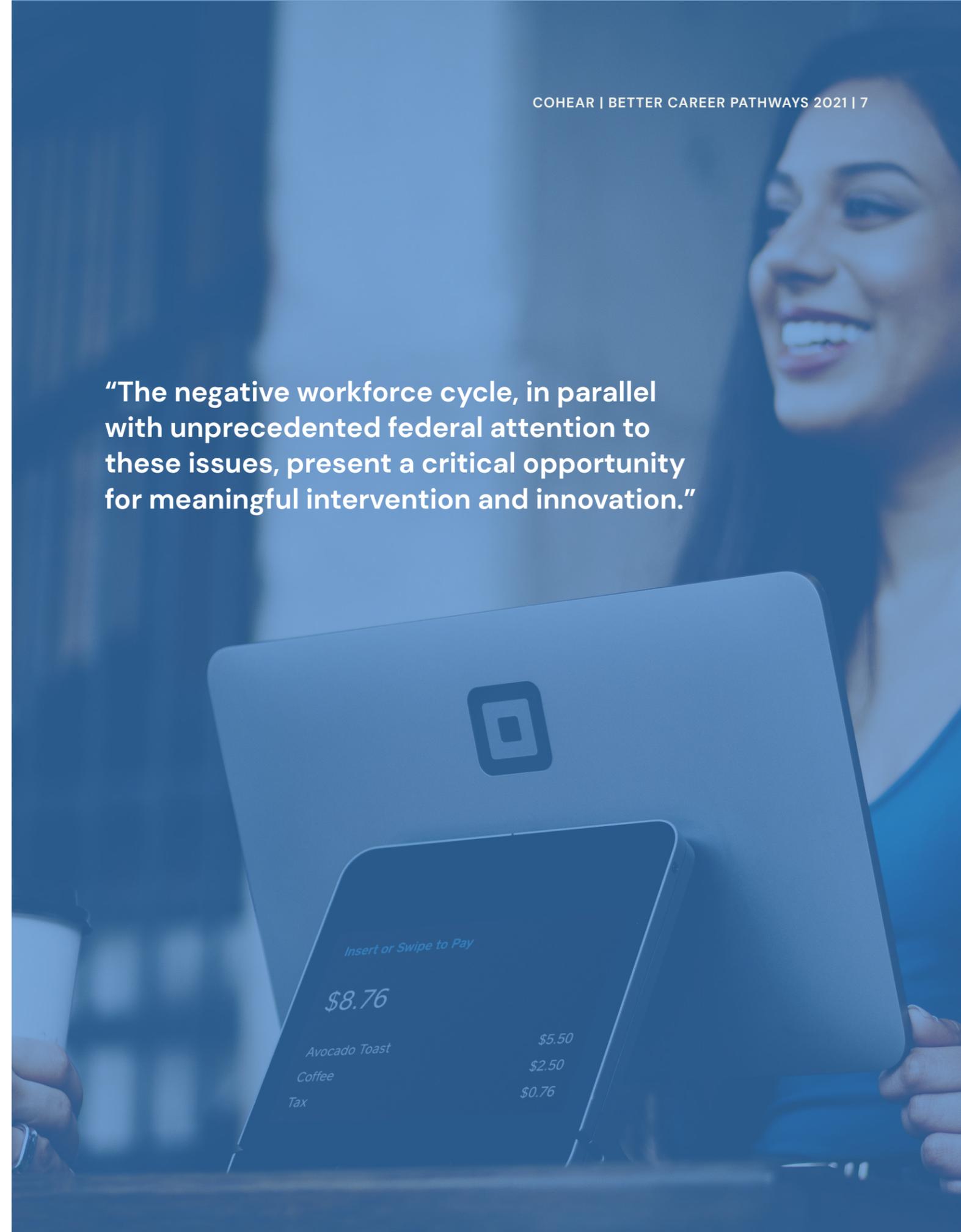
As the economy recovers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the labor market has been a constant source of excitement, trepidation, and uncertainty. Potential labor shortages are a major concern for employers, as the balance of negotiating power seems to be shifting in the direction of wage earners for the first time in a generation. Some business leaders, Chamber of Commerce representatives, and Republican government leaders have pushed for an end to additional benefits in order to encourage more workforce participation and shift the balance back in the direction of employers.

However, data seems to demonstrate that it is unlikely that those efforts will do much to alter the fundamental dynamics that have shifted during the last 18 months. Even as government stimulus checks and tax refunds rolled out during the spring and unemployment benefits were further extended, [unemployment claims continued along their trend of a gradual but steady decline](#). Job gains in recent months have [primarily been among male workers](#). [Women--especially women of color--have left the workforce in record numbers](#) over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many have not yet returned. Their continued absence from the workforce is a result of a number of factors, including: job losses in fields which employ large

numbers of women--such as education, childcare, and hospitality--family care pressures, challenges finding childcare, and a desire to find work they can do from home.

Women remain the primary caretakers for children, both professionally and within the home, creating a twofold childcare crisis: working moms are hard-pressed to find care for their children in order to return to work, and low childcare enrollment rates during the pandemic have resulted in estimates that up to [40% of childcare centers have or will permanently close as a result of COVID-19](#). Many of those centers which remain open have been [forced to lay off staff, and are now struggling to hire them back due to their low wage offerings](#). [These centers are largely staffed by women](#), many of whom are now choosing to remain at home for reasons surrounding their own family needs, COVID-19 concerns, and the low wages offered by underfunded childcare centers. The negative workforce cycle, in parallel with unprecedented federal attention to these issues, present a critical opportunity for meaningful intervention and innovation.

“The negative workforce cycle, in parallel with unprecedented federal attention to these issues, present a critical opportunity for meaningful intervention and innovation.”



Who We Engaged

9 FOCUS GROUPS WITH **69** EVERYDAY EXPERTS

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Employers, training providers, and workforce partners

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4 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Employers

