



PILLARS OF SUCCESS:

A GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING PLACE-BASED RETAIL INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION: WHEN LAUNCHING A WORKFORCE PROGRAM IN RETAIL, LOCATION AND INDUSTRY SPECIFICS MATTER

Retail career pathway initiatives can take many forms – helping job seekers access frontline employment opportunities, providing on-the-job training to incumbent workers, or helping seasoned retail employees obtain the skills and credentials they need for career advancement. As in any workforce development initiative, the organization (or partner organizations) leading the efforts cannot just rely on having a good program model. The location of the program will matter for how a lead organization’s program is designed and implemented in a number of ways. The industry also matters: even if an organization has a long history of working with employers on workforce initiatives, it is worthwhile for it to take some time to understand the ways in which the retail industry may differ from industries like healthcare or IT or manufacturing.

This implementation guide is designed to describe the specific ways that location, or place, plays a role in the planning of a retail career opportunity initiative. It describes six different “place-based pillars” that should be considered during the planning process, with examples from two recent retail initiatives funded by Walmart Giving presented in short case studies. In thinking through the place-based pillars, lead organizations will recognize how their initiatives can be shaped by the larger system that exists and by the local context in which it is placed.

The guide then provides a quick overview– Retail 101 – of what is unique about the retail industry that can be helpful to know when planning and implementing retail workforce development and career initiatives. Finally, a Workforce 101 section provides some suggestions for how to communicate with retailers about what the larger public workforce system is and what it offers employers in terms of programs and services.

This guide was developed with funding from the Walmart Foundation’s Retail Opportunity Initiative to support members of the Retail Opportunity Network, a collection of over 50 organizations working collaboratively to drive system change in the U.S. retail sector and advance the careers of frontline retail workers. The guide may also be useful for others interested in developing local workforce initiatives for the retail industry. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) worked with national and local partners within the Retail Opportunity Network to shape the content of this implementation guide and gather direct insight from placed-based work in the field. CAEL, a national non-profit organization, has over 40 years of experience providing thought leadership and programmatic support for efforts that aim to link learning to the workplace.

PLACE-BASED PILLARS IN PLANNING A RETAIL INITIATIVE

What follows are six key factors to consider when thinking through how place matters for your initiative. These place-based pillars are:

- ✓ **Determining How Geography Matters for Your Initiative**
- ✓ **Identifying Local Partners and Other Key Players**
- ✓ **Understanding the Region’s Labor Market – Supply and Demand**
- ✓ **Identifying Who the Retail Opportunity Initiative is Serving**
- ✓ **Engaging Retail Employers**
- ✓ **What is Behind the Scenes & Beneath the Surface**

For each of these pillars, this guide addresses why it is an important factor for any retail initiative to examine, what you should consider when addressing it, and how to effectively plan and develop a successful initiative with that factor in mind.

Determining How Geography Matters for Your Initiative

Why think so carefully about geography?

The geographic “boundaries” of your initiative can fundamentally affect who you engage with (partners as well as workers), how you structure outreach and communication, and how you deliver programs or services.

What kinds of geographic characteristics can affect an initiative?

- **Political Boundaries:** Will the initiative be operating in one state/region/county/city or across multiple? How will government policies in each of these areas, particularly around issues such as retail business, training, labor, etc., affect or shape the initiative?
- **Workforce Areas:** Local workforce development boards (WDBs) have defined areas in which they operate and provide services. If your initiative is operating across an area that is served by multiple WDBs, you may need to navigate how to work with multiple entities that may be competing for funding or clients, or have different interests and priorities.
- **Employer Territory/Regions:** Do the employers you are engaging have multiple stores across the region, state, or nationally? Are training and employee development handled by regional/state managers, or left to individual stores? Understanding how these employers operate geographically can help guide whom you should reach out to and work with at the company.
- **Other Geographic Considerations:**
 - *Population density (urban/suburban):* This can determine the types and numbers of retailers in an area, as well as non-profits and community-based organizations (CBOs) available as partners.
 - *Transit:* Availability of public transportation can affect workers’ or job seekers’ mobility and ability to participate in training or access services.

How can existing resources help identify geographic boundaries and characteristics?

