



The Value of Workforce Development Now

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 297

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

Another thing to note when looking at workforce development in the current moment is that workforce development plays a role not only in attracting and skilling new workers but in upskilling and retaining workers.

Jeff Cobb (00:18):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:19):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:28):

Welcome to episode 297 of the Leading Learning Podcast, where we'll be talking about workforce development. As we'll discuss later in the show, we feel this is an area where learning businesses have a very important role to play, and playing that role could open up opportunities that many learning businesses are not currently aware of or pursuing. Before we get to that, though, we'll note that workforce development can be a fairly complex topic to understand. So we want to start by defining our terms. What do we mean when we say *workforce development*?

Celisa Steele (01:02):

Workforce development encompasses the services, programs, systems, and networks that provide people with education, skills development, and improved access to employment and advancement in the labor market to achieve overall maximum sustainable economic growth. Right, now I can take a breath. That was a pretty long definition.

Jeff Cobb (01:23):

That was thorough.

Celisa Steele (01:25):

It's based on a definition of *workforce development* used by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Jeff Cobb (01:31):

And you can count on federal reserve banks for those sorts of concise definitions. That one was definitely thorough. It was also pretty broad. It mentioned means—so the services, programs,

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systems, and networks—and those means are for providing various things—education, skills, skills development, and improved access to employment and advancement in the labor market—and all of that with the end goal of maximum sustainable economic growth.

Celisa Steele (01:59):

And part of what we like about that definition from the St. Louis Fed is precisely that broadness because its broadness means it can be used to describe the activities done by the various players in workforce development. And it covers the range of perspectives represented by those players. So let's talk a little bit about those different perspectives.

Celisa Steele (02:21):

Education providers—and that includes K12, higher ed, and learning businesses—those education providers and social service providers tend to approach workforce development and develop programs from the perspective of the sustainable economic security of the individual. Education providers think about the individual learner and her attainment and her opportunities. The idea behind the individual perspective of workforce development programs is that individuals won't be able to make substantive contributions to society without access to training and education. And I think most learning businesses would agree that they're performing important work in educating and training people.

Celisa Steele (03:06):

Another component of this individual view of workforce development is the recognition that an individual's basic needs must be met for her to contribute to society. So social services and community supports figure in, along with job training and education, to position an individual for success in the workforce.

Jeff Cobb (03:28):

Now, in contrast to that individual-oriented view, employers tend to approach workforce development from an organizational perspective, focusing on the skills and training that their specific organization needs to be or to remain competitive or, more broadly, the skills and training needed by their industry or their profession.

Celisa Steele (03:50):

And then communities and economic developers are a third group of players in workforce development. Communities and economic developers tend to approach workforce development from the perspective of what benefits the sustainable economic growth of a community or region. Workforce development from the community perspective tends to focus on initiatives that educate and train individuals to meet the current and future needs of businesses and industries in a region. So whereas education and service providers center the individual, and employers center their organization, this perspective is driven by the economic development plan for a region, which is often a state in the U.S.

Jeff Cobb (04:36):

So that community perspective means that workforce development initiatives tend to emphasize local or regional needs. And in some ways that can be good. That tighter geographic focus makes communication and coordination among the major players a bit easier. In other ways, though, the regional or local focus can really be limiting when we think about the global

nature of much of the economy these days and the growing prevalence of remote work, which means workers and their employers don't necessarily live in the same region.

Celisa Steele (05:12):

And I'll add to remote work the growth of a more nomadic workforce. If they can work remotely, workers don't necessarily have to stay in one area, and they can move around while remaining employed at the same employer. And these more recent trends—towards remote work, towards a more nomadic workforce—I think are very interesting to consider in light of the fact that workforce development tends to be decentralized by nature. Workforce development tends to be more interested in Main Street or really multiple Main Streets across the country versus being aligned tightly with just Wall Street. And, when thinking about these various perspectives on workforce development, in an ideal scenario, the individual, organizational, and the regional perspectives would have significant overlap. If you think of a Venn diagram, these would be three circles that almost sit on top of one another.