Christ Hospital Health Network

Medpace

Life Enriching Communities

The Health Collaborative

Mercy Health

BrightView Health

Cincinnati Children's Hospital

CTI Clinical Trial Services

Messer Construction

Cincinnati Metro

Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority

Triversity Construction

Michelman

Nehemiah Manufacturing

JBK Packaging

Greater Cincinnati Water Works

Standard Textile

Duke Energy

Educators & Training Providers

Gateway Community College

Cincinnati State

Allied Construction Industries

Great Oaks

UC Blue Ash

Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority Mercy

Neighborhood Ministries

160 Driving Academy

NIMS

Healthcare Access Now

Making a Change Cincy

The Urban League of Greater Cincinnati Talbert

House

The United Way of Greater Cincinnati AtWork

Personnel Services

Building Trades

BEW Apprenticeship

Greater Cincinnati Apprenticeship Council

Laborers Statewide Apprenticeship

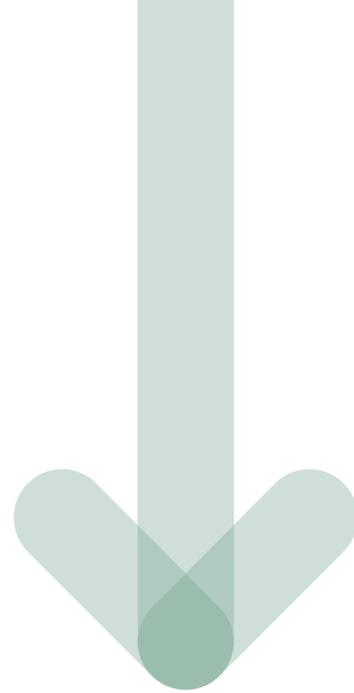
Greater Cincinnati Building Trades

Laborers Local 265

Laborers Local 392

Cincinnati Cement Masons and Plasterers

Key Ideas

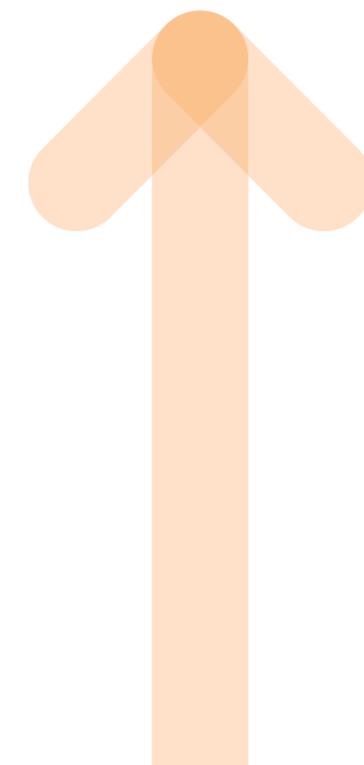


1. Education and Training

- Expose students early to career paths such as IT, construction, manufacturing, logistics, and administration.
- Create opportunities for students to opt in to learn about career paths of interest.
- Develop job shadowing and internship opportunities for students.
- Partner with schools to provide information and resources regarding OMJ training offerings and opportunities for job placement.
- Leverage success stories, especially featuring people of color, to spread the word about OMJ services through social media and other channels.
- Build robust relationships between OMJ, employers, training providers, and schools.
- Utilize successful alumni working in fields which do not require four year degrees to better reach their former high schools.
- Foster more mentorship, peer networking, and sponsored speaker opportunities.
- Provide hands-on assistance for training program enrollment.
- Remove financial barriers for people to enter training.
- Establish a regional work preparation program to equip employees to succeed.
- Train applicants to navigate online job application portals and digital interviews, in addition to resume and interview training.

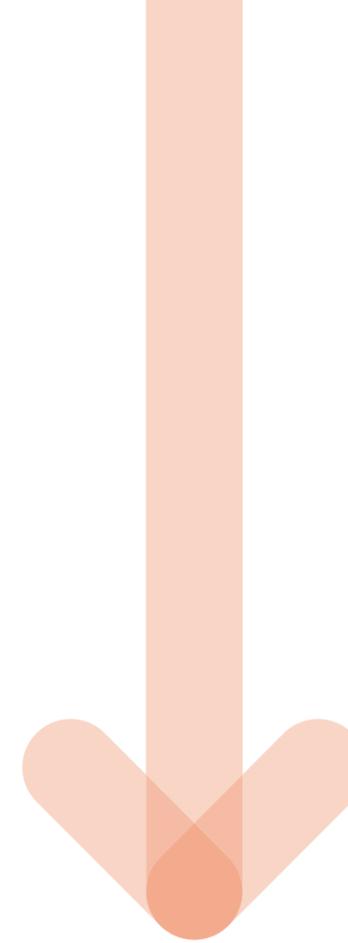
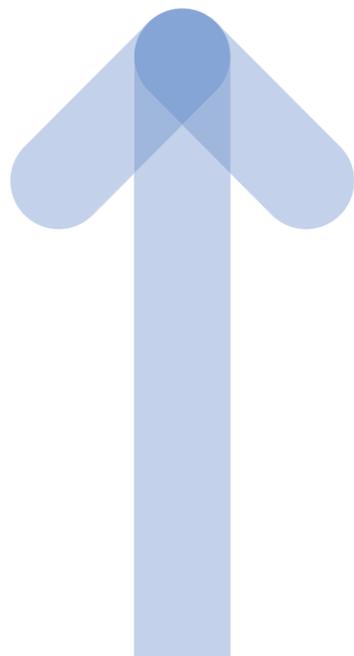
2. Recruitment

- Develop a marketing strategy that highlights jobs in high-demand industries as sustainable and long-term career paths.
- Create a database for employers to share candidates' applications for entry level positions.
- Invest in transportation solutions for employers and training providers.
- Coordinate affordable childcare solutions for employers, especially those hiring for second shift or inconsistent schedules.
- Break down barriers for single mothers to participate in the workforce.
- Help companies spread the word about their long-term career opportunities, such as internal advancement and tuition reimbursement programs.
- Assist employers and vocational schools with dedicated outreach to women and people of color.
- Provide anti-discrimination guidance for hiring personnel.
- Prioritize female and minority leadership in workforce programs in order to better recruit diverse candidates.



3. Retention and Career Development

- Prioritize mentoring and ongoing case management programs for employees.
- Assist with resource navigation programs for new workers.
- Provide ongoing resources and financial support for employees transitioning off of public benefits.
- Connect new employees to financial literacy programs.
- Dedicate more resources to equipping trainees with workplace soft skills and conflict resolution techniques.
- Equip students with financial and equipment assistance during their first year in the workforce or a career transition.



4. Building a Better Workforce Pipeline

- Provide small grants for common emergency needs, such as food, healthcare, transportation, rent, and childcare.
- Create a resource navigation platform for workforce partners.
- Streamline paperwork with a universal filing system that collects information common to all OMJ program applications.
- Designate an OMJ point person for employers and training providers.
- Expand eligibility requirements wherever possible.

1. Education and Training

OVERVIEW

Though the workforce conversation often revolves around ready-to-hire adults, our engagement also reflected a need to include young people early on in their academic careers. OMJ can provide assistance to combat some of the key challenges to setting students up for success, including a lack of awareness around non-traditional career opportunities such as the trades, administration, and manufacturing. Additionally, appropriate workplace expectations and conflict resolution skills are crucial to lasting success in the workforce. Some action steps include utilizing human-centered marketing strategies that highlight young people of color who have successfully navigated certain career paths and can provide helpful information about their industries; embedding OMJ within public schools to disseminate information about available training programs, providing career exploration surveys and job application workshops, and raising awareness about potential career paths; and building connections to employers for hands-on job shadowing and internship opportunities.

