



POSITIONING YOUR
REGION FOR SUCCESS:
**INCORPORATING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
AND UPSKILLING INTO THE CEDS**

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The idea of workforce development as a key component of economic development is no longer novel. Leaders at the local, regional, state, and national levels recognize that while incentives and real estate and tax structures remain critical components of healthy business attraction, retention, and expansion strategies, the availability of a skilled and ready workforce can be the difference between success or failure for companies, local industries, and entire communities' economic prosperity. The workers themselves, the techniques used to engage them, and the learning and skill development strategies that make and keep them productive are also part of the community's infrastructure - just as important as power or transportation or a favorable regulatory environment.

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) can boost their regions' competitiveness by intentionally prioritizing this infrastructure within their [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies \(CEDS\)](#), ensuring that workforce development programs and initiatives function as an effective and efficient network and not just a series of fractured, incrementally useful transactions. In 2023, the [U.S. Economic Development Administration](#) updated its CEDS Content Guidelines to include a [section on workforce development](#) that offers examples and approaches to strengthen these approaches.

Just as every community has traditional infrastructure like roads and power sources, every community also possesses fundamental infrastructure to develop a workforce. Each state is served by public and private educational institutions, and every community is home to workforce investment systems that serve as conduits for job training programs and resources. Many are quite effective as foundational components of communities' economic development assets, though too-often underappreciated or not as prominently considered as they might be. EDDs that align these efforts with economic development plans create mutually reinforcing cycles of communication, collaboration, and planning.

In creating a CEDS, regions can work to elevate and amplify their unique mix of people, skills, and community assets that differentiate them from the rest. Leveraging your region's unique assets presents a compelling and specific argument that your talent and your talent development assets are aligned to your economic development goals, and in turn, to the success of target sectors and firms who choose to locate, form, and grow in your region. Centering on workers and their skills alongside real estate, transportation, and other traditional economic assets presents a more holistic picture of a place where communities and industries can grow and prosper together. A strategy that is more explicit about its talent base, and more targeted about how it applies its skills development resources will differentiate itself and offer distinct competitive advantages.

WHAT CAN THE CEDS SAY ABOUT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT?

As with any aspect of an economic development strategy, a region's workforce strategy can adhere to the following principles:

- **Identify and elevate the workforce assets that make a region competitive.** Assets can include workers and specific skills that are concentrated in or cut across job and industry categories. Occupational segregation – where certain demographic groups are excluded from or starkly underrepresented in certain jobs and industries – lets important assets go underutilized.
- **Invest in enriching current and prospective assets so they are more valuable.** Regions can enrich their worker assets by investing in skills development and career guidance. Supportive services that allow people to get to and thrive at work – such as good transportation, childcare, and health and financial services – also enrich regional talent pools and enable companies and target industries to better access those assets.
- **Target key needs in the regional economy.** Generalized education and workforce skills are important and necessary, but those focused specifically on a region's target sectors ensure relevance and applicability and make the region more competitive in the economic lanes that they have chosen.
- **Focus on job quality as well as quantity.** While the numbers of jobs created, attracted, and retained is important, ensuring that those jobs pay well, offer benefits and job security, provide pathways to advancement, and enable other economic activity can be more impactful to a community and region's overall economic health, as articulated in the [U.S. Department of Labor's Good Jobs Initiative](#).

AVAILABLE WORKERS

A CEDS that defines not only its target sectors, but also the specific occupations that those sectors rely on can help better position the region for new opportunities. A CEDS that also documents the typical wages that those workers earn in the region will show whether prospective target sector firms will gain cost advantages over other regions. Similarly, a CEDS can document the number of people working in those occupations in the region today and what they earn. That data can then demonstrate to prospective firms how easy or difficult it may be to staff up. CEDS research and data that shows regional disadvantages – whether in wage levels or worker availability – can motivate a region to invest in the quality or quantity of those kinds of workers.

With the right data presented strategically, communities can move from offering general and unpersuasive arguments to more concrete, meaningful, adaptive, and resilient approaches. Prospective companies may state that they are looking for “skilled workers,” but there are infinite ways to define what a skilled worker is in any given industry, role, region, or firm. Regions that can more clearly speak to companies’ needs for workers and skills show prospective firms and industries that they are ready to meet those needs, gaining a significant advantage.

How regions think about which people are in the “available” population of workers can also be expanded through the CEDS process. Members of underrepresented communities may not yet be participating in critical and growing occupations, but their presence in the community offers an available workforce that can be [activated and engaged](#) to the benefit of growing industries, to the broader economy, and to those workers accessing these evolving opportunities.