Jeff Cobb (06:12):

Right. And so that's a good overview of what workforce development is, who the major players tend to be, but it's probably worth it to add some details to that definition, some context by taking a little bit of a detour into U.S. history. And it will start back at the New Deal, the legislation under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That's commonly viewed as the start of federal workforce development legislation. During the Great Depression, of course, employment in the U.S. fell to an all-time low, and so Roosevelt initiated and Congress enacted programs designed to provide employment assistance and create jobs in both urban and rural areas while building the nation's infrastructure. And the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, was part of the New Deal, and it increased spending on public projects to provide those jobs. Then, during the eight years that the program existed, it generated more than 8.5 million jobs nationwide. So that was unprecedented, to take that kind of initiative as part of a public project.

Celisa Steele (07:27):

So, if we jump from those origins in the 1930s to more recent times, President Clinton signed the Workforce Investment Act in 1998. That was passed during a period of full employment—so very different economic times than when the New Deal came to be. The Workforce Investment Act, WIA for short, focused on the delivery of workforce development programs and services through a nationwide network of community-based one-stop career centers. The idea was give individuals a single location where they can go and access workforce programs and services. WIA created workforce investment boards led by businesses to develop local strategies based on labor market data and oversee programs in their communities.

Jeff Cobb (08:17):

So, continuing on through time in this tour of workforce development history, in 2014, President Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, which reauthorized the workforce investment system and replaces the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The WIOA took effect on July 1st, 2015, and states and local workforce development boards are still in the act of implementing it to the present day.

Celisa Steele (08:48):

So, to sum up, workforce development involves many players and stakeholders—government, employers, communities, and individuals—and workforce development is a prime example of

tying education to outcomes. In the context of workforce development, training and education and learning are all about preparing individuals for good jobs.

Jeff Cobb (09:17):

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Celisa Steele (09:21):

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Jeff Cobb (10:24):

Let's move on from the definition and that brief history lesson and look at workforce development today and the role and opportunity for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (10:35):

When we think about jobs and the current moment, my mind immediately goes to the Great Resignation or the Big Quit or the Great Reconsideration—whatever you want to call it. This is the fact that a record-breaking 47.4 million people quit their job in 2021. The pandemic has been a major driver of the quitting—folks, for example, who had to quit to stay home with children doing school remotely or folks who quit to limit their exposure and chances of being infected. But I think to only look at COVID is to miss the bigger picture.

Jeff Cobb (11:14):

Yeah, I think that's really important. You mentioned the Great Reconsideration as one of the names being given to this phenomenon, and I think that speaks to the reevaluation that many workers are doing of their jobs and their work life. We know low wages and new career goals have driven some of the resignations, and those are the kinds of things workforce development can help with. One of the big goals of workforce development is good jobs.

Celisa Steele (11:43):

Right. It's not any job or jobs at any cost. The goal is good jobs, high-quality jobs. I recently read an article from the Center for American Progress. It was a December 2021 article that makes this point precisely. It says the U.S. isn't facing a labor shortage. The U.S. is facing a good jobs shortage.

Jeff Cobb (12:07):

That's right. Even before the pandemic, a lot of workers were dealing with low or stagnant wages, unpredictable schedules, and undesirable working conditions and often going without benefits like healthcare and paid family and medical leave. And the number of good jobs really

has been declining for decades. If you look at something like the U.S. Private Sector Job Quality Index.

Celisa Steele (12:32):

And, of course, the talk of “good jobs” brings us back to definitions because opinions on what constitutes a good, high-quality job differ. The Job Quality Index that you just mentioned, Jeff, really just looks at money, specifically the weekly income a job generates for an employee. A September 2020 report from the Center for American Progress asserts that we need to go beyond just income, and it defines good jobs as “the kind of jobs that afford economic security and participation in civic life as opposed to occupations that require few skills, pay low wages, or are vulnerable to outsourcing.”