In Their Words

Examples of Current Challenges

Some prospective employees face difficulties building resumes and applying to or interviewing for job opportunities, skills which are often not taught in schools.

“I couldn’t make a resume. I was in school [at CPS], but the schools I went to didn’t teach resumes.”

-ANTWAN, JOB SEEKER

Underrepresentation in some fields, such as construction, IT, and coding, may mean minority and female students are less likely to visualize themselves in those fields, and less likely to pursue them.

“The number [of vocational education applicants who are women] has dropped and continues to drop... as well as African-American males. Those two populations [are something] we’re very concerned about.”

-AMY, EDUCATOR

Students begin to form plans and goals for their career paths early, and by the time they are aware of all the options available to them--including those fields which may not require four year degrees--they have often already made up their minds as to what they would like to do, making it difficult to hire for skilled trades and similar positions.

“Any of those kinds of programs that require technical knowledge with electrical work [are what we need help with]. We have an aging workforce where our median age is probably around 40--something years old... We need workers to replace them as they’re going out for retirement.”

-ALEX, EMPLOYER

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Potential Solutions

Expose students early to career paths such as IT, construction, manufacturing, logistics, and administration.

Ensuring that elementary and middle school students are aware of varied career options will help guide their career pursuits down the road. A focus on applied math skills is also crucial to enable students to pursue a wide variety of occupations in the future. This exposure to these careers could include shadowing opportunities, in-school discussions with people who have pursued the skilled trades and other non-traditional career paths, and on-the-job field trips and visits.

"You gotta get 'em early... if you're catching them at 14, their mind is made up, but if you catch them earlier with IT and coding and stuff like that, it can be really cool, and learning math can be really cool, then yes. Let's push more women and females into these industries."

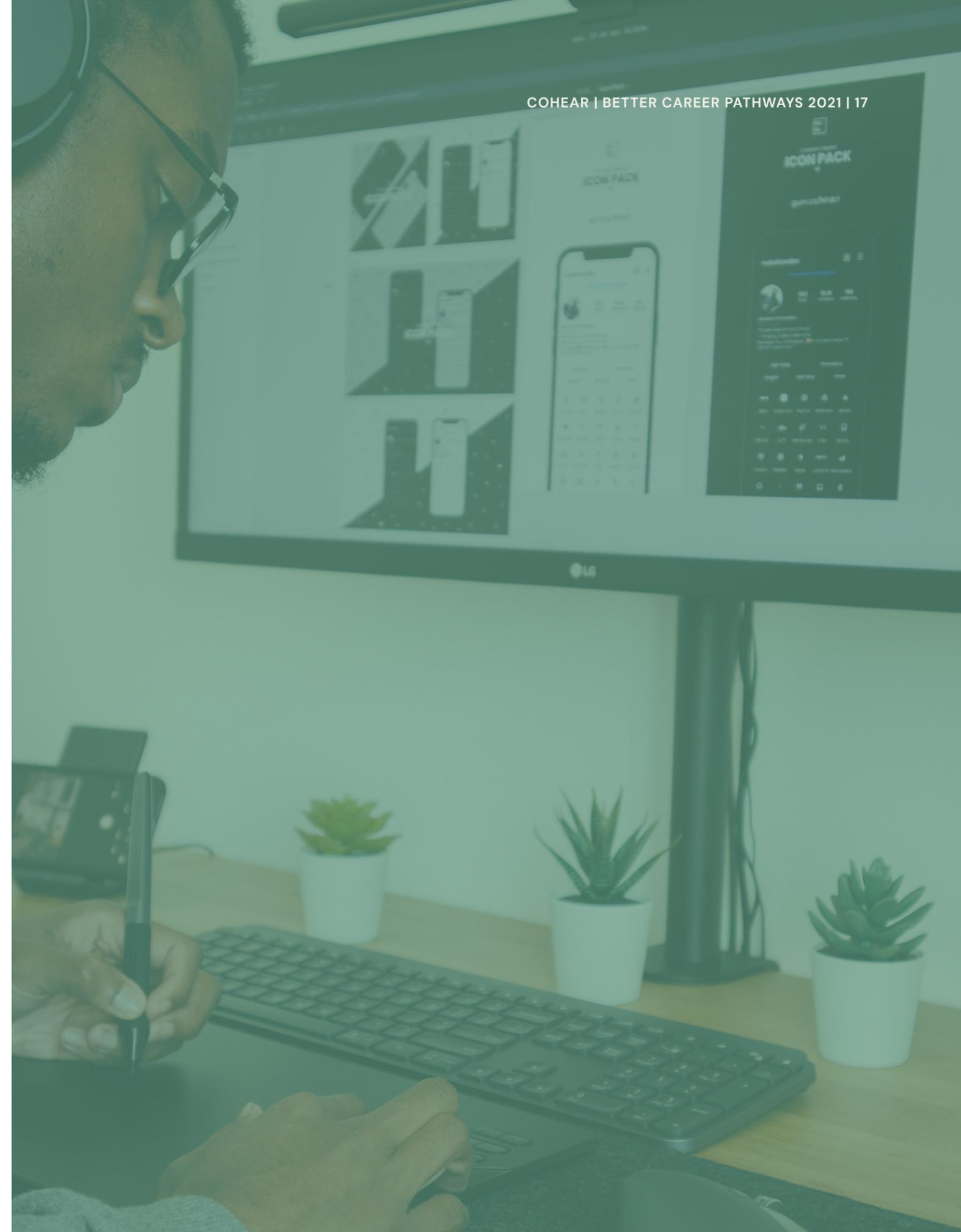
-TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

"We cannot get anyone in class or a job or anything if they cannot do math, in manufacturing, construction."

-CATHY, TRAINING PROVIDER

"I wonder if there is an opportunity for us to extend the pipeline beyond the ready-to-hire [individuals] and reach out to the younger community to get them mentally prepared on all the different kinds of opportunities that could be available for them upon graduation."

-ISABEL, EMPLOYER



Create opportunities for students to opt in to learn about career paths of interest.

Surveys and assessments can help connect students to career exploration events that are tailored to their areas of interest. Instead of a one size fits all approach to career exploration in which various adults speak to entire classes about their career journey, find out what students' interests are, and connect them to information sessions and job shadowing opportunities based on that information.

"I've had experience where people would come to my school and they would speak about different job careers and opportunities, but what happens is when you... forcibly place a class on a set of youth and they're not really interested in it, it defeats the whole purpose of even having an awareness towards that type of career, if that makes any sense. I've been in different classes where people will come and talk about their jobs, but not a lot of people were interested in that."

