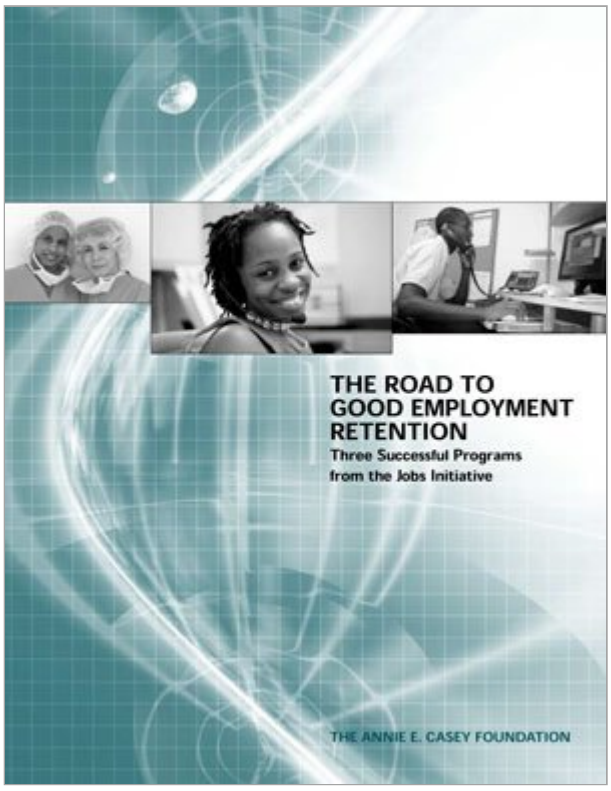
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The Road to Good Employment Retention

In this report for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center examines three projects from the Casey-sponsored Jobs Initiative that have managed to place and retain high numbers of low-skilled individuals.

by David Jason Fischer

This is an excerpt. Click here to read the full report (PDF).

It's a truism of the workforce field that getting a job is much easier than keeping one. As such, retention is the most important of the various measures the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative looks at to gauge the success of its jobs programs. The Casey Foundation also closely tracks how program participants fare in terms of wage gains and earning benefits—but job retention is very often a prerequisite for both.

The advantages of retention are fairly straightforward to both jobseekers and employers: for workers, staying on the jobleads to greater opportunities for wage gains and promotions at work as well as increased overall stability in their lives, while employers enjoy the benefits of reduced employee turnover and related expenses. Also, to the extent that each program provides ongoing services to the placed worker that focus on retention, the employer is effectively outsourcing some human resources functions—for free. Both government and private funders such as the Casey Foundation have indicated their growing appreciation for the importance of retention over the last few years, placing job training providers on notice that the days when they could meet their contract obligations by merely bringing participants in for training, or even making initial job placements, are gone forever.

Attaining high retention is tough work, and that is why we have spent an intensive period of six months examining the strengths of a varied set of program models. The three projects we examine in this paper are the Work Link/Project R.E.S.P.E.C.T. program in St. Louis and Seattle's Individualized Placement efforts and Office Skills sector project. These are programs that have focused their efforts on the difficult goal of high retention. All have managed to place and keep between

half and about two-thirds of the low-skilled individuals who entered their programs into jobs for over a year. While several other JI programs have shown early promise with small populations, these programs all have achieved some level of scale and shown impressive retention rates for participants. All told, the Jobs Initiative has supported more than 40 jobs projects, accounting for over 9,500 placements and an overall 12-month retention rate of 524 percent.

In a 2003 report on Jobs Initiative projects, Abt Associates found that to best promote long-term retention, advancement, and economic self-sufficiency, “workforce development programs should do everything possible to provide a full range of training (job readiness, soft skills, and hard skills) and supportive services for their clients.” These three programs represent steps along a continuum of approaches toward those goals; each is intended to meet program participants at different levels of employability. Work Link in St. Louis is designed to serve more difficult-to-place individuals, offering work supports and some soft skills instruction through total engagement with participants and employers.

- The Abt evaluation included a number of key findings that are reflected in the three projects considered in this paper:
- Participants’ access to basic supportive services significantly increases their likelihood of finding jobs;
- “Job readiness” services are pivotal to participants’ chances of short-term job retention (defined by the Jobs Initiative as three months);
- “Hard skills” training is vital for participants’ prospects of longer-term retention (twelve months or longer) as well as advancement and attendant wage gains;
- The more comprehensive the services and training offered, the better participants’ chances are for successful work and wage gain outcomes;
- Placement into jobs with employer-provided benefits is likely to lead to higher rates of retention;
- New employees who earn wage gains following initial placement are often on track for long-term retention; and
- Access to a “mentor” for support after placement is another factor often associated with successful outcomes.