DATA RESOURCES TO HELP “DO YOUR HOMEWORK”

A region or community can only make effective workforce arguments if they are supported by facts and research. A place that does its homework to actually understand these needs is one that a prospective company can have greater confidence in.

EDDs have a range of data resources at their disposal to create and validate their arguments:

- The [Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration](#) offers [this guide](#) to state and local workforce data.
- The [Bureau of Labor Statistics Office of Employment and Wage Statistics](#) program estimates wage and employment data for hundreds of occupations across geographies. BLS’ [Current Employment Statistics](#) reports employment and earnings at the national, state, and metro levels.
- Details on occupations and the skills and education that they require is available via [O*Net](#).
- The [American Community Survey](#) of the US Bureau of Census provides economic, demographic, and social data by geography.

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- The [National Economic Resilience Data Explorer \(NERDE\)](#) aggregates a number of publicly available economic, workforce, demographic, risk, and resilience data and offers county-level and EDD-level views of communities' economic health and vitality.
- [Each state](#) also provides a range of data and support to economic developers who are representing their region's workforce and skills.

A number of commercial labor market data providers have created tools and resources to present these data in accessible formats, create custom queries, and compile data that can help support and shape CEDS priorities, including [Lightcast](#), [Chmura JobsEQ](#), [Horsefly](#), [Geographic Solutions](#), and others.

OCCUPATION VS INDUSTRY: DRAWING FROM AND DEPLOYING SKILLS MORE BROADLY

But what if even after doing the homework, the evidence for that argument is weak? Or if there are precious few people locally already performing those roles and meeting those specific types of employers' needs? In that case, the "we have the workers" argument may fall flat. A different view (also requiring homework to support) can still offer a compelling argument:

- While (the target) industry is not as well represented in your community yet, you have other industries who hire similar kinds of people who are already doing the critical work. Accountants do not only work for accounting firms, for example. An effort to grow a region's financial services sector can show an abundance of accountants working in retail or distribution. Regions can show prospective tech companies that they have cybersecurity experts working in healthcare, or user experience specialists working in media and advertising. In each of these cases, the CEDS can highlight workers whose current role (and therefore their current skillset) is available to prospective industries, even if the industry is not yet well represented.
- Those similarly-skilled workers may be earning less than their counterparts in the prospect industries and thus could realize value in joining those newer industries. They may experience improvements in scheduling or benefits or safety or any other reason why the new industry can be attractive and appealing to appropriately skilled workers. A CEDS that shows this deeper level of workforce availability can set up arguments that the region has the workers that target sectors need, and the target sector will be appealing to them because of favorable wages, working conditions, or opportunities.
- When those similarly-skilled workers are members of underrepresented groups, their engagement is a win not only for the receiving companies but for the achievement of a more equitable economy and community.



Workers who can perform highly similar work in these new and favorable environments can likely make an easy transition, picking up new nomenclature and protocols by way of little more than onboarding and some practice that comes with time. Doing your homework to discover how your community is home to key occupations - even if they aren't yet working in the target industry - can show strength and the ability to offer a workforce beyond what an initial industry analysis can reveal. A deeper look into demographics and how occupational segregation may be occurring can also reveal talent available to meet employer and industry needs in new ways and in turn create opportunities for underrepresented groups and build a more equitable and inclusive regional economy.

MORE TALENT ASSETS - HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Your labor market data will show the size of the available workforce today, but target industries and firms' needs will endure and evolve well into the future. Your argument and evidence that "We have the workers" can then evolve to also argue that "We can continue to expand the pool of available workers."

Frequently, that argument is underpinned by data showing population trends, school enrollments, and other broad indicators that are meaningful in the most general way - but may fail to excite your target industries or differentiate your community or region. Somewhere between "We have the workers now" and "We will deliver the workers to you in 5-12 years after they go through high school or college" lies a better argument, but it depends not only on the people themselves but in the ability to demonstrate that the region and its education and training organizations can engage them and expand their skillsets.

People are not fixed. The jobs and skills that they have today are (hopefully) not the same ones they will have next year or the year after that or a decade from now. A community can organize itself to make ongoing skills development a feature of its education, workforce, and business support system. A CEDS that incorporates approaches to tap and develop underutilized talent pools makes for a more compelling advantage than those who see and present workers as fixed in place and time, or that shows fixed pools of high-skilled and lower-skilled workers. Communities that help workers to reapply and refresh their skills to meet new and evolving business needs will be resilient to negative shocks and ready to adapt when innovation and entrepreneurship creates more jobs than can be filled immediately.