-ME'YANI, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

"What I was into is when they talked to us about what would we want to do, how would we do it, how will we get to that point, how would our future look doing that, and talking about our future jobs."

-LAKIYA, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Develop job shadowing and internship opportunities for students.

It is important for young people to be able to envision what their lives might look like if they were to pursue a particular career, so creating opportunities for students to work for a company of interest or job shadow would be extremely helpful.

"What would be most helpful for me is actually having... an internship, or being able to watch firsthand how a real estate broker would operate, or even just understanding what real estate agents do... actually being able to shadow their line of work."

-ME'YANI, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

"I like doing construction... [I don't know anyone who works in construction]... I want to be able to touch things... I'm willing to try [different construction fields]."

-STEVEN, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Partner with schools to provide information and resources regarding OMJ training offerings and opportunities for job placement.

Teachers and school administrators often struggle to find adequate time to perform their essential duties, so there is a clear need for a more robust infrastructure of workforce pathway support in schools. OMJ could create resources for schools to help inform and guide their students as they develop plans for their careers, particularly for those fields which do not require a bachelor's degree.

"Recruiting a lot of the students from the high schools sounds like a good idea so that people can start out with those 15 dollar [per hour] jobs and work their way up in a company."

-MAHOGANY, TRAINING GRADUATE

"I would focus on networking and getting to the youth and people straight out of high school. A lot of people don't really realize that you don't have to go straight to college, there are other trades that will pay for your schooling."

-ARIEN, TRAINING GRADUATE

Leverage success stories, especially featuring people of color, to spread the word about OMJ services through social media and other channels.

There is a knowledge gap among many job seekers regarding available career paths and training resources. Success stories are an especially compelling way to capture people's attention, while simultaneously providing valuable information. It is critical that these stories are shared by people who the students can relate to, both in terms of identity and experiences.

I think something that could be beneficial would be a marketing campaign on utilizing success stories in Ohio, being Ohio-proud in that manner."

-CODY, EVERYDAY EXPERT

"When we talk about having mentors or peer groups that can actually speak to situations with people, that's vitally important. ...People need access to people who are getting it done, who have went through these hurdles, and who understand [persistence]."

-KURT, FORMER JOB SEEKER



Build robust relationships between OMJ, employers, training providers, and schools.

OMJ should establish relationships directly with middle and high schools in order to better illuminate the path to living-wage careers that don't require four year degrees, connect students to apprenticeship and job training opportunities for credit, and establish that OMJ can be a valuable resource throughout the career journey. Employers and school leaders alike are too busy and disconnected from one another to take on the task of building and maintaining those bridges. Work for a company of interest or job shadow would be extremely helpful.

"I would try to get more involved in CPS schools and try to get seniors familiarized with OhioMeansJobs when they graduate. If college doesn't work out, they can always remember OhioMeansJobs."

-CEDRIC, TRAINING GRADUATE

"Now in the schools, students can get up to twelve credits for work related to a trade or work related to credentialing, and to me that's so critical because some of the students, again, might not be as academically interested, but they can still graduate by taking advantage of various credentials at the high school level."

-ANTHONY, TRAINING PROVIDER

Utilize successful alumni working in fields which do not require four year degrees to better reach their former high schools.

Recruit successful graduates to perform outreach at their alma maters. Students may feel more comfortable talking to someone relatable who is near their age about potential career opportunities, and success stories are an appealing way to garner interest in non-traditional career paths. Alumni can provide resources and next steps to students who are interested, such as OMJ sponsored training programs and more.

"[OhioMeansJobs] should get alumni involved. Send some mail or emails to give them an opportunity to go to their schools and tell their experiences."

-CEDRIC, TRAINING GRADUATE

Foster more mentorship, peer networking, and sponsored speaker opportunities.

Seeing someone walk a path is often a prerequisite to being able to see oneself on that same path. More mentorship opportunities may help open job seekers' and students' minds to what is possible, as well as provide specific, practical next-steps career guidance. Finally, sponsoring speakers to go to high schools and other groups to share their career pathways could be impactful.

"Mentorship [would also be helpful]. At the end of the day, a lot of us don't have people that have gone to college, a lot of us don't have people who are businessmen or are around businessmen."

-CEDRIC, TRAINING GRADUATE

"I think everybody has kind of hit the nail on the head with mentorships, I think that is huge. ...I think connecting [entrepreneurial-focused organizations like Mortar and GCM] with some local business owners to present seminars would be big."

-LEON, JOB SEEKER

Providing hands-on assistance for training program enrollment.

Identifying, obtaining funding for, enrolling in, and succeeding in the right career training program can be challenging. Providing an enrollment navigator or other staff person through OMJ who can be available to walk people through the process of enrolling in training and applying for financial aid, as well as reaching out periodically throughout the training process to help ensure success.

“I really need someone to hold my hand and [tell me] this is a school that will help you do x, y, z, we’re going to pay for it, and help me through the step-by-step process. Because if I’m being honest, I’m not really good at that stuff... I’m not good at finding the school, the application process, how to pay for it... I need someone to kind of steer me in the direction I need to go.”

–ADAM, JOB SEEKER

“These different businesses and career paths, you need a step-by-step [process], you need someone to literally hold [your hand] when it’s something new.”

–LEON, JOB SEEKER

Remove financial barriers for people to enter training.

While earn-and-learn training tends to see better participation rates than other programs, training providers and employers often find it challenging to source funding for trainee compensation. OMJ could help by providing direct funding or additional supportive resources—such as gas cards or work clothes—for potential employees who are going through training.

“People have to live while they’re training, and even if it’s a 10-week training, you still gotta eat, you still gotta pay rent... so stipends kind of help, they don’t take the place of a livable wage, but they kind of help turn people’s heads toward training and making themselves more marketable.”

–TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

“Paying for the first year of an apprenticeship program... is [an example] of where we’ve found the most success in [retention].”

–LYDIA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Establish a regional work preparation program to equip employees to succeed.

With Messer Construction’s “work hardening” program as a guide, OMJ should explore broadening those efforts to create a pipeline of employees who have received training in soft skills such as punctuality, bringing the correct supplies, and working in teams. It is vital to have a number of well-trained case managers to help guide job seekers through this process, as well as partnerships with both enough entry-level and career-track employers to make it work.

“The work hardening piece... [is] the most important part of our whole process. ...We essentially coach, and groom, and continually reiterate the things that individuals need to be successful.”

–CEDRIC, TRAINING GRADUATE

Train applicants to navigate online job application portals and digital interviews, in addition to resume and interview training.

Some job seekers face substantial technology access barriers. Provide training for online application, interview, and job search tools, as well as resume crafting and interview skills.

“I think access, whether it be technology access or the ability to use the technology, or even language barriers, may prevent people from even attempting to apply for one of these jobs.”

