PROMISING PRACTICES IN PREPARING THE UNEMPLOYED FOR WORK: A MAKE IT IN AMERICA CASE STUDY

Similar to other Make it in America (MIIA) grantees, the Macomb/St. Clair Workforce Development Board (M/SCWDB) served unemployed workers, incumbent workers, and other individuals interested in changing careers. What made M/SCWDB’s MIIA program unique was that its leadership made a conscious decision to also target long-term unemployed (LTU) workers (in addition to shorter-term unemployed workers), as well as traditionally underrepresented populations with previous work experience in manufacturing. As a result, most of the unemployed individuals served by the grantee were LTU workers. Despite initial challenges to identify employers in the bio-based materials and manufacturing industries and secure employment for participants, the grantee successfully expanded partnership with employers, far exceeded its goals for unemployed workers, and demonstrated that the integration of soft skills training into technical skills instruction is the key to effectively serving LTU workers. Similar to the needs of unemployed workers, the grantee’s experience shows that LTU workers require regular training and practice using employability skills such as resume writing, interviewing, problem-solving, decision-making, teamwork, and time management. This case study describes how M/SCDWB partnered with its training provider, Macomb Community College (MCC), to successfully serve unemployed and LTU workers by bringing work readiness training to the classroom. It also offers promising practices and lessons learned that can help you replicate this success in your program.

Key Terms

Bio-based materials are industrial products made from renewable agricultural and forestry feedstock. These products offer advantages from both environmental and economic perspectives. These materials are increasingly being deployed in a number of automotive components.

The Performance Reporting Handbook for MIIA grantees defines an unemployed worker as a person who is not working and wants and is available for work. An LTU worker is defined as an individual that has been unemployed for 27 weeks or more. Additional definitions of an LTU worker under MIIA are described in an H-1B resource on the topic. Most of the unemployed MIIA participants served by the M/SCWDB and its training partner were LTU workers.

Agency Acronyms

CAR: Center for Automotive Research
EDA: Economic Development Administration
MCC: Macomb Community College
MiWorks: Michigan Works!
MMTC: Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center
M/SCWDB: Macomb/St. Clair Workforce Development Board
NCMS: National Center for Manufacturing Sciences
NIST: National Institutes of Standards and Technology
Key Partners

Other key project partners included CAR, MMTC, and NCMS. EDA partners, NCMS and CAR, worked together to identify companies with the potential to grow and that would benefit from workforce training and business support services. CAR and NIST’s project partner MMTC worked with employers to identify their needs with regard to training incumbent workers and finding qualified job seekers. MCC used this information to conduct incumbent worker training outreach and ensure its courses met the needs of employers. M/SCWDB administers local MiWorks Service Centers, otherwise referred to as American Job Centers, and uses the MiWorks system to recruit dislocated and LTU workers who are eligible for grant-funded training.

Program Overview

The Great Lakes region, and especially Michigan, is known for both its manufacturing and agricultural production capacity. To capitalize on the region’s strengths and meet automotive industry-specific needs within bio-based materials and manufacturing, M/SCWDB’s “Building Capacity and Capability in the Bio-Based Materials Manufacturing Sector” project sought to bridge gaps between Southeast Michigan’s current manufacturing capabilities and the resources necessary to develop the bio-based materials manufacturing sector, including workforce skills and materials. By working together, MIIA grantee Macomb/St. Clair Workforce Development Board (M/SCWDB) and its NIST and EDA partners achieved the project’s goals and advanced the grantee’s mission to connect job seekers facing barriers to employment in the labor force.

Providing customer-driven job training and other employability support services has resulted in increased levels of employment opportunities, wage earnings, and enhanced educational and occupational skills of the unemployed and long-term unemployed (LTU). As of September 30, 2016:

- All MIIA participants that completed training have earned credentials;
- Nearly 98 percent of all unemployed MIIA participants served by M/SCWDB have been LTU;
- Ninety percent of LTU participants completed training;
- Seventy-eight percent of all LTU MIIA participants that completed training entered employment.