- The W.E. Upjohn Institute has a national [online map of workforce investment areas](#) you can use to identify the WDBs in your area
- [StatsAmerica](#) provides a variety of useful mapping and regional profiling tools

 **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

Changing Boundaries—How you define your initiative’s operating area may change as you engage new partners or continue developing your program; be flexible and responsive to those realities.

Statistical Areas are defined geographic areas used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other federal agencies (e.g. Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Combined Statistical Areas). How do these areas overlap with your initiative’s location? Which area definitions should you use when gathering data to gain an accurate analysis of the area’s workforce landscape?

Identifying Local Partners and Other Key Players

Why identify potential stakeholders in a place-based retail initiative?

Retail initiatives, like all workforce development, are collaborative efforts. You will need the assistance of local partners with diverse resources and expertise to be successful. As a result, it is worthwhile to understand upfront who these stakeholders and potential partners may be, the roles they may play in an initiative, and how they relate to one another. In addition to looking for new partners, you should also ask: Who in the area is already doing work related to your initiative (e.g. retail training or development)? And how can you partner with them to complement that work and fill in any gaps, rather than duplicate efforts?

What is the intermediary's role among stakeholders?

A lead intermediary organization fills the critical functions of convener and coordinator, fostering new partner relationships or maintaining/improving existing ones, as well as making sure everyone is effectively working together. Lead intermediaries can also be responsible for maintaining the long-term stability of the initiative, which may mean seeking out alternate sources of ongoing funding such as chambers of commerce or private funders.

How do you know who the important players are?

You can use the glossary on the next page to guide you in mapping your local landscape of retail and workforce players and identifying the roles they may play in developing a retail initiative.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Hidden connections. Not all stakeholders or existing partnerships are obvious at first; make sure your initiative is flexible enough to accommodate new stakeholders or partners you encounter along the way.

Coordination is king. Your role might need to be to make sure there is a coordinated message and outreach to employers. Multiple organizations should not be contacting employers at the same time with different “asks”.

Already covered. You may discover that another organization is already working closely with local retailers. Consider how best to approach them to collaborate.

PARTNER/PLAYER	DESCRIPTION	POSSIBLE ROLES
Job Seekers & Incumbent Workers	Those served by the initiative. Important to think about target/focus population(s) for the initiative and understand the unique challenges or needs they are facing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Training/learning participants > Career pathway and advising users > Provide program input and evaluation
Employers	Any employer with interest in developing the local retail workforce. Useful to categorize by size, type/merchandise, etc.; how to approach/work with each “kind” can vary. Also includes non-retail employers where retail skills are valued (hospitality, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Inform labor market/landscape research > Job placement for job seekers > Worker training, assessment, and advancement > Ongoing initiative feedback and evaluation
Public Workforce System	A federally-funded network of development boards and One-Stop Centers with wide variety of workforce-related operations and services including funding. Responsible for specific geographic “territories” (may deal with more than one).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide and fund training for workers > Provide and analyze labor market information > Job search and placement services > Connect workers with support services
Funders & Philanthropies	National/local organizations that provide funding for workforce projects. Includes foundations, local/state-funded agencies, or private investment (venture capital, etc.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide sustaining project/program funding > Facilitate connections with other local partners > Guide program/project priorities
Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)	Local organizations that provide services with workforce-oriented mission, including support services (transportation, childcare, etc.) May focus on specific populations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Job advising, placement, or training providers > Support services > Funding, outreach/communication, or capacity
Education and Training Providers	All regional institutions providing relevant education/training: private/proprietary vocational training, community colleges, 4-year public/private colleges, online training vendors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Inform labor market/landscape research > Develop new offerings in response to demand > Skill assessment and training (soft and hard)
Industry/HR Associations & Chambers of Commerce	Coordinate multi-employer voice around employment and skill needs; broad business & industry perspective. May provide extra resources. Some associations develop, validate, or provide industry credentials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Employer coordination and needs advocacy > Develop and/or provide industry credentials > Marketing, communications, and outreach

Understanding the Regional Landscape – Labor Market Supply and Demand

Why is understanding your regional labor market important?

The central aim of any workforce or talent development initiative is to help build a labor marketplace that meets the needs of both employers and the workforce. The first step in making sure that an initiative does this is to understand the labor market in the region and how well workforce and education supply is already aligned with employer demand. Retail initiatives can then ensure that they are addressing valuable, in-demand skills needs and meeting employer demand by addressing any existing supply gaps.