-VERNA, EMPLOYER

“People may have really good experience, but if they have a lot of typos or grammatical errors on their resume, then the hiring manager may [get a bad first impression]...It may just be that [applicants] haven't learned how to put all of that together.”

-LYDIA, TRAINING PROVIDER

“Right now, we're in a virtual world within the healthcare system, so we're not doing on-site interviews...These candidates really need to be prepared to be comfortable through Zoom or HireVue... maybe even doing pre-recorded interviews.”

-DEANNA, EMPLOYER



2. Recruitment

OVERVIEW

Recruiting new workers is a key challenge for many employers. An external entity such as OMJ could provide services to a wide range of employers and training providers that break down key barriers to bringing on new employees, from shared transportation and childcare solutions to effective marketing which can help reach potential applicants of color. Additionally, since low wages are the largest barrier to convincing people to apply to new jobs, OMJ should consider a wage subsidy program that would help employers bring on more new talent. Another key initiative is a regional work preparation program designed to equip potential employees with the soft skills they need to arrive to work on time, properly attired and with the correct supplies.

In Their Words

Examples of Current Challenges

People of color may be deterred from working in traditionally white-dominated industries due to underrepresentation.

“I have not yet seen a Black electrical foreman in Ohio or Kentucky. These companies make millions of dollars a year but refuse to hire a Black foreman. ...It’s just that bad out here for Black men.”

-DEMAR, JOB SEEKER

Some women may not be disposed to pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, for a number of reasons including shifts at odd hours, concerns around how male colleagues might treat them, and varying levels of interest.

“I feel like these in-demand areas, industries, lean toward men. Construction, truck driving, IT... no one is saying that women can’t enter these industries, but the likelihood that a woman or teenager is going to gravitate toward those industries is miniscule.”

-TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

Low numbers of female and minority applicants may have been exacerbated by low levels of in-person outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for trade positions.

“We are very low on minority and women [applicants]. I think that not being able to go out and do as much outreach as I have in the past really put a hamper on those individuals coming and applying.”

-CHRIS, BUILDING TRADES

RECRUITMENT

Potential Solutions

Develop a marketing strategy that highlights jobs in high-demand industries as sustainable and long-term career paths.

Help employers communicate that career tracks are available for those who are hired at the entry level and dispel negative stereotypes about industries such as construction and manufacturing.

“Once we get someone in the door, there is progression within their role. ...There’s also opportunity to transfer to roles. Once you’re in the organization, it’s much easier [to move around and get experience].”

–JODI, EMPLOYER

Create a database for employers to share candidates’ applications for entry level positions.

Employers invest extensive time in their prospective employees through work preparation, training, interviews, and more. Create deeper partnerships between employers so that when a promising candidate is not the right fit for a company or industry, they can be matched with other, more suitable potential employers, perhaps through a shared applicant database.

“[I like the idea of] networking with other employers, that we’ve interviewed a candidate and they weren’t the right fit for us and [there being] a way to get that candidate out to that network. Just to share amongst others that might be hiring, that might be looking for that type of skill set.”

–COURTNEY, EMPLOYER

“I think it would be great to see that someone interviewed with Mercy and maybe they weren’t a fit for that role, but could potentially be [suited] for our healthcare division--that would be great.”

–JESSICA, EMPLOYER

“I do like the idea of seeing that somebody interviewed somewhere else, but maybe they would be a better fit for us. ...It would be kind of nice to share candidates in a way.”

–DEANNA, EMPLOYER

Invest in transportation solutions for employers and training providers.

Transportation is one of the largest barriers prospective trainees and employees face. Employers and training providers have seen success providing their own transportation solutions, but need longer-term sources of funding. Potential solutions include shared shuttle vans which pick people up at a designated location that is accessible to transit and drop them off at work, assistance programs for those who need help to obtain a drivers’ license, and funds for car purchase or repair assistance.

“The one thing that is missing is money, sustainability. We have done some stuff at Talbert House where we have taken people to and from work, it worked beautifully! But we ran out of money.”

–TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

“I cannot stress enough how big of an issue transportation is for the construction industry. We have done everything we can to get schools to establish Driver’s Ed programs, we’ve connected with Changing Gears... We lose so many students to lack of transportation.”

–LYDIA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Coordinate affordable childcare solutions for employers, especially those hiring for second shift or inconsistent schedules.

Employers struggle to hire and retain employees with children for roles which necessitate later shifts or unpredictable scheduling. To meet this need, facilitate partnerships between employers and nearby childcare providers who could flex to meet the employees' unique needs. Subsidizing childcare for new employees is also an important intervention, as traditional daycare costs may be out of reach for those earning entry-level wages. Because so many childcare centers closed during the pandemic, and many are struggling to reopen without higher government reimbursement rates, OMJ could create direct partnerships with childcare providers, then collaborate with employers to boost childcare workers' wages so that more childcare centers can open and operate.

"[Having OMJ help find more flexible childcare options] would help us a lot with retention. It could be single parents or it could be two-parent households that just work the same shifts. ...To have another resource for childcare would help us tremendously."

-DANA, EMPLOYER

"I think [childcare assistance] would be a huge benefit to us. I think there are a lot of employees that can't return or maybe they aren't looking to take on a new position because of the inability to have adequate childcare. ...If we had a [childcare] partner, we could capitalize on [that] from a marketing perspective."

-DEANNA, EMPLOYER

Break down barriers for single mothers to participate in the workforce.

It can be challenging for single mothers to break into high-demand industries like manufacturing and the skilled trades. Explore alternative credentials like the Child Development Associate (CDA) certification, which might be more appealing and accessible to some.

"I'm just now exploring child development certification, and we need that--we need that right now because of COVID."

-TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

"The 300 people [who have come through our doors] in Q1, 92% of them are Black single moms."

-JESSICA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Help companies spread the word about their long-term career opportunities, such as internal advancement and tuition reimbursement programs.

Entry-level positions in administration and technical fields may not seem like the path to a sustainable career to some applicants--for example, there is a widespread understanding that state-tested nurse's aid (STNA) roles are compensated at low rates, so it is critical that the pathways to becoming a registered nurse are clearly communicated. Provide marketing help to employers and training providers to shift the narrative.

"We have tuition reimbursement... we can pay for you to go back to school for so many credit hours per calendar year. That's a benefit we offer to our employees after they have been here for a certain amount of time."

- ALEX, EMPLOYER

“We have something new called an Individual Development Plan [in our corporate office], and any of our associates can implement that with their managers. It really takes a look at where would I like to be, say, in a few years, where am I now, and what is the skill set I need to get there.”

-JESSICA, EMPLOYER

Assist employers and vocational schools with dedicated outreach to women and people of color.