A key factor in this success has been the integration of work readiness training into the technical skills training curriculum. To be successful, LTU workers served needed to learn more than just the hard skills required to do a job. They needed to master soft skills that increase their employability and work readiness, including communication, time management, professionalism, resume writing, networking, and interviewing. Excelling in these areas required continuous exposure and practice. By partnering with training provider Macomb Community College to bring work readiness training to the classroom, MIIA participants completed training with the hard and soft skills necessary to start work.
Eligible individuals receive training that leads to credentials and certificates in welding, production operator, Computer Numerical Control (CNC), and electric vehicle from MCC. This training prepares participants for employment with employers that CAR and MMTC have identified. Through this collective effort, many employed, unemployed, and LTU individuals have completed training for middle-skilled jobs and secured or advanced in their employment.

The Challenge

At the start of the grant, MCC expected to achieve high job placement and retention rates based on their previous success and the region’s gradual decrease in the unemployment rate. However, LTU participants were unable to secure jobs and employers expressed that LTU MIIA participants lacked the soft skills necessary to be successful on the job. Even though the training curriculum included a week of soft skills training and all participants had access to the college’s Career Center, MCC staff found that participants were unable to write compelling resumes and interview well. In addition, participants were not accessing the services of MiWorks despite being located directly across the street from the college.

MCC staff responded by asking MiWorks to provide core services on campus and soon, MiWorks was delivering all of its programs on campus. However, the employment and retention rates of LTU MIIA participants did not improve. MCC staff then realized that LTU workers face more significant barriers to employment than other unemployed and employed job seekers and a different approach would be required to increase the entered employment and retention rate of LTU MIIA participants.

Overcoming the Challenge

Beginning in October 2015, courses for unemployed participants featured an employability skills component that was embedded into the week-by-week curriculum and delivered by MiWorks.

M/SCWDB offered a more intensive approach than the college could provide. The grantee has experience in providing non-traditional students with the strategies needed to become employed, with a focus on improving soft skills and employability skills. It recognized that building trust and providing extra support are necessary to help LTU participants become successful.

M/SCWDB proposed providing unemployed participants with workshops related to soft skills and employability skills during regular class hours throughout the course of their technical skills training. MCC and the grantee deepened their partnership and reached an agreement for M/SCWDB to integrate its employability skills curriculum into the training programs for unemployed MIIA participants, which were mostly LTU. Beginning in October 2015, courses for unemployed participants featured an employability skills component that was embedded into the week-by-week curriculum and delivered by MiWorks.

The curriculum included a Job Fair Boot Camp, which taught participants what to do at a job fair, how to present themselves, and what to expect. By preparing participants for job fairs, the boot camp reduced anxiety and increased confidence. Workshops about resume writing, cover letters, interviewing, and other topics related to job search were embedded into the daily technical training curriculum, which lasted up to five months. This was done by spending a few hours a day with case managers instead of instructors. A Competitive Edge workshop used peer
feedback to teach participants about social behaviors and the workplace competencies required to obtain and retain employment. Topics covered during the Competitive Edge workshop included the difference between hard skills and soft skills, professionalism, interacting with others, and critical thinking. The soft skills curriculum also included a day of job shadowing and an Interview Day, which provided participants the opportunity to practice their newly acquired soft skills and receive feedback and encouragement from employers.

Throughout the training, instructors and case managers from MiWorks collaborated to meet the needs of participants. A soft skills team attended classes regularly to address issues, such as absenteeism and falling behind on coursework, as they arose. Case managers reached out to participants individually on an ongoing basis. This created continuity, which built trust. The goals were to show participants that everyone involved with their training was there for them, to teach them what they needed to know to be ready for employment, and to help them use their new knowledge to secure a job.

The Results

The integration of work preparation activities into the technical training curriculum led to very positive outcomes. The first three classes with soft skills training embedded into the curriculum ended by March 31, 2016. Participants enjoyed the activities and became more engaged in the training. Employers that participated in Interview Day began hiring unemployed and LTU MIIA participants on the spot. This success is now being replicated as the college’s partnership with MiWorks expands to other departments.

