

The Public Sector as Workforce Intermediaries: California Workforce Investment Boards

By Virginia Hamilton, Executive Director for the California Workforce Association

Workforce investment boards (WIBs) are private-sector-led entities that oversee and administer many of the publicly funded workforce development programs in a region. As Executive Director of the California Workforce Association (CWA), I have had the opportunity to work with WIBs throughout California as they transform themselves from administrators of government job training programs into effective workforce intermediaries.

“Our WIB Chair told us flat out...If you really want to help employers, stop sending us your clients...become the HR Department to small business.” This was a call to action for Charlie Brown, Workforce Investment Board (WIB) Director of NORTEC, a nine-county consortium in rural northern California. And over the course of three years, NORTEC has reengineered its organization to focus on small businesses’ needs, increased enrollments and training, upgraded the skills of the local workforce, and put more low income people to work.

Described in detail below, California WIBs are both helping to meet the needs of business and connecting the unemployed and working poor into good jobs with career opportunities. Additionally, worth note is that California WIBs have developed a larger intermediary role focused on the whole community.

California Workforce Investment Boards’ Approach

The framing language in the [Workforce Investment Act](#) posits workforce investment boards as brokers, conveners, and catalysts for collaborative workforce development strategies. To assume this role, the fifty California WIBs have been steadily moving to a dual-customer approach, which serves both job seekers and employers, over the last five years. Many have developed strategies to serve employers as a primary customer.

Approximately three-quarters of California’s fifty WIBs are using an industry sector approach to link with business and are working with selected industries in a variety of ways. The State Workforce Investment Board has supported this approach by aligning some of the Governor’s discretionary funding around sector approaches, particularly the health care industry. Additionally, CWA has partnered with the National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP) to develop and lead conference sessions and provide support to WIB directors and staff who are working on sector initiatives.

Examples of How WIBs Serve as Workforce Intermediaries

1. WIBs Respond to Workforce Shortages in Health Care

Using both discretionary and formula funding, WIBs have convened hospitals, colleges, high schools, and community-based organizations to fund Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) and Registered Nurse (RN) programs. Humboldt County, for instance, a remote county in northern California, launched a nursing career training initiative along an entire career ladder. Partners included the State University, Community College, Regional Occupation Program and two hospitals, all of whom contributed funding. The project provides training to existing nurses for the critical care specialty, addressing rural hospitals’ employee retention and training challenges. The project also expands the capacity of educational institutions to enroll and graduate CNAs, LVNs, RNs and Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSNs), while introducing high school students to careers in health care. This makes local young people aware of a career where they can make a difference while continuing to live in their rural community.

2. Career Pathways

Another example is the Bay Area Biotech Consortium Career Pathway Project, a two county regional project between the Alameda County and San Mateo WIBs. Partners include Genentech, Bayer Corporation, and two community colleges. Low income and dislocated workers are trained for entry-level positions in biotechnology, with potential for upward mobility. Participants are provided with remediation skills in English, math, and employment readiness so that they can enter career pathways in biotech manufacturing, facilities management, quality control, and product engineering. After an intensive fourteen-week training program, participants are placed in partially

subsidized internship program at Genentech for three months leading to full-time job placement at wages starting at \$35,000 to \$40,000/year.

3. **Customer Service/Communication Training**

In Marin County, an employer survey showed that over 90 percent of the businesses identified customer service as a training need. The Marin WIB partnered with the Adult Education program to offer a two-week customer service/effective communication class, given largely to welfare recipients.

Community Focus

WIBs have two things in their favor as they take on a more pervasive role as intermediaries.

1. They are public entities with ongoing funding and infrastructure (absent major changes in Washington, D.C.).
2. As mandated by federal law, they are composed of all of the key workforce players in a community: business, labor, education, economic development, welfare, rehabilitation, community-based organizations, and elected officials.

Given these factors, WIBs have an opportunity to become intermediaries for a much broader range of issues and at a larger scale than most other community organizations currently characterized as intermediaries.

One of the key roles of intermediaries is to enhance regional competitiveness. Tackling workforce needs is often a larger community issue since some of the biggest needs are childcare, affordable housing, education reform, or transportation. WIBs are well positioned to become a convener for community leaders to look at these issues. This role is one that many WIBs in California have taken on as primary to their work.