COVID-19 has exacerbated some employers' existing difficulties recruiting people of color, as referral through word of mouth and outreach activities have been curtailed. Trade employers and vocational schools in particular have noticed a decrease in applicants of color, and could benefit from assistance re-launching or creating new outreach programs.

“We are very low on [minority applicants] and women. I think that not being able to go out and do as much outreach as I have in the past really put a hamper on those individuals coming and applying.”

-CHRIS, BUILDING TRADES

“The number [of applicants who are women] has dropped and continues to drop... as well as African American males. Those two populations we're very concerned about.”

- AMY, EDUCATOR

“I don't know if there's an opportunity to help with showcasing those jobs [with low diversity] and the people that are in them. Maybe that would appeal more and help us increase diversity in those areas, because they're traditionally male-dominated fields.”

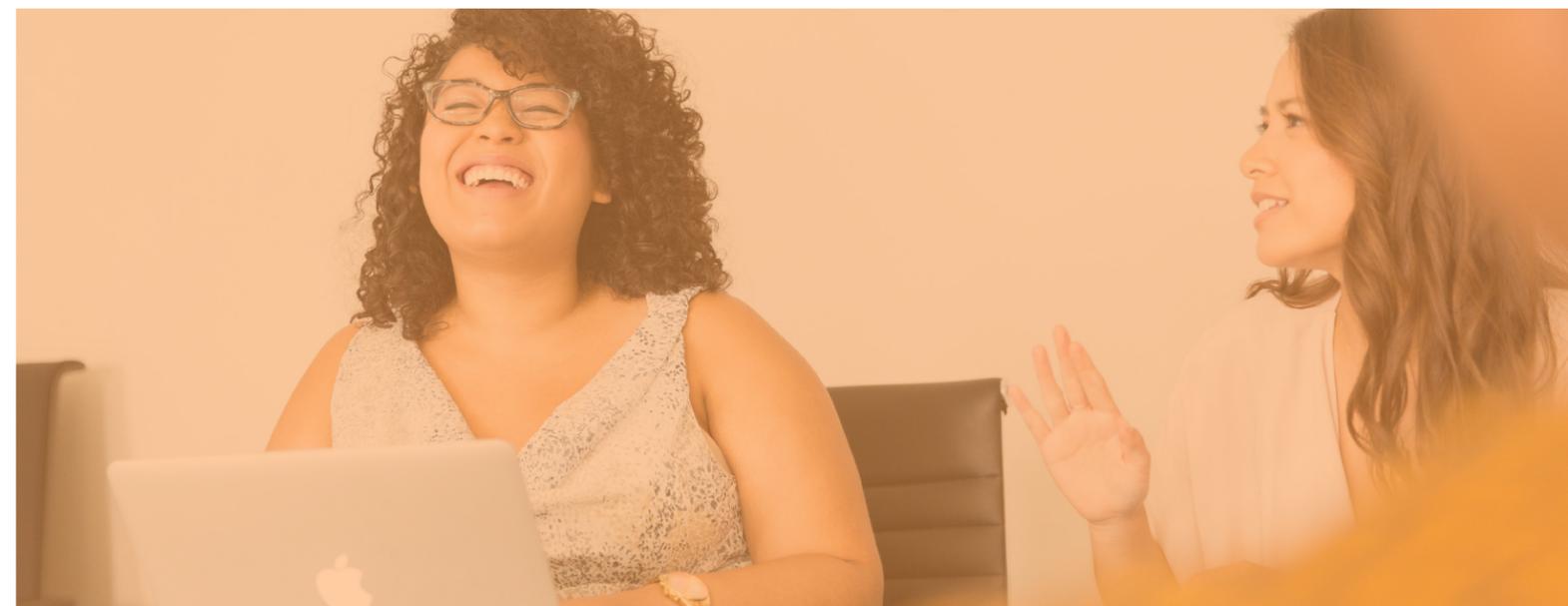
-VERNA, EMPLOYER

Prioritize female and minority leadership in workforce programs in order to better recruit diverse candidates.

Diverse representation among leadership in the workforce space, from training providers to hiring managers, is key to improving diversity among job applicants and the workforce at large.

“When we look at closing the workforce gap, it's the smart answer: we should be focusing on women and minorities, and how do we do that? The first approach has been that we need women and minorities to lead our workforce programs.”

-LYDIA, TRAINING PROVIDER



3. Retention and Career Development

OVERVIEW

Many employers, in addition to struggling to recruit for entry-level positions, experience high rates of turnover and find it challenging to keep new employees long enough to help them build careers. Often, logistical barriers such as childcare and transportation are central to these challenges. The loss of government benefits as a result of increased wages—a phenomenon known as the “Cliff Effect”—may also prompt some employees to leave their new jobs, especially if those benefits amount to a higher value than their wages. Even those employees who excel and enjoy their work may be more likely to leave for a new opportunity which pays higher wages if there is not a clear path upward at their current position. Cultural and generational differences between employees and their coworkers or management may also be a factor, leading to communication and conflict resolution challenges which can seriously impact retention.

In Their Words

Examples of Current Challenges

Some job seekers have found it difficult to move up from entry-level jobs, causing them to leave and look for other opportunities to advance.

“Working dead-end job after dead-end job, you get caught in this moment of despair.”

-AARON, JOB SEEKER

Employees may be uncertain how to communicate with managers and coworkers in difficult situations, such as interpersonal conflict in the workplace or absence due to family emergencies, which can result in the termination or abandonment of their employment.

“The high schools don’t teach soft skills... we get them to these employers with these certifications and then they turn around and get fired...”

-JESSICA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Jobs with lower starting wages or unpredictable scheduling tend to have high rates of turnover.

“Being that we’re in the public sector, I can’t say that we have the most competitive wages. They’re not super low, but somewhere in between... We do get applicants, [but] retention is probably one of our biggest issues as well. It’s just a high turnover job. The first year, the schedule is challenging.”

-DANA, EMPLOYER

RETENTION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Potential Solutions

Prioritize mentoring and ongoing case management programs for employees.

Barriers such as transportation, childcare, and financial concerns continue to present themselves after an employee has landed a job, making ongoing support and resource navigation assistance essential for long-term success. Additionally, a neutral third party may be able to help an employee navigate conflict with coworkers or managers without raising concerns about job security or creating an uncomfortable work environment.

“Employer resource networks, or similar to what SELF is doing up in Butler County... Something that really is able to come alongside employees in their first 3–6 months, when they begin to run into the inevitable barriers and issues that they run into with a car repair, or a sick child, or something like that.”

–WALT, TRAINING PROVIDER

Assist with resource navigation programs for new workers.

Resource navigators can be extremely helpful both for those who have never been part of the workforce before and those transitioning to a new career.

