



Using Occupational Bridging To Create Complementary Career Transitions



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“The end of one journey is the beginning of another,” the saying goes. That sounds almost idyllic. But what about the transition from one to the other? If we’re talking about career journeys, most workers would agree the more seamless and rapid, the better.

With widespread workforce disruptions created by the pandemic, technology, and a combination of both, time is of the essence for the millions of workers who have been displaced since 2020. The same can be said of employers in growth industries struggling to fill openings amid the rash of layoffs in declining ones. An occupational bridge connecting the former and latter is the missing link for workers looking to resume their career journeys in more rewarding occupations.

Making such transitions usually requires upskilling or reskilling. That’s why more postsecondary educators are complementing their traditional degree programs with innovative shorter-term certificates and other sub-degree credentials that are both work-relevant in the near term and stackable into formal degrees in the long term.

Increasing the flexibility of classroom learning is a great way to accelerate occupational transitions. But workers also possess valuable experiential learning — competencies acquired and honed on the job. If these can be accurately assessed and mapped to the knowledge areas, skills, and abilities needed in high-growth roles, we can shorten the distance between adult learners and their career goals even more.

Earlier this year, CAEL completed work that leveraged credit for prior learning (CPL), also known as prior learning assessment (PLA), to create occupational bridges for students of Ivy Tech Community College (Ivy Tech), Indiana’s largest public postsecondary institution. The work focused on assessing transferable competencies workers bring with them as they seek new jobs in Indiana’s high-demand industries.

CAEL analyzed the competencies required in 10 workforce-ready credentials offered by Ivy Tech and those prevalent in industries where employment is projected to contract. From this, CAEL and its partners could see the skills gap, where upskilling is needed to transition between industries, for workers hoping to utilize this pathway. These are gaps which could be fulfilled by academic programs, such as those provided by Ivy Tech. Even more exciting, CPL at Ivy Tech could help to accelerate workers along these transitional pathways, and the information gathered from the competency analyses could inform CPL recommendations that help staff more accurately review resumes and make determinations about what students likely already know. Such insight supports constructive, proactive conversations about CPL review with students and the best coursework for supplementing experiential learning to satisfy occupational requirements in targeted occupations.

In a perfect world, a displaced worker would step into a new job with minimal need to upskill or reskill. In reality, the CPL process typically carries them anywhere from 30 to 80 percent across the occupational bridge. Regardless of the specific amount, these credits save students time and money. They also offer affirmation of adult learners’ career journeys and assurance that they won’t have to start from scratch or take on coursework redundant to what they already know and can do.

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Although the occupational bridges connect to entry-level roles, the programs offer additional affirmation by highlighting their integration within pathways that pave the way for career progression. Instead of CPL students viewing themselves as 80 percent of the way to an entry-level job, for example, they can visualize themselves as 50 percent of the way to a mid-level role within a new and growing industry.

An administrative assistant exiting a word processing/typist role, a declining occupation, for one in bookkeeping/accounting provides an example of how the process works. Although bookkeeping/accounting is roughly steady in terms of demand, it commands a wage premium vs. word processing/typist. It also ladders seamlessly into insurance claims and policy, a high-growth area, with skills readily transferring.

Thanks to prior professional experience, the administrative assistant would probably possess all of the essential (soft) skills needed for bookkeeping/accounting. Some of the occupational (hard) skills, such as documenting and recording information and preparing correspondence, would also typically be creditable to work experience. In total, the CPL review process would likely show that such a student possessed about half of the skills needed to complete Ivy Tech's bookkeeping/accounting certificate. This career transition would result in a wage increase of 17 percent (to an annual salary of \$36,840, based on labor market data) and a role within a more-stable profession.

It would also position the former typist for a transition from bookkeeping to insurance policy via another certificate program, with a subsequent associate degree option and a much bigger jump in wages. Completing that track would lead to an average annual salary of \$58,910. Along the way, our onetime typist would continue to accrue relevant experience with an industry employer — experience that, again, could be assessed for CPL within Ivy Tech's certificate and degree programs.

That's great news for the college, its students, and its workplace partners. Programs that can bridge the worlds of education and employment foster a culture of continuous learning within institutions and industries, sustaining enrollment for the former and a healthy talent pipeline for the latter.

Perhaps most importantly, CAEL's work with Ivy Tech reminds us that even as we focus on streamlining processes, we must be aware that every individual is different. Adult learning is shaped not only by work experience but by what each worker takes away from it. Even so, quality processes can allow administrators to make general -- but informed -- predictions. That insight can help guide the advising process as students explore the possibilities of where their knowledge and experience can take them and how fast they can get there. Instead of starting from scratch with each student, advisors can use data-supported trends to streamline the CPL process and be more proactive about adult learner needs.

These discussions can transform displaced workers into empowered students. By informing degree and certificate programs with labor market data and occupational demands, administrators can elucidate discernible and desirable learning outcomes in the ever-evolving employment landscape.

Without this transparency, adult learners often can't judge just how far (or close) they are to their goals. Occupational bridging unveils opportunities hidden in plain sight: opportunities to remain in their community, validate their hard-earned work experience, and ensure the end of one journey is just a part of a bigger and better one.

Learn more at cael.org



Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.