CWA, through a collaborative stakeholder consultation process, developed a framework for looking at how communities can focus on building their competitive workforce advantage. WIBs are serving as catalysts in looking at the whole range of issues that make communities competitive.

Seven Characteristics from Communities with Competitive Workforce Advantages

We consulted hundreds of stakeholders over the course of two years, asking the question: “What does a community with a competitive workforce advantage look like?” The same seven characteristics began to emerge, phrased and nuanced in slightly different ways, but all pointing to the same theme. These characteristics are (descriptions are presented here in an abbreviated form):

- **Forward Thinking Community Leaders.** A set of community leaders who care about and are engaged in workforce issues. This leadership includes local elected officials, business, nonprofit, and faith-based leaders, and “civic entrepreneurs,” all of whom understand that the needs of business and the skills of its workers are critically important to the economic health of the region.
- **Business Investment in Human Capital.** Businesses in which workers are viewed as assets. Employers invest in training workers to meet present and future needs. Employees are aware of opportunities for advancement and are given incentives to improve their skills.
- **Strong and Diverse Economy.** Workforce is part of their economic development strategy. The community has both a business retention and a growth strategy, as well as the more traditional business attraction approach.
- **Integrated Infrastructure.** An infrastructure for both employers and workers. In addition to physical infrastructure for businesses—such as roads, water, and electricity—it includes a diverse housing supply, access to affordable quality childcare, health care and adequate regional transportation.
- **Effective Articulated Education System.** A K-12 system that works. Residents have easy access to higher education and nondegree occupational training that prepares them well for jobs in the community.
- **Clearly Defined and Accessible Career Pathways.** Ongoing communication between industry and education/training entities. Education and training programs are designed with a deep understanding of how people move within occupational clusters. Employers within an industry understand their career pathways and encourage skill development within the worker pipeline.
- **Ready, Willing and Able Workforce.** Employers can recruit local residents for available jobs. The labor pool has the knowledge, skills, and ability needed by employers.

Many California WIBs have taken these seven characteristics and used them to develop strategies to address complex workforce issues:

- In San Bernardino County, the WIB was a catalyst in developing the Alliance for Education, a multi-stakeholder group with business and education leaders focused on improving the connection between education and local industry.
- The Fresno County WIB was instrumental in a project that studied the water industry: convening employers to help them understand and articulate what the industry looked like, what occupations were available, and how to map career pathways.
- Both the Verdugo WIB in LA County and various WIBs in the northern Bay Area are attempting to influence decisions about affordable housing, which has reached crisis proportions for employers in these communities.
- The Kings County WIB coordinates with the Economic Development Corporation in sponsoring quarterly luncheons for industrial plant managers to maintain their awareness about how the local One-Stop can meet their needs.
- In San Mateo County, the WIB has worked with a large biotech company to change their hiring practices so that workers trained by the local community college can enter jobs formerly limited to those with four-year degrees.
- In San Jose, the WIB has convened economic development agencies, small business development centers, ethnic chambers, and banks to provide a full range of business retention services for small business.
- At NOVA, in the north Silicon Valley, the WIB is convening community colleges, hospitals, and NASA to develop a high tech nursing training center.
- In San Diego, the WIB has partnered with the biotech industry association in developing a deep understanding of the biotech industry to help the community colleges develop appropriate curriculum.

The projects above are a sampling of what WIBs are doing around the state. The WIB efforts are all collaborative, focused on community needs rather than on narrow job training and labor exchange, and have a depth and breadth way beyond a traditional WIA oversight role. In a year or so, it will be difficult to point to a California WIB that is not clearly seen as a workforce intermediary in their community.

For more information about what California WIBs are doing, specifics on any of the initiatives mentioned, or more about the Community Competitive Workforce Advantage framework, contact Virginia Hamilton at 916-325-1610 or hamilton@tomatoweb.com. CWA is a non-profit membership organization that develops public policy strategies and builds local capacity to address critical workforce issues.

To **Learn More** about the various WIBs and other organizations and initiatives mentioned in this article, visit the following Web sites:

California Workforce Association: www.calworkforce.org
Workforce Investment Act: www.edd.ca.gov/wiarep/wiaind.htm
National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP): www.nedlc.org/nnspl/

[Click here](#) to view the full framework discussed in this article.