“Especially when you’re looking at non-traditional adults who are looking for a career change, they just need someone to email or call. They need to know that [navigators are] going to respond quickly, that they will have the information that they need, and that they can make the connections that they need to get to the resources that will help them.”

–CHRISTI, EDUCATOR

Provide ongoing resources and financial support for employees transitioning off of public benefits.

The public benefits cliff effect is a significant factor in employee retention. Providing financial support and resource navigation assistance for those who are facing this cliff could substantially improve retention.

“[My students] are hitting this cliff effect... once they get their first paycheck, their benefits are cut in half, so it’s either quit and go back on the system or get multiple jobs in order to make it.”

–ELLA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Connect new employees to financial literacy programs.

Financial literacy and budgeting skills are important for employees who may be new to earning consistent income, and are interested in seeing OMJ connect with employers to offer such courses to their staff.

“A financial literacy class that makes sense for the construction industry that we could possibly all plug into and use would be very helpful.”

-VINCENT, BUILDING TRADES

Dedicate more resources to equipping trainees with workplace soft skills and conflict resolution techniques.

For those new to the workforce, managers' and coworkers' expectations can represent a new, often confusing culture. Conflict resolution skills, and other workplace soft skills such as punctuality, are crucial to employability.

“Employability is a big issue and we'd like to get more students into [our employability prep class] because we know our students really need that. It is about the skills, yes, but... they need to be able to work in the workplace as functioning adults.”

-VINCENT, BUILDING TRADES

“[I think there should be] some kind of conflict-resolution piece that should be added to the program for the participants so they are better able to understand or handle issues or situations that may occur.”

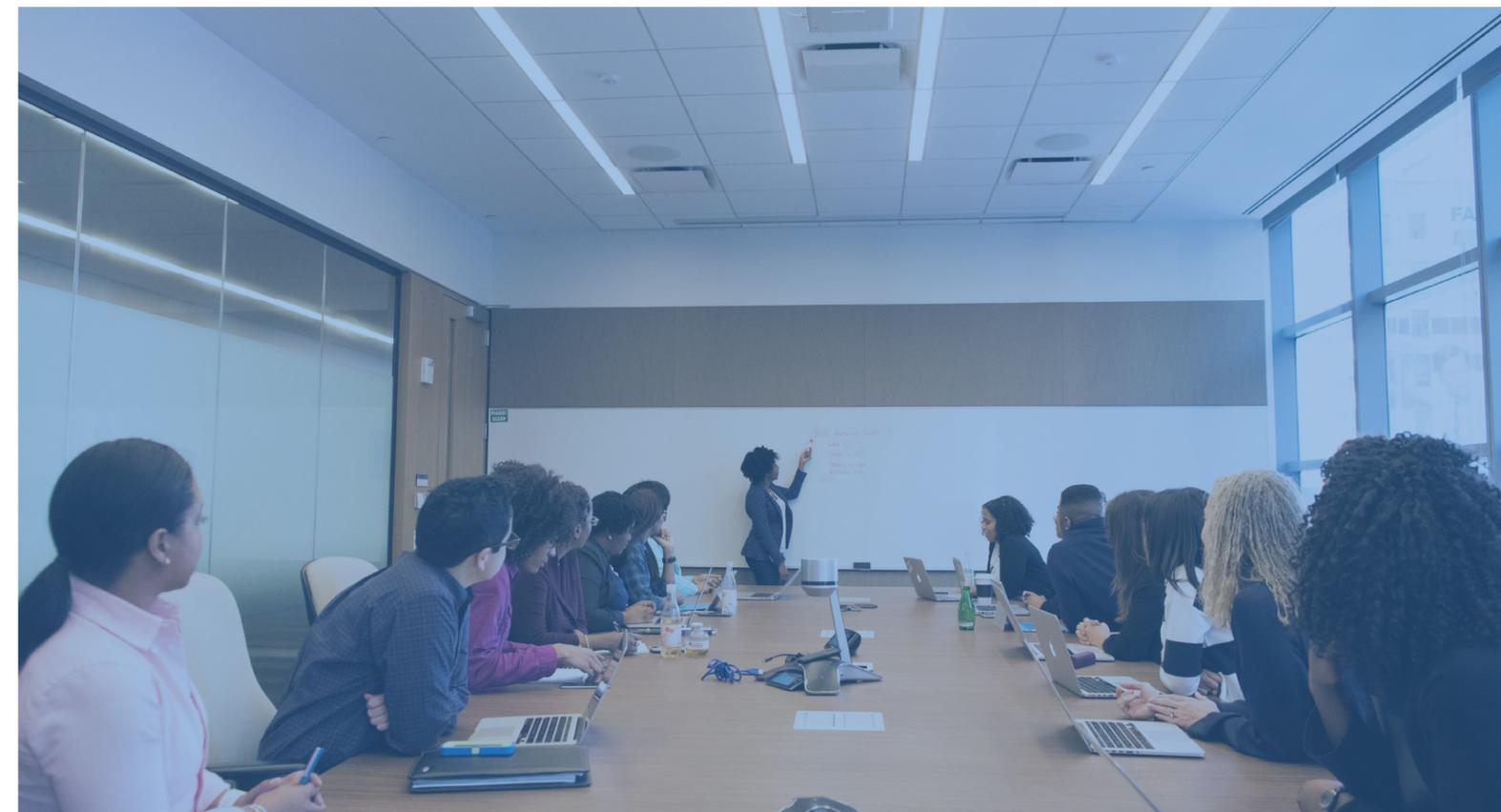
-NIKKI, TRAINING GRADUATE

Equip students with financial and equipment assistance during their first year in the workforce or a career transition.

Making ends meet during times of transition or beginning a new career can be challenging, and young people may struggle to afford the up-front cost of appropriate work attire.

“Many [students looking to start a new career] are non-traditional students. We're not talking about high school graduates, we're talking about somebody who's 30, looking for a switch in a career pathway. They can't afford to come in at that entry-level wage and wait five years to be able to pay their mortgage. That's been a huge issue for many of them.”

-CHRISTI, EDUCATOR



4. Building a Better Workforce Pipeline

OVERVIEW

A common theme emerged in all of these conversations: employers, training providers, and employees alike are interested in having stronger relationships with both OMJ and one another. These relationships could help foster more shared resources, communication regarding opportunities to partner, and more. Consider streamlining funding and training applications, providing each employer and training provider with a dedicated contact at OMJ, and exploring more flexible eligibility requirements for funding assistance.

In Their Words

Examples of Current Challenges

Job seekers may not be aware that OhioMeansJobs is a potential resource.

“OhioMeansJobs does have a lot of good resources to get people to different [career] points, but I just don’t think a lot of people know about them, and that could be an issue.”

-MAHOGANY, TRAINING GRADUATE

Those seeking career training may be ineligible for funding assistance based on technicalities. Alternatively, others may not even know that they are eligible.