A cursory view of a community's workforce may indicate that it has a surplus of one kind of worker but a deficit of another. But what if that apparent worker shortage is not actually a skills shortage? What if critical skills have been segregated in a narrow set of occupations?

And if we have the right skills then is it not too far a leap to see that we *actually do* have the workers who can be ready quickly? The workers may in fact be hidden in plain sight.

For example, a community may be trying to grow manufacturing operations but falls short of the number of manufacturing workers needed to staff those operations. At the same time, that community may have sufficient or excess numbers of construction workers. Those construction workers are highly skilled in using tools, making precise measurements, maintaining safety, and reading schematics - all of which are skills highly valued in a manufacturing environment. And if moving from seasonal work to something more consistent is preferable, or if moving to work indoors appeals to those construction workers, then your manufacturer prospects have reason to be bullish on their ability to attract talent that needs only modest reskilling. But they will likely not know that because they are not looking for construction workers, even if those workers represent a formidable skills reservoir.

Skills proliferate across your current industry, occupation, and worker mix. Know them. Find them. Connect them to the needs of your target industries even if those skills are not yet being applied there. To site selection consultants, or to firms that are forming, relocating, or expanding, it may not be obvious that those construction workers can be just as rich a talent pool as people currently working in manufacturing. An effective CEDS can combine data on current workers and data on occupational skills to reveal where additional assets - workers - are available.

EXAMPLES OF HIGH-POTENTIAL TRANSITIONS

Hospitality → Healthcare

Graphic Design → Web Development, User Experience Design

Journalism, Technical Writing → Marketing and Communications, Prompt Engineering

Retail, Hospitality → Customer Service, Account Management, Sales Management

Auto Service → HVAC Maintenance, Machine Operations, Medical Device Repair

Transportation Management → Logistics Planning and Coordination, Supply Chain Management

Commercial Food Production → Pharmaceutical Manufacturing





A COMMITMENT TO UPSKILLING

Understanding how easily people and skills can transfer into new arenas will impact how compelling this argument is, and how it must be made if it is to be accepted. A hospital nurse may easily transfer into a similar role at physician's office. A quality assurance professional at a utility may need only minimal learning on regulatory issues to move into a role in environmental management. But workers in commercial bakeries - who bring meaningful knowledge of sanitary production processes and FDA compliance - may need more substantial upskilling and certification in order to work in pharmaceutical manufacturing. And it may not be realistic to expect the workers themselves to see the possible transition and bridge the skills gaps without some additional support and guidance.

A CEDS that surfaces skills alignment between these different kinds of positions and prioritizes filling skills gaps will enable that region to meet emerging skills needs and shows an uncommon level of foresight, adaptability, resilience, and efficiency.

What does it take to demonstrate that capability?

Here, too, communities must show that some valuable skills are already present, that those skills are needed in target industries, and that it is clear about the level, depth, and nature of the gap that needs to be overcome. But knowing this is not even half of the battle. Communities need to be able to fill them, and to inspire workers to pursue paths that may not be obvious to them, or that even seem doable.

FILLING SKILLS GAPS

All communities have education and training resources. And while not all are of the same capacity or quality, every community can legitimately assert that they can upskill their workers. But the degree to which they are positioned to do so is highly variable and can mean the difference between whether they can achieve their upskilling goals or not.

A robust upskilling strategy incorporated into the CEDS sends a message that:

- *We have workers who are ready to do the jobs you need done. We know how many there are, we know what industries they are currently working in, and we know how much they earn.*
 - » A CEDS can indicate which groups of workers represent the strongest asset for

the prospective businesses – who are already here, and who are already well positioned to meet their staffing needs.


- *We know which workers are poised to move into roles that don't exist here yet – we know which of our local occupations have skills that will be important, and we know what skills still need to be developed.*
 - » The CEDS can indicate which workers that are in abundance locally who share some skills with the workers that our prospective companies will need. This part of the strategy shows that we know where our investments in upskilling and retraining will make us a community who can supply a workforce to the prospective company.
 - » The CEDS can show where some demographic groups have been historically underrepresented in key industries and promote greater equity by tapping those workers' skills where they have not yet been fully appreciated or utilized.
- *We know what new skills will need to be developed, and our education and training providers are standing by ready to teach them.*
 - » A critical part of the CEDS strategy will be to identify how you can rapidly prepare a workforce for the target industry firms. You not only know what the skill gaps are – you are ready to fill them with specific upskilling and retraining programs that your education and training providers and workforce development systems are already planning to offer.