What does your local/regional labor market look like?

Conducting a landscape analysis of your local labor market involves learning about the current state of the local economy as well as the size, shape, and scope of the retail sector. It will also be helpful to gather details about industries that could provide destination careers for retail workers as they advance (for example, Transportation/Logistics or Hospitality). A landscape analysis can include gathering and analyzing:

- **Labor market information** including number of jobs, salaries, and education/skills requirements.
- **Trends or future workforce needs** including employment projections, industry trends, and technology innovation or regulatory changes that may disrupt the labor market.
- **Education and training assets** that already exist locally and develop retail-related skills.
- **Gaps or misalignments** that may be causing friction in the marketplace: Are there certain types of jobs that will need to be filled soon that your local workforce is not currently trained for? Are employers seeing large gaps in specific skillsets?

You may want to periodically refresh this analysis with updated data so that you can stay on top of shifts in the local labor market.

How do you map your local landscape?

There are several methods for “getting smart” about the regional business community and their employment needs. Below are some elements to consider when developing a landscape analysis for your region:

- **Draw on existing resources**—Workforce boards, economic development organizations, and state agencies regularly collect and analyze labor market information.
- **Engage employers directly**—Develop relationships with employers to gain valuable insight into their hiring needs and challenges, including the skills, education, and credentials they are looking for in qualified job candidates. As the needs of employers change, retail initiatives should continue to update their programs to stay aligned with these needs.
- **Understand the types of employers that exist locally**—For example, a retailer’s size or structure may influence their capacity to offer training or participate in other workforce initiatives.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Outside Help—Find out if anyone is doing (or has already done) this type of analysis in your region. If not, do you have the expertise to conduct the analysis yourself, or should you hire or partner with another organization?

Existing Networks—Look for any pre-existing networks of employers that you can tap into initially to gather employer input.

Identifying Who the Retail Opportunity Initiative is Serving

Why is it important to define an initiative's target population?

Retail workers and job seekers will have different needs based on a variety of factors including their employer and employment status, their occupation, their demographics, and their existing resources. To be most effective, your retail opportunity program should be customized to serve a targeted population based on a clear understanding how that population's skills, circumstances, and needs will drive decisions about program design and implementation.

What should factor into the selection of a target population?

In some cases, a funder or specific grant focus may determine who your target population is. If not, labor market information and landscape analysis can help focus your efforts based on where employment needs are strongest (among both employers and job seekers). Based on your initial market/landscape analysis and employer engagement, are certain kinds of workers having a more difficult time finding work, staying employed, or advancing than others?

Consider also how local resources can be leveraged to greatest effect in terms of worker demographics (i.e., age, socioeconomic status, experience level, etc.). Do unique local resources (funding, stakeholders, political initiatives) provide greater opportunity to address the needs of a certain population (e.g., opportunity youth or the underemployed)? Are there stakeholders that may be highly effective with a particular demographic or skill level (e.g., providers of basic literacy/numeracy for the low skilled population; immigrant services; English Language Learning programs?) Be sure to also carefully consider the capabilities of target populations when planning and developing your program. For example, digital tools may not be as useful for those with limited access to – or experience with – computers or the internet.

How do you develop an initiative that meets your target population's needs?

While labor market data may be able to give you some basic information about the skill levels and demographics of local workers, consider also learning about what kinds of experiences these workers have on the job. Talk to employers about their experiences in hiring and training new employees. Talk to stakeholders who work closely with your target population to learn more about their lives, skills, and work experiences. As soon as you can in the planning process, talk directly to the workers in your target population to understand more about their particular strengths and challenges in terms of skill development and career opportunities to learn what kind of assistance they might need to reach their career or employment goals.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Multiple workforce providers may already be serving your target population — Is there another population that is not currently being served? If not, learn more about what each of these stakeholders does and determine if there is a need to coordinate efforts or fill in any service gaps to expand collective effectiveness.

Your target population may not yet be served by anyone in the workforce space — Identify stakeholders that are serving this target population in other ways (e.g., churches, child care providers, etc.) to learn more and perhaps coordinate efforts to provide wrap-around support.

Engaging Retail Employers

Why will retail employers want to get involved?

