

BRIDGING THE TALENT GAP CASE STUDY: COLORADO STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN

I. Colorado Campaign Information

In July 2020, the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) began working with The Graduate! Network (TGN) to bring the Network's model to the state.

Colorado has a goal for 66 percent of its adult residents to obtain a postsecondary credential by 2025. To achieve this goal, a significant percentage of the state's 700,000 potential Comebackers will need to re-enroll and complete their degrees.

The CWDC deployed [Bridging The Talent Gap](#) (BTTG) across Colorado's priority industry sectors as the basis for activating the state's employer community in support of college degree and other postsecondary credential completion among adults and as a catalyst to explore how TGN's model can best be incorporated into Colorado's workforce development ecosystem.

BTTG is TGN's proven approach to activate employers in support of the essential agenda of catalyzing communities and systems around the interests of individual aspirations and goals in the collective movement toward full education and economic equity.

"BTTG's focus of engaging employers as a primary driver in educational equity is entirely consistent with the CWDC's approach and the perfect launchpad to begin the work of designing a service structure in support of Comebackers," said Lee Wheeler-Berliner, Managing Director of the CWDC.

The implementation of BTTG across Colorado began with the launch of an employer survey in the spring of 2021.

II. Project Start

PROJECT GOALS

The goals of the BTTG initiative were threefold:

1. Create a process by which stakeholders could explore a strategy for advancing degree and other postsecondary credential attainment among adults in Colorado using TGN's institution-neutral navigation model.
2. Get industry voice on the skills employers need most.
3. Bring partners from the postsecondary and workforce sectors together to have conversations on what employers are looking for.

Project coordinator Katherine Zaback believes the BTTG initiative addressed these goals well. According to Zaback, there was a lot of outreach to adult students before the BTTG initiative, but there wasn't much alignment. BTTG helped create an opportunity for that alignment. The initiative also yielded helpful data that both the workforce and postsecondary sectors will lean into using. In addition, it provided something concrete for these two sectors — as well as the various state agencies represented on the CWDC — to come together around.

KEY RESOURCES AT THE PROJECT START

Since the CWDC only has a limited number of employers as members, they enlisted intermediaries such as chambers, state-wide economic development organizations, and sector partnerships to help get the word out to their respective members.

To help facilitate this process, TalentFOUND, an initiative of the CWDC, worked with TGN to create a stand-alone [website](#) to engage their network partners in spreading the word about the employer survey. As an umbrella organization, TalentFOUND includes all the businesses and institutions of higher education in Colorado.

The website included an [outreach toolkit](#) designed to support TalentFOUND network partners in promoting BTTG and to encourage employers in their networks to complete the BTTG employer survey. The toolkit contains key talking points, email and newsletter copy, and draft social media posts.

While Zaback found the website helpful to send people to, she discovered that personal outreach was the most effective way to reach people. She thinks the campaign would have had even more success if she had downloaded the contact list for the economic development leads across the state and directly reached out to them earlier. “Direct outreach is key,” said Zaback. “Direct asks work.”

III. Project Process

SURVEY COOPERATION AND RESISTANCE

Zaback has conducted a lot of surveys, and her experience has shown her that people generally move on after receiving survey results. She found it interesting that with the BTTG initiative in Colorado, once the data were in, people were very engaged.

Before the data were collected, however, there was some resistance to getting the requests out for employers to complete the survey. She believes that some of this resistance was due to what she calls “initiative fatigue.” She also thinks people had a hard time seeing what they were going to do with the information. Zaback doesn’t think there was much more they could have done to counter this resistance — she thinks people simply needed to see the data in order to get engaged. One thing she would have done differently is ask for people’s connections and done the direct outreach herself instead of asking them to get the word out.

CHALLENGES

One of the challenges Colorado faced as a state-wide campaign was that their state-level champions were not as close to employers as they might be in a city- or county-wide initiative. While campaign partners were able to tap into the CWDC’s robust network in order to move the campaign forward, the need for a local champion was very clear.

Another challenge was tapping into the local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) chapters. Zaback believes that part of this challenge stemmed from the fact that human resource offices were overwhelmed by the challenges presented by the pandemic, particularly the new regulations being handed down as a result. She also believes that there was a fundamental

disconnect in self-interest: while human resources needed to fill out the BTTG employer survey, they didn't necessarily need the data the survey would yield.

To overcome this challenge, Zaback asked individuals with a direct self-interest in the data to make a direct ask to the human resources representatives to fill out the survey. This individual was someone the human resources representative respected, such as someone from their chamber, economic development group, or trade group. In her outreach to these individuals, Zaback included the email template in the [outreach toolkit](#) for the individual to use in their outreach to human resources.

IV. Project Conclusion

DISSEMINATION OF SURVEY OUTCOMES

The CWDC took the following steps to disseminate the survey outcomes:

- Presented the data to the council.
- Made the information available to the public via Colorado's BTTG [website](#).
- Co-hosted a webinar with TGN to present the data to survey respondents and other stakeholders from across the state.
- Conducted several presentations for local workforce boards.