By the Numbers

Between September 30, 2015, and September 30, 2016:

- M/SCWDB nearly tripled the number of LTU MIIA participants that entered unsubsidized employment after completing training and obtaining a credential.
- Eighty-one percent of LTU participants that landed a job secured training-related employment.
- The employment retention rate among LTU participants jumped by 48 percent.

Promising Practices

- Teach unemployed and LTU participants how to use your state’s labor exchange. Most people are not aware of this valuable resource. Ensure that participants understand how the system works and show them how they can make their profiles come up at the beginning of employer searches for qualified job candidates.

- Help participants create job seeker business cards that represent who they are and what they bring to an employer. These cards tie back to a participant’s resume, providing a highlight of their certifications and what they are interested in. These cards allow job seekers to feel more professional and comfortable when approaching
others about employment opportunities.

- **Start work readiness training from day one.** Lay out expectations for the participant, the training provider, and other service providers from the very beginning. Give participants a schedule during the intake process. If a potential participant does not pass an initial assessment test, provide remedial training.

**Lessons Learned**

- **The unemployed and LTU are often non-traditional** students that face many barriers to employment. They need more support than incumbent workers and other program participants.

- **Having the right people in the right positions is important to implementing soft skills training effectively.** The personality of the people who facilitate employability and soft skills training is critical. Without staff that are willing to have the difficult conversations with a smile and a positive attitude, your effort will never be successful. If none of your efforts are working, you may have the wrong people in the wrong job.

- **It is necessary to integrate work readiness training into the curriculum** to ensure that unemployed participants, and particularly LTU participants, have the soft skills that employers say they need. These participants may not be interested in additional assistance outside of the classroom to develop soft skills. At the same time, they often face barriers, such as lack of transportation or meeting the demands of multiple jobs that make it difficult to seek additional help outside of class. Understanding their barriers and providing flexibility to meet their needs is critical.

**Keys to Replication**

- **Embed soft skills training into the curriculum.** A week-long boot camp at the start of the training program is not enough. Surveys completed by the grantee’s MIA participants found that regular inclusion of employability skills in coursework led to increased confidence about their resumes, interviewing skills, and ability to apply for a job.

- **Build relationships with each participant at the start of the training** and stay in touch regularly so they know you are there for them through good times and bad. Gaining trust is the biggest hurdle. As long as they trust you, participants will hang in there, working to overcome obstacles until they secure employment.

- **Work hard to stay connected with participants.** They are the success or failure of your grant. Know what they want and need, and keep in mind that your needs may not be the same as their needs. While funders focus on credential attainment, unemployed workers are more concerned about securing jobs.

- **Trust among partners.** This means getting to know people, doing what you say you will do, and going the extra mile to support one another. To ensure that the partnership is sustained over time, involve a number of people in activities so there is still a connection between organizations despite staff turnover.

**Next Steps**

Would you like to know more about how M/SCWDB and MCC successfully embedded work readiness activities into the technical training curriculum? Do you want additional information on serving unemployed and LTU workers?

Contact your Technical Assistance Coach or email us at jobsaccelerator@dol.gov. Also, check out the following
Resources

MIIA Webinar on Job Search and Employer Placement
Helping MIIA participants overcome the obstacles they face during their journey from education to employment requires collaboration among MIIA grantees, training providers, and employers. Hear how MIIA grantees are boosting job placement outcomes by working with their partners to provide MIIA participants with the soft skills they need to secure employment and ensure that they are prepared for work.

MIIA Peer-to-Peer Learning Exchange on Soft Skills and Work Readiness
During this webinar, M/SCWDB and MCC shared how they leverage partnerships and use job seeker boot camps, job seeker business cards, work readiness training and other promising practices to ensure that unemployed participants have the soft skills they need to be job ready.

February 2016 MIIA E-Newsletter
A successful transition from an educational program to work requires adequate preparation for the job search and a change in mindset. This issue of the MIIA E-Newsletter provides strategies for helping MIIA participants manage the transition from training participant to job seeker and ensuring they are ready to work.