Employers may care about helping low-income and low-skilled workers, but they will also need to know how your program will help meet their bottom line before participating. Make a strong case for how your project will generate a return on investment (ROI) for the company, and identify how your initiative can help meet their unique business and workforce challenges.

Keep in mind that different employers will have varying levels of engagement – some employers will be willing and able to provide significant dedicated time and resources to participating in the initiative, but others may not. While large retailers often have greater capacity to engage in training and skill development, try to also reach out to and engage small retail employers. Consider how to address their workforce training and sourcing needs efficiently and effectively.

What do I need to do to establish strong employer relationships?

When initially conducting employer outreach, you can build on any existing relationships you may have with other stakeholders like local chambers, workforce development boards, and economic development agencies. Make sure that these outreach efforts are coordinated with other organizations so that employers are not hearing from multiple groups about similar issues.

Find a champion to work with at each company – someone able to make things happen and who understands the value and importance of training and skill development. To ensure that employers are fully-engaged partners in the initiative, go beyond the “advisory council” approach by asking them to work with you to build the program. Visit the workplace and talk to supervisors and managers about their specific talent needs and challenges. Talk directly with them to understand worker roles and responsibilities within their company – the written job description may not fully capture what these jobs look like in practice.

Find ways to provide immediate value to your employer partners to develop trust, and follow up with them on a regular basis to see if program changes might be needed to continue providing value. Instead of using surveys, reach out to your employer partners individually for feedback and to learn about their changing needs. Individualized attention, and responsiveness to issues on the ground, will help you sustain the relationship over time.

How can I get smart about making the case for employer engagement?

The Retail Opportunity Network has several resources that can guide you in making the case for employers to engage with you, from ROI frameworks to best practices on employee retention strategies in retail. See also the Retail 101 section of this guide for more insight on what makes the retail industry and retail employers unique partners in workforce development initiatives.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

You will need to have a clear and unique business case for why employers will want to work with you. Each retailer may respond to a different value proposition.

Make sure you are talking to a decision maker. That person could be a local HR person or a corporate-level chief learning officer. Develop a pitch that will get you to the right person.

You may strike out at first. But try again. Your timing may be off, or you may have reached the wrong person.

See Retail 101 section for additional insights.

What is Behind the Scenes & Beneath the Surface

Why is this important to your success?

Understanding the political climate within which you are working is key for success, especially when you are managing several partners with different missions, goals, objectives, and funding sources. “Turfism” is a challenge anywhere—in any industry sector, city, or coalition. However, it is possible for multiple organizations to carry out similar work, in the same location, and in an efficient and effective way. To do that, it is helpful to get to the core of what motivates your partners and find common ground for greater community impact within your career pathway initiative. Finding that common ground and basis for mutual trust can help break down real, and perceived, institutional and organizational silos.

What is important to know ahead of time, or be on the lookout for?

In the process of engaging partners, you may encounter well-formed relationships where transparency and partnership are highly valued, but you may also discover pre-existing or historical relationships that have soured because of personal, professional, or operational conflicts. These will require careful maneuvering and sensitive diplomacy to get the most out of future engagements. The back stories may not be immediately apparent or easily discoverable, so you may need to learn as you go. It may be helpful to find a well-connected local source who can alert you to potential political landmines you will need to understand or account for in your approach.

How can I avoid political landmines that could undermine my local initiative?

If you are the lead organization, find a way to position yourself as a neutral player with a focus on developing collaboration for collective impact around the issues and populations you hope to address. Meet existing workforce development efforts where they are and seek to thoroughly understand local issues, concerns, and existing efforts before proposing new solutions. Try to work around local landmines or be intentional in disarming them. Despite your best intentions, you may still step on one of those landmines. When that happens, address the problem directly, change course as necessary, and keep going.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Current events matter. Get to know what’s going on in the community. Are there any “hot button” issues locally that stakeholders are sensitive to?

Watch for landmines. Partnerships can be effective ways to build capacity, but they can also be difficult experiences and lead to permanent rifts. Uncover any issues, or landmines, that may exist among potential partners and other stakeholders.

Role of retail. What is the relative importance of retail as an economic driver in your community? In some places, sales tax is a key income source, making retail a target for employer attraction and retention programs. This can open doors to additional sources of support for your initiative.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS ADDRESS PLACE-BASED PILLARS IN THEIR RETAIL INITIATIVES

The following are short case studies of two Walmart Giving grantees and how they addressed these place-based considerations in their initiatives. Throughout each case study, references to the relevant place-based pillar is noted in parentheses.

