

NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

UPSKILLING NEW ENGLAND: *BRIDGING THE GAPS BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS*



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New England is home to a large number of fast-growing, high-skill industries with jobs that require a postsecondary credential. Effective models of education and training need to be created to meet labor market demands, overcome employer-reported skills shortages, and satisfy workers' desire for additional training. Consequently, the region's businesses need to make upskilling programs available to employees to improve skills matching, retention and work productivity. The successful implementation of upskilling programs will require greater collaboration and alignment between New England's educators and employers.

In September 2019, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) convened a meeting of higher education, industry and policy leaders and subject matter experts to identify best practices and strategies for improving access to—and completion of—upskilling programs in New England.

Nearly 40 stakeholders, including employers from small and mid-sized companies, leaders of higher education institutions, policymakers in state agencies, and representatives of workforce boards and non-profit organizations participated. Their keen insights, combined with consumer data from Strada Education Network on adults' perceived need for additional education, yielded a number of key recommendations

for how New England can expand and improve successful upskilling programs and policies.

These opportunities must be expanded to ensure that more individuals have access to employer-informed upskilling programs, credentials and degrees. Growth of upskilling opportunities in New England is currently hamstrung by the shortage of effective programs, which tend to exist in disconnected silos, and constrained capacity of education providers and employers alike.

Our recommendations to education providers, employers and state policymakers for expanding upskilling focus on three target areas: partnership development, new delivery models and state policymaking. We recommend that:

WHAT IS UPSKILLING?

Education, training and development that prepares someone for advancement in the workforce.



Key upskilling opportunities and outcomes:
Employer training - Credentials - College Degrees

Source: Aspen Institute's UpSkill America

Partnerships

- Employers, institutional leaders, policymakers, and members of workforce boards convene state-level, cross-sector working groups focused on eliminating structural barriers that prevent the implementation and scaling of collaborative upskilling programs.
- Both employers and higher education institutions utilize intermediary organizations or designated points of contact to enhance open, sustainable and growth-oriented communication, partnerships and programming.

Participants identified common ways employers, workforce training providers and higher education institutions deliver upskilling opportunities to adults:



In-house upskilling. An organization has on-site education and training opportunities available to its employees.



Direct Employer-Institution Partnership. An employer works in partnership with an education or training provider to offer upskilling programs for employees, using off-the-shelf or customized programs to fit employer or industry needs.



Industry-led partnerships. An industry group or association--referred to in this paper as an intermediary--connects an employer with education providers to train workers and fill skills gaps.

Partnerships *continued*

- Employers and institutions use standardized skills-related language in job postings, course and credential descriptions to establish alignment between jobs and training programs.

New Delivery Models

- Education and training providers implement flexible education and training delivery models to enable learning at home, in the workplace or community setting or on a college campus.
- Postsecondary education providers redesign programs to include stackable credentials, transferrable credits and pathways to further education and training opportunities. This will enable individuals to transition to and from education and training, work and life responsibilities in a more seamless fashion—setting the conditions for successful lifelong learning practices.
- Upskilling programs include support services tailored to workers' needs, including work-based study spaces and expanded or 24/7 access to learning advisers.

State Policymaking

- Policymakers support and incentivize provider-employer partnerships to expand the validation and recognition of prior learning and work experience—reducing the time to credential attainment and promoting worker participation in upskilling programs.
- Policymakers provide incentives, including grants and tax breaks, to stimulate employer investment in upskilling as a key business and workforce development strategy.
- Policymakers encourage higher education and other training providers to develop accessible, transparent credentials and pathways to better communicate how upskilling programs provide specific skill acquisition, career progression and increased compensation.

- Policymakers promote programs and partnerships that reach underserved populations, including people of color, the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated, those recovering from drug and/or alcohol dependency, new immigrants and individuals living in rural areas.

Comprehensive implementation of these recommendations is an ambitious charge. However, they serve as critical elements of a state and regional roadmap to:

- Engage and retain employers and support an innovation-driven economy;
- Address pressures felt by higher education systems and institutions, including financial sustainability challenges and public perceptions of the value and career-connectedness of postsecondary learning;
- Develop new and expanded models of education that are accessible to a wide variety of learners, including underserved populations and those left behind by the evolution of skills in a digital economy.

Central to these recommendations is the critical need to enhance individuals' trust in education and training systems and enable them to become lifelong, working learners. Regional collaboration among employers, higher education leaders, training providers, and state policymakers will reinforce communications about the necessity of upskilling and increase the transparency and effectiveness of upskilling programs, policies and partnerships.