Jeff Cobb (13:15):

And, of course, job quality probably should also take into account things like worker safety, commute time, working environment, the right to unionize, and even things like equal pay and protection from discrimination.

Celisa Steele (13:28):

Yeah. And there is a push for diversity, equity, and inclusion and a real focus on DEI in workforce development. And this is where that societal or community perspective we talked about really comes into play. Yes, we want workforce development to provide individuals with jobs, and we want to provide employers with workers, but communities can really value that diversity, equity, and inclusion piece.

Celisa Steele (13:56):

A senior fellow for workforce development at the Center for American Progress wrote a February 2022 article that points to the fact that construction and other industries that are supported by the recent bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act face labor shortages. That act allocated \$1.2 trillion toward repairing the transportation system, ensuring access to clean water, connecting people to high-speed broadband in the U.S., and more. And that senior fellow asserts that workforce development systems can help narrow that gap, that labor shortage, by supporting efforts to bring in women and workers of color into these industries like construction, where they’re typically underrepresented. And she makes the point that workforce development alone is not going to solve systemic inequities in the labor market, but it has the potential to create an environment in which those problems aren’t perpetuated and connect job seekers to good jobs and help employers meet their labor needs.

Jeff Cobb (15:03):

We’ll include in the show notes links to a couple of February 2022 articles written by Marina Zhavoronkova who’s that senior fellow for workforce development at the Center for American Progress that Celisa mentioned. So be sure to check out the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode297](https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode297).

Jeff Cobb (15:23):

Another thing to note when looking at workforce development in the current moment is that workforce development plays a role not only attracting and in skilling new workers but in upskilling and retaining workers. And when the labor market is as tight as it is now, the

retaining piece becomes as important and valuable as the attracting piece, especially to employers.

Celisa Steele (15:51):

Now is the part of the show where we get on our partnership soapbox again and recommend that your learning business take the time and energy and money to invest in finding and forming appropriate and valuable partnerships. In the case of workforce development, if you're going to be an education provider in that realm, then close alignment with employers in your industry, field, or profession is absolutely essential.

Jeff Cobb (16:18):

Definitely. And that alignment really is part of your marketing, that big-picture marketing that goes far beyond just promotion. That alignment with employers is a big part of how you know that the products and services you offer will be seen as valuable. And, if you can go beyond alignment with employers to actual partnerships, then you're making the design and development of new products much less risky. Depending on the nature of the partnership, you may be sharing design and development costs with an employer-partner, or you may be pre-selling to that employer-partner so you go into design and development knowing that you've got a B2B, a business-to-business, sale already guaranteed.

Celisa Steele (17:05):

And, to be honest, whether what you're doing "counts" as workforce development or not, that work to align with or to partner with employers is valuable. It'll be useful broadly in your learning business because it keeps you connected to the industry or profession that you're serving.

Jeff Cobb (17:24):

Yeah, definitely. And something that just, over years of experience in working with organizations, we haven't seen enough really intentional efforts to communicate with employers, understand their needs, and use that as the basis for creating products that you know there is demand for out in the marketplace. I spoke to Clare Marsch, senior vice president of training and development at ABA, the American Bankers Association, recently for the podcast, and she talked about how close they are to the banks, meaning the employers in ABA's field. They offer in-bank learning programs, and they work closely with their members to create programs, and that keeps them aligned with employers. And that's something most trade and professional associations can certainly do—make use of their members to get and to stay connected with employers.

Jeff Cobb (18:18):

And Clare also pointed out that one of the important things she and her team do is seed the market for future bankers. ABA has relationships with a number of colleges, universities, community colleges, and educational organizations that are focused on minority communities to spread knowledge of the banking industry to the next generation of workers who are currently students. So ABA is both looking to professionalize banking but also to seed the market for future bankers.