Center for the Future of Arizona

The [Center for the Future of Arizona](#) (CFA) received funding from Walmart Giving to lead a retail opportunity initiative in Phoenix that targets incumbent retail workers. With an emphasis on broad, place-based systems change, much of CFA's work so far has focused on better understanding the local retail landscape and carrying out other planning activities, prior to moving forward with program development and implementation.

CFA's primary strategy has been to engage key stakeholders through two networks: one for employers to identify and explore local retail industry needs, and another for workforce partners to coordinate existing services and build capacity. For both networks, CFA acts as a convener, facilitator, and educator, communicating retail industry needs as well as best practices and research around retail workforce development. The goal is for programmatic needs to develop organically from the relationships that develop between and among the two groups.

The Phoenix region is served by two workforce development boards, which has necessitated getting to know each of those entities and how they operate (**Geography Pillar**). [A thorough analysis of the retail industry in Phoenix](#) (conducted by the Arizona Commerce Authority) has been an excellent tool in engaging the WIBs as well as other partners and stakeholders (including elected officials). This landscape analysis, which included an in-depth look at labor market and industry data, identified retail as an important economic driver regionally and for the entire state despite the workforce system's focus on other sectors (**Labor Market Pillar**).

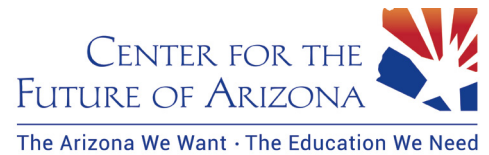
The workforce partner network has been valuable in helping CFA understand the roles and expertise of various regional education and training providers particularly as CFA would need to engage one or more of these local partners to provide training (**Local Partner Pillar**). The focus of CFA's retail initiative is on the needs of the current frontline retail workforce, which was identified in the landscape analysis (and by funders) as a high-need population (**Target Population Pillar**). This, too, has required CFA to use the workforce partner network to share information on the specific issues and challenges facing this population, since most local agencies and non-profits work primarily with job seekers rather than incumbent workers.

Meanwhile, CFA has adopted a strategy of initially working with human resources representatives when engaging retailers through the employer network (**Employer Engagement Pillar**). When working with employers, CFA has also decided to initially focus on addressing advancement pathways within retail, recognizing that sector employers may not yet see value in promoting advancement pathways to adjacent industries (**Behind the Scenes Pillar**).

Beyond educational/informational purposes, CFA sees these networks as important for gaining the trust of the various stakeholders leading up to implementation. CFA has recognized that it is somewhat of an outsider to the region's workforce development community and is most useful acting as a neutral facilitator in navigating the existing relationships between local stakeholders, including the two local WIBs (**Behind the Scenes Pillar**).

While CFA's approach of network-building has taken time, it believes that building relationships and trust up front will ensure employer demand-driven solutions and a smooth implementation process, and that the partners are now ready to start implementing program activities and scaling existing resources (such as those developed by other Retail Opportunity Network members).

To learn more about the initiative, see the RetailWorks AZ website, <https://www.arizonafuture.org/education-we-need/retailworks-az/>.



Earn Dallas (Innovate + Educate)

[Innovate + Educate](#) (I+E) received funding from the Walmart Giving to establish a place-based retail initiative in Dallas. The goals of this initiative, called [Earn Dallas](#), are to provide a “SHIFT framework” for local employers to use in identifying skilled entry-level talent, help incumbent workers understand their own skills and pathways to advancement, and offer training opportunities for skill development. A key component of this work has been the development and deployment (through employers and other non-profits) of [Core Score](#), an online soft skills assessment tool.



As a national non-profit organization, I+E initially considered multiple metropolitan areas as potential locations, developing a [landscape analysis](#) that compared information on the retail industry in each area, such as total employment, projected growth, retail real estate prices and vacancy rates, and average wages (**Labor Market Pillar**). The organization eventually chose Dallas based on I+E’s existing partnerships in the area, as well as the strong leadership around retail development within the chamber of commerce and community colleges.