“This pandemic, it hit everybody, and everybody’s not going to fit into that WIOA bracket.”

-ELLA, TRAINING PROVIDER

There is no entity leading the workforce space region-wide, resulting in service and communication gaps.

“If we had an organization like OMJ that led this work [of finding partnerships and ways to remove barriers for workers], and funded the work... we could really change the landscape of employment in Ohio.”

-ASHLEY, EMPLOYER



BUILDING A BETTER WORKFORCE PIPELINE

Potential Solutions

Provide small grants for common emergency needs, such as food, healthcare, transportation, rent, and childcare.

When someone is looking for work, financial needs are often small but imminent. Providing “gap financing” of sorts between jobs could help people navigate that process more successfully.

“We should have grants set aside for those [commonly identified needs].”

–DEMAR, JOB SEEKER

Create a resource navigation platform for workforce partners.

Just as job seekers may struggle to know what resources exist for them, employers are often so pressed by immediate responsibilities that they don’t have time to seek out and connect with various training providers and educators. Creating an all-in-one online platform to facilitate those partnerships could help enable employers and training providers to access the resources available to them.

“Most employers just don’t know [about the resources already out there], they really just don’t know. They have too many other things with their job to really understand our role.”

–CHRISTI, EDUCATOR

“If there were funds available to create a virtual body of service navigation where all of these resources are in one place for an industry, per industry, [that would be ideal]. Even if they’re the same resources, [like CityLink], I think that’s okay.”

–LYDIA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Streamline paperwork with a universal filing system that collects information common to all OMJ program applications.

Applying for OMJ funding, either for an organization or on behalf of an individual, can be onerous and delay the process of getting assistance. Creating a universal, general application and requiring further specifics by program would both reduce redundancy and save time.

“The restrictions for me on, and the complications around, the application process... that if we can streamline some of the bureaucracy and allow the systems to be a little more efficient. I think of the college applications, you have the FAFSAs, right. Can we do that locally... with an application that could serve, at least in part, as a foundation for a lot of programs.”

–SARAH, TRAINING PROVIDER

Designate an OMJ point person for employers and training providers.

It can be challenging for employers and training providers to feel as though they are in the loop with what’s going on at OMJ, and they often struggle to receive timely updates about applications for funding and other assistance. Providing each organization with a point person who could keep in contact and act as a go-to for specific questions would be helpful.

“Having that contact person to remind us [what funding opportunities are] going on--an OMJ rep, a representative or contact person, that would strictly deal with this, so that we can have a timely process and communication chain of what’s going on.”

–ELLA, TRAINING PROVIDER

Expand eligibility requirements wherever possible.

Broadening those who are eligible to receive assistance would help workforce partners put idle funds to good use, assist those who need help, and turn fewer people away. When eligibility criteria can be flexed, consider doing so in order to reach people who may be left out on technicalities.

“There are a lot of people in the middle who just are missing these eligibility guidelines by this much... make them eligible so that we can help them. We have to turn away so many people... and then the money just keeps flowing and there’s no way to spend it... There are a lot of people who are 80% median [income] who could use some help. A lot, not just those who are 200% of poverty.”

–TORI, TRAINING PROVIDER

Actionable Pilot Ideas

1 CREATE A REGIONAL 'WORK PREPARATION' PROGRAM.
Use Messer Construction's Building Value model as a guide. Work preparation provides job seekers with the necessary soft skills to succeed, while also allowing them to earn wages and bring in one-on-one case management to break down barriers.

2 COORDINATE LONG-TERM CASE MANAGEMENT FOR EMPLOYEES.
Provide case management for those entering training or the workforce to ensure success.

3 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEER MENTORSHIP.
Facilitate peer mentorship for people starting their careers, connecting them to successful individuals in their fields.

4 ESTABLISH SHARED, INNOVATIVE CHILDCARE SERVICES.
Coordinate with employers and childcare providers to facilitate affordable childcare, especially during odd shifts.

5 FACILITATE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND SCHOOLS.
Create connections between employers, career training providers, and middle and high schools.

6 BUILD A SHARED RECRUITMENT AND CANDIDATE INTERVIEW DATABASE BETWEEN EMPLOYERS.
Establish a database via which employers can access and share a common pool of applicants.

7 IMPLEMENT SHARED TRANSIT SOLUTIONS.
Provide shuttle services to far-out employment hubs, and create programs to help people get drivers' licenses, cars, and funds for car repair.

8 CRAFT A SUITE OF SUPPORTS FOR LOWER-WAGE EMPLOYEES.
Provide short-term grants for emergencies, case management, resource navigation assistance, and longer-term wage subsidies or stipends, especially for those experiencing the public benefits cliff effect.

9 INCENTIVIZE UNIONS AND EMPLOYERS TO INCREASE THEIR DIVERSITY METRICS.
Make additional funds available for employers and unions that meet diversity and inclusion goals.

10 SHARE MARKETING TOOLKITS FOR EMPLOYERS.
Create marketing assistance toolkits to help employers recruit young people and people of color, dispel myths about certain industries, and communicate the long-term opportunities available at their organizations.

11 TIE INCENTIVES TO CLEAR SUPPORTS AND PARTNERSHIPS THAT CAN HELP EMPLOYERS BE SUCCESSFUL.
In addition to financial incentives, provide employers with resources to help their new, more diverse workforce thrive.

12 LAUNCH WAGE SUBSIDY PILOTS TO HELP EMPLOYERS INCREASE ENTRY-LEVEL WAGES.
Create a bridge for employers to increase wages beyond \$15/hr by providing short-term wage subsidies during the transition to a higher base pay structure.



Conclusion

The Cincinnati region faces a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of an economy in the early stages of a boom, increased federal funding, and a labor market in flux. By investing in improved workforce infrastructure, OhioMeansJobs Hamilton County can help establish southwest Ohio as a place where everyone has access to career-track jobs, regardless of whether they have a four year degree. While there is no one solution to the current workforce challenges, the priorities of the everyday experts--employers, educators, training providers, job seekers and students--are clear. Helping employers and training providers in high-demand fields build more positive narratives about trade and administrative careers, providing sustained support for new employees, centering racial and gender

equity in workforce efforts, and facilitating improved relationships between OMJ, employers, training providers, and schools are all essential to success. Finding ways to increase base pay, compensate trainees, and create innovative childcare and transportation solutions will also be critical for the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. The action steps outlined above represent concrete ways in which OMJ can move toward a unified, county-wide workforce strategy that provides excellent opportunities for employees and employers alike. This mutually beneficial relationship between workforce entities, as well as employers and their employees, is crucial for sustainable change, and can only be driven forward through continued and continual listening, communication, and engagement.



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