Celisa Steele (18:51):

Well, what you shared there Jeff, I heard the DEI focus come up—ABA partnering with education providers that are focused on minority communities. That's an example of the diversity, equity, and inclusion focus of workforce development. Given the benefits of partnering and working with employers, I always am left wondering why it doesn't happen more. And I think at least part of the answer is just the time and effort required. To first figure out potential partners can be hard and time-consuming. You have to identify employers, find contacts there. You've got to meet with them. You've got to discuss opportunities.

Celisa Steele (19:30):

This reminds me that when I spoke with Lowell Aplebaum for the podcast, he talked about the need for potential partners to come into discussions with open minds. If you're looking for a partner to do or be X or Y or Z, you're likely going to be disappointed because what are the odds of finding a partner to check all of your boxes. And, even if you can find one of those, you're likely to miss out on the full potential of the partnership because you won't know what else the partner can do beyond X or Y or Z.

Jeff Cobb (20:00):

Yeah. So, right, the time and energy and open-mindedness required for effective partnerships are barriers. A lot of organizations are resource-strapped. A lot are rigid in their thinking. It can be, as you said, time-consuming to find and then maintain partnerships with employers. But they're really worth taking on because the potential is just so huge. We know that a learning business alone is not going to be able to achieve and accomplish as much as a learning business working with partners can. That's just a fact.

Celisa Steele (20:34):

And I'll put a teaser in here and say that we're going to air another interview soon that gets into workforce development. So we'll have more real-world examples beyond what you already shared about Clare and ABA, Jeff. So, listeners, stay tuned.

Jeff Cobb (20:48):

Yeah. Do stay tuned. And, in the meantime, we invite and encourage you to take some time to reflect. What role does your learning business play in attracting and educating workers new to the field, industry, or profession you serve? What role might your learning business play? There may be opportunities to revisit and refine what you offer, to add new offerings.

Celisa Steele (21:14):

How clear are you on the needs of the employers in your field, industry, or profession? When was the last time you verified those needs? Make sure to avail yourself of relevant existing research, and/or conduct your own research. In terms of existing research, I'll mention Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce as a good potential resource.

Jeff Cobb (21:39):

Yeah. The CEW is always a great resource. They issued a report at the end of 2020 called *Workplace Basics: The Competencies Employers Want*. And that "report explores how 120 knowledge areas, skills, and abilities are demanded across the workforce and within specific occupations—and how the intensity with which workers use these competencies, along with their education level, can affect their earnings." So that may be a specific resource to check out, and, of course, we'll include a link to it in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode297.

Celisa Steele (22:18):

Those 120 knowledge areas, skills, and abilities mentioned in that report, they cover a wide range, from things like leadership, teamwork, communication to health sciences and engineering to fine motor skills and vision and hearing. And the Center's research found that general cognitive competencies—so communication, teamwork, sales and customer service—those were more highly valued—i.e., more highly paid—than physical competencies like strength and coordination in the labor market. So that's just a little tidbit from that report to maybe heighten your interest in checking it out.

Jeff Cobb (22:56):

Right. And, along with cultivating a deeper understanding of employer needs, we'd encourage you to think through the implications and opportunities of some recent and still unfolding trends. We've mentioned remote work and more nomadic workers, and we've touched on the need for good jobs that the Great Resignation points to. Automation through AI and other tech is obviously another phenomenon. So take the time at your learning business to reflect on these and other trends, and think about what these trends mean for skill gaps, for upskilling, and for reskilling and for the role that your learning business could potentially play in this world of workforce development.

Celisa Steele (23:46):

That's our look at workforce development and the opportunity for learning businesses. For full show notes and other resources to help you think about your learning business's role in workforce development, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode297.

Jeff Cobb (24:02):

At leadinglearning.com/episode297, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we do hope you will subscribe if you haven't yet. Subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (24:16):

We'd also be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Jeff and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review.

Jeff Cobb (24:32):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode297, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (24:44):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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