I+E began by working closely with the Dallas County workforce development board (WDB) Workforce Solutions of Greater Dallas (WFSDallas). I+E is in now the process of transitioning operations of the initiative to WFSDallas. Over the course of the project, however, I+E partnered with various employers that had locations outside of the WDB’s boundaries, leading I+E to establish close relationships with the other two WDBs in the region as well (**Geography Pillar**).

I+E has also developed relationships with a wide variety of other community stakeholders, particularly in building a leadership advisory council, which guides the development and implementation of the initiative. Partners on the council include employers (e.g. AT&T, CVS, Kroger), the Dallas County Community College District, the Dallas Regional Chamber, and local non-profits (e.g. Goodwill, United Way, and the Salvation Army). These partners also take on several other roles in support of the initiative. For example, Goodwill and the Salvation Army offer use of the Earn Dallas platform and provide some training through the initiative to their retail store staff and job seekers (**Stakeholders/Partners Pillar**).

While Earn Dallas works with job seekers through community partners (such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army), its primary goal is to provide entry-level incumbent retail workers (**Worker Populations Pillar**) with opportunities to advance and showcase skills via assessment and upskilling training opportunities through their employers. As a result, engaging employers and developing these partnerships has been a key component of the initiative. I+E has found that identifying a “champion” (or multiple, in case one contact is lost) within each employer has been critical to getting buy-in and supporting learners through the process. “Champions” are those staff at the retailer who are responsible for training or employee development (at either the store or regional level) and who understand the value of Earn Dallas in filling an identified training/development need or gap within the company (**Employer Engagement Pillar**).

While I+E has been able to successfully engage a variety of partners through their Earn Dallas initiative, they have also found that some employers or non-profits have been hesitant to participate due to the involvement of other companies or organizations (e.g. if they are direct competitors). This pre-existing “web” of relationships between local stakeholders wasn’t always immediately or initially obvious to Earn Dallas staff, requiring them to continually uncover new relationships and potential conflicts as they continued to implement and engage additional partners (**Behind the Scenes**). As a result, I+E/Earn Dallas sees flexibility as a key characteristic for any retail initiative—the ability to react and readjust to new information as an initiative is implemented and grows is just as important as its initial planning and development.

To learn more about the initiative, see the Earn Dallas website, www.earndallas.org.

RETAIL 101: WHAT A RETAIL CAREER PATHWAY INITIATIVE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE RETAIL INDUSTRY

1. Timing is everything - design your approach around the retail calendar and leverage the opportunities that the retail calendar provides.

- October – January are typically busy times for most retailers. Employers will not be able to launch new programs during that time. There may also be other busy seasons that are specific to some retailers (e.g., Valentine’s Day).
- Employers may be interested in finding ways to identify and retain the “shining stars” from their seasonal staff.
- Seasonal hiring needs can offer opportunities for workers in other seasonal professions (e.g. landscapers in colder climates).
- Retail’s traditional fiscal calendar (February 1 – January 31) is important to keep in mind for budget planning purposes.

2. The nature of retail jobs creates unique challenges for training and development programs.

- Direct communication with the retail employees may be difficult, since retailers generally do not have company-wide email.
- Workers may have shifts that change and are not predictable.
- Perception of lower wages in retail, compared to other industries, can make it difficult for workforce boards to be interested in supporting retail initiatives.

3. For entry-level positions, retailers value basic industry knowledge, strong foundational skills, and a positive attitude.

- Retailers may like competency frameworks and retail-focused credentials, but they tend to hire for entry-level positions based on other criteria (availability, work history, soft skills). They may ask for someone with basic skills and train them for the rest.
- Relatively low entry-level educational and experience requirements, combined with flexible scheduling opportunities, make retail an ideal industry for job seekers who require immediate income, need to work while in training, and/or need to build their resume.

4. Retail is not one-size fits all – Like all industries, individual retailers are diverse and have unique hiring structures, incentives, and promotion policies.

- Each employer may have different hiring and other employment practices that are important to understand in order to support their employment and training needs.
- The full range of the retailer’s talent needs may go well beyond low-skilled entry-level occupations. Some large retailers will have in-demand and high-skill occupations, including supervisors, logistics managers, customer service representatives, and roles in operations and IT.
- For regional and national chains, the local senior hiring manager is a good initial point of collaboration. However, while someone in local human resources is an obvious place to start outreach, it may be the case that regional or national positions (e.g., chief learning officers, operations managers, or talent managers) will prove to be the contacts to engage.
- Big Box retailers may be hard to get engaged because they feel they already are doing well on employee training and development.
- Most retail workers work for small employers, who may be the hardest to engage since the decision-makers have multiple responsibilities and reduced capacity to take on new initiatives.