The first finding, regarding basic supportive services, is the key to the success Work Link has enjoyed; the program also explicitly utilizes mentoring from previous “alumni” who serve as resources for more recent participants. The Individualized Placement program operated by the community-based partners of the Seattle Jobs initiative also offers supportive services and places a greater emphasis on soft skills, consistent with Abt’s conclusion about job readiness services. Finally, Seattle’s Office Occupations sector project brings in a menu of field-specific skills for jobseekers looking to make careers in the corporate field. This program, which boasts the highest wage outcomes and retention rates of the three, illustrates Abt’s conclusion that hard skills training is the pivotal element to facilitate long-term retention and career advancement.

In keeping with the basic approach of the Jobs Initiative, two philosophies underscore the programs profiled in this report:

- Different strokes for different folks. Depending on whom you’re looking to serve, you might need to emphasize job readiness, basic skills, vocation-specific skills, or some combination of the above. One program can’t do it all—so it’s important to target just whom you want to reach and structure things accordingly.
- Retention starts on Day One. It’s vital that program participants start to internalize the “elements of retention”—problem-solving skills, coping in the workplace, seeing things from the employer’s perspective and knowing where to turn when difficult issues arise—long before placement. In different ways, all three of these programs pursue this approach. Additionally, all emphasize sustained follow-up after participants start new jobs; these programs remain engaged with both workers and employers for a full year after placement.
- Additionally, we found several operational principles consistent across all three of these projects, as detailed below and tracked throughout the profiles:
- Stay Flexible. Partners have to be willing to change directions and tactics as needs dictate. As the strengths and weaknesses of different program approaches, partnerships and funding strategies emerge, it’s vital for providers and

intermediaries to be willing to change course as events dictate.

- Maintain Strong Employer Ties From Start to Finish--and Beyond. For these projects to work, they have to be market-relevant-—in other words, responsive to a real demand for workers. That means soliciting employer input in program design, continuously getting feedback from businesses where workers are placed, and actively partnering with employers to smooth out problems that arise after participants are placed.
- Provide Work Supports and Related Services. To put low-income, low-skilled jobseekers who often lack extensive work histories on track to get and keep a job, it's not usually enough to offer only short-term skills instruction or job-readiness training. To be credible with participants and prove value to employers, programs also have to provide support services that address workers' life issues that get in the way of participants' staying on the job. These issues often include substance abuse, childcare, transportation, housing, and physical and mental health issues.
- Build Strong Partnerships. All of these projects succeeded in large part because the Jobs Initiative sites carefully selected CBO, training and support-services partners with good track records and specific value to the project in question.

For this study, it's important to keep in mind that the Jobs Initiative defines successful retention somewhat more strictly than do most other actors in the workforce field. The most important performance milestone for the JI sites is 12-month retention, though three- and six-month intervals serve as intermediary markers. The Casey Foundation also includes in its measure of 12-month retention all placed participants, not just those the projects can keep track of, and allows only short gaps of unemployment during the 12 months following initial placement. This represents a considerably higher standard than the federal government applies in considering retention figures for programs funded under the Workforce Investment Act as well as many privately funded jobs projects. The Casey Foundation and its partners have emphasized 12-month retention out of a conviction that this milestone best measures employment stability and the likelihood of wage gains and career advancements to follow.

As the case studies indicate, the most successful jobs programs boast three key elements: work supports, soft skills andhard skills. With all three in place, the stage is set to move participants into career-track positions that can pay enough to support a family. For many jobseekers, however, the road to self-sufficiency first must take them through more modest neighborhoods in which they prove to potential employers—and to themselves—that they can meet the responsibilities of everyday work and learn the skills necessary to move ahead.

Another attribute all three of these programs share—and which some otherwise promising Jobs Initiative projects have lacked--is real credibility within their communities. This is no accident: in St. Louis, Better Family Life is a full-service nonprofit that has operated for more than two decades and has brought the bona fides earned through its other efforts to bear in the workforce field, while the Seattle Jobs Initiative has emphasized close ties with community-based organizations from its first days of operation. Good intentions, elegant program design and even ample funding aren't enough by themselves; any program that attempts to provide comprehensive training and employment services without a foundation of trust among its participant base will run into difficulties.

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