WORKER SKILLS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

One critical skills category that is becoming increasingly important across industries and regions are those that are referred to as “Green” skills or “Sustainability” skills. While such skills are certainly present in roles that relate to renewable energy, energy efficiency of buildings, natural resource management, electric vehicles and the like, every industry can further improve its efficiency, its consumption of power and materials, and its management and reduction of waste. Many education and training programs have incorporated content that enables workers and firms to have both financial and environmental impacts.

As with industries, populations, education and training assets, each community's collection of “Green Jobs” is unique to them, and each community's opportunity to leverage skills for economic and climate resilience will be unique. Green Jobs Now shows how this manifests differently in different US states and presents a framework through which communities can understand and document how skills impact sustainability.





To build on an example used earlier, most communities have manufacturing skills training programs and can legitimately assert that they can get the construction workers skilled for manufacturing. But when we connect one set of workers to another by way of shared skills, we cannot forget that connection when helping them to build those skills and move from one role to the other. Forcing construction workers to sit through classes on measurement, safety, tool use, and schematics will frustrate them, delay the time it takes to make them available to the manufacturing employers, and will waste precious instructional capability. An effective, efficient, and homework-informed solution acknowledges what they bring to the table and focuses on the elements that will make them ready for the new role.

The WHAT and the HOW

Designing instruction that focuses just on what new skills are needed and doesn't waste resources on teaching skills workers already have honors the reality of skills transferability and respects the workers who have already built some skills but need more. Not only must education and training providers acknowledge the skills that those workers bring, they must also acknowledge that those workers face practical barriers to engaging in traditional education and training programs. Those workers may not be able to access training programs on a traditional academic schedule and may not even be able to commit to any schedule more than a few days ahead of time as their current work is impacted by business cycles, material availability, site access, and even forces as idiosyncratic as the weather. Delivering training asynchronously, in partnership with their current employers, and online show a capacity to accommodate these realities to truly take advantage of the region's people and skills.

Many more mature workers (as opposed to traditional-aged students in their teens and early twenties) may have difficulty in traditional education and assessment regimes of the type they last experienced years or decades ago. Any program delivering upskilling and reskilling may also need to maximize self-directed learning, peer mentoring, and evidence-based (as opposed to exam-based) validation of skills. Communities that address human needs as well as instructional needs, such as childcare or transportation assistance or digital access, will ensure that workers can take advantage of the available instructional assets. Such interventions will benefit all workers, and especially those who have faced barriers to learning and work, including underrepresented groups whose fuller engagement in regional economic activity are key to achieving equity and economic resilience.

A few ways to make education and training more accessible and impactful include commitments to:

- **Offer programs in a way that is accessible for those already working in adjacent occupations**
 - » Programs delivered online with schedules friendly to working people
 - » Career guidance and support to ensure that those less-obvious transitions become visible to those who stand to benefit and gain new and better jobs
 - » Support that enables meaningful participation, such as access to childcare
- **Partner with companies in the broader region**
 - » Deliver training on-site as companies upgrade processes and equipment
 - » Deliver training based on widely shared skills needs, so no single company needs to bear the burden of creating or buying the training services
- **Partner with communities within the broader region**
 - » Reach into and attract participants from neighborhoods and sub-populations who are underrepresented in new and emerging industries to ensure that companies have access to the widest and deepest talent pool possible

CONCLUSION

As EDDs create and update their CEDS and consider how to address workforce and talent issues, thinking and acting expansively can better position the region to increase economic growth, support economic resilience and inclusion, and improve overall regional prosperity. An effective CEDS can show:

- The number of workers in the region currently skilled in the areas that target sector firms need
- The availability of workers who can quickly transition from legacy firms to growing target sector firms
- The availability of workers who can make the transition into target sector roles
- The availability and readiness of schools, training programs, and resources to promote industries and roles not yet familiar to the region's workers
- The ability to upskill workers
- The ability to engage untapped talent pools
- The value of a culture of lifelong learning and skills development, to ensure target sector success now and well into the future.

The “We have the people” and “We have the training programs” approach will continue to be important elements of a CEDS. But places that think more intentionally about the full set of human assets will have more to offer. Communities and regions that show a deeper understanding of how skills can be applied broadly will solve a wider set of workforce challenges. And those places that arrange their talent engagement and development systems to enhance and deploy those skills adaptively and efficiently will show themselves to be the areas that can solve both the workforce challenges of today and those that will inevitably arise in the future.

This brief was authored by Joel Simon, workforce and economic development consultant.



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