Importantly, the CWDC prominently featured the survey outcomes in their annual [Colorado Talent Pipeline Report](#) (pp 22-27) published in December 2021. They also expect to conduct additional presentations for local workforce boards about the findings.

LEVERAGING THE DATA

Once the survey results were in, the council used it as a jumping off point for a conversation about an integrated strategy to increase educational attainment among adults in the state. Zaback anticipates that these conversations will continue to take place.

The CWDC is planning to use the data from the survey which is organized into a Priority Table to do outreach to specific employers based on their interest in actions such as: 1) current or potential future interest in partnerships with learning providers (320 respondents); 2) current or future interest in conducting an Employee Survey to improve their education benefits programs and increase utilization (339 respondents); 3) plan to continue, grow or implement new tuition assistance programs (343 respondents). There is a lot of opportunity there for the community college system, the Department of Higher Education, and the council to collectively convene stakeholders to talk about the data.

The retail sector unit, *Lives Empowered*, plans to use the data to conduct outreach. The council has a grant with the retail sector already that allows some people to go back and get some training, so they are going to use the data to reach out and encourage people to utilize that training. They are also going to deploy the BTTG Employee Survey. It is worth noting that many retail sector employers are keenly interested in upskilling their employees' learning capabilities. Among the 118 respondents associated with this sector, 41% seek to create an education friendly workplace environment, while 58% want to continue or grow their education benefits programs. This interest extends to greater insight into their employees' education experiences and plans

while working. Sixty-two percent of retail respondents are interested now or in the future in administering an Employee Survey to create more meaningful education benefits programs.

BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

These are the main benefits that the CWDC gained from the project:

- More information about the skills employers are looking for across the state. Those skills considered most important include teamwork/collaboration capacity (78%), communication (75%), and orientation to detail (73%), all of which are considered among skills most in need of development among employees.
- A better understanding about the interests in partnership across urban/rural locations. While 70% of respondents expressed interest in connecting with learning providers, interest level varied. Rural respondents generally show more interest in this connection (81% - 88% depending on location) than urban respondents (64% - 77%)
- A good understanding about the hiring environment. Since the pandemic, for instance, hiring levels increased among 32% of respondents since the pandemic, while hiring challenges increased by 65%.
- A good understanding about which education benefits employers are already offering. Compared with the national BTTG dataset, Colorado employers were less likely to offer college tuition support (36%) than nationwide (54%).
- New data they can use to advance current state initiatives, explore how to better engage incumbent workers who are interested in postsecondary education opportunities, bring stakeholders together, and add more industry voice to educational decision-making.

KEY RESOURCES AT THE PROJECT CONCLUSION

During the project conclusion, the CWDC relied on two primary resources:

- The Colorado BTTG results [webinar](#).
- The Colorado BTTG results [dashboard](#).

V. Follow Up

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The CWDC intends for stakeholders to use this data to create stronger connections across the talent development system.

LESSONS LEARNED

When asked what she might have done differently now that the campaign is completed, Zaback said she might have spent less time on the messaging and more time on building the personal connections necessary to pull off a successful campaign.

Zaback would have also had a different process for revising and finalizing the survey instrument. She thought that sending out the draft of the survey to the council via email would have led to fewer changes, but in reality, it probably led to more changes and less alignment with the national survey. She thinks it would have worked better to go through the draft of the survey question by question together with a TGN representative who could help them identify how any proposed changes might affect their ability to do a national comparison. She also thinks this process would have helped build better ownership of the survey.

Lastly, Zaback might have considered putting together an external advisory group of people outside the state who were interested in this work. She also might have held a separate meeting for the initiative instead of being an agenda item on an existing meeting, only convening those individuals who were particularly interested in being part of the initiative.

ADVICE FOR OTHER STATES

Colorado would advise other states take the following steps to ensure a successful implementation of BTTG:

- Have a really clear use case.
- Have your stakeholders at the table when you make the decision to implement BTTG.
- Ensure that you don't only include top-level stakeholders, but also those who have the vision for what they're going to do with the information.
- Have a leader who's willing to move it forward and act on the data.

If you'd like more information about The Graduate! Network's Bridging The Talent Gap initiative, please fill out our interest form [here](#).

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The Graduate! Network

About Us: Founded in 2005, The Graduate! Network is a non-profit organization that helps communities build and grow programs that specifically serve adults with some college credit who have not yet earned a degree, also referred to as Comebackers. Today, we have worked with over 40 communities across the country to build a supportive system that has helped thousands of adults return to college.

Our Vision: Every adult who aspires to earn a college degree has access to the resources and supports they need to start and complete their degree.

Our Mission: We believe everyone should have an equitable chance to achieve the education and career they desire. The Graduate! Network collaborates with a range of stakeholders to build, nurture, and assess structures and systems that support adults to attend and complete their degrees.

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