5. Competition among retailers may be more pronounced than in other industries.

- Fostering greater collaboration among retailers may be particularly challenging in a highly competitive local environment.

6. Retailers highly value strategies that support their recruitment and retention efforts.

- Employee retention is one of the biggest challenges for retailers.
- The ready pool of talent available through the workforce system, potentially reducing the time from vacancy to hire, is a strong incentive for retailers to partner with the system.
- Retailers are attuned to the needs of workers who are in school or have other demands on their time; therefore, career pathway initiatives that combine a retail job with other services (including education and training) could support the interest of a stable workforce for retailers.
- Helping job seekers understand their future opportunities is an important strategy to supporting them on a retail career pathway that aligns with their short-term employment needs and long-term goals.

7. Retailers have specific challenges when it comes to managing their workforce. Build a business case around those concerns.

- Employers will care a great deal about the impact on their bottom line. They will want to see a clear business case for why they would want to be part of the initiative.
- Retailers understand the need to raise the image and opportunity associated with retail.
- Retailers are often challenged to employ a diverse population that reflects their communities and customers.
- Although retail workers learn a lot of transferable skills on the job, retailers may not be ready to consider how to help them access careers in adjacent industries.

8. Retail is undergoing a huge transformation, which is starting to have an impact on how retailers view their talent needs.

- Some of the industry changes include: the rise of online shopping, brands selling directly to the consumer, delivery drones, and virtual reality shopping experiences.
- Because of industry shifts, retailers increasingly require employees who understand their business and have advanced training and education to support their continued evolution. Job seekers with front-line retail experience combined with training in logistics, operations, IT and other specialized fields (such as pharmacy) are in great demand.
- The transformation of the industry presents an opportunity for the workforce system to align work and education in new ways to support career pathways.
- The National Retail Federation website offers information on the latest industry trends that can be useful for informing your work.

WORKFORCE 101: HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE PUBLIC WORKFORCE SYSTEM WITH EMPLOYERS

Since the public workforce system is a critical stakeholder in any retail initiative, it is important that your partners, particularly employers, understand what it is and does. What follows are tips for how to communicate about the workforce system and the services it offers to employers in a way that keeps things simple and to the point. If you are not familiar with the system yourself, one good source of information—in addition to building relationships with and learning from workforce system leaders—is the Urban Institute’s [Understanding Local Workforce Systems](#).

What does the Public Workforce System Offer?

Even though the workforce system is complicated, your role as intermediary should be to boil the complexities down to basics – what do employers need to know about services the system offers that can help them with specific business needs?

Common Employer Needs	How the Workforce System Can Help
Trouble hiring (skilled) workers	Match job seekers with employers (via job fairs, job boards, or directly). Job candidates are prescreened and assessed for skills.
Looking for workers with a specific certification or training	Connect employers with education and training providers that have or can develop customized short-term training, as well as degree or credential programs, that meet specific employer needs.
Employees need additional training	Provide on-the-job training as well as funding/reimbursement for employer-provided training (e.g., training on new equipment, soft skills).
Deciding whether to open a new store	Access to regional economic information and analysis that can guide employer recruitment and growth strategy, including job numbers, unemployment rates, average wages, etc.
Employees need help outside of work	Can connect individuals in need with community support services (e.g., child care, transportation, food, and other assistance.)
Long-term problems finding skilled workers	Inform state and local development priorities by industry, how federal funding is spent, and government policies affecting labor/HR

What You and Employers Should also be Aware of...

- **Translator, not expert**—You do not need to know everything there is to know about the workforce system, just enough to connect employers with the right staff locally, and to help translate between the two if necessary.
- **Avoid jargon and acronyms**—When talking with employers, minimize the use of insider terms and acronyms. Focus on how specific programs/services can provide value and meet their needs.
- **Manage expectations**—Employers looking to utilize workforce system services may be required to meet specific eligibility requirements and complete government paperwork. Be sure interested employers are aware of what they will need to do to apply and support them through the process.

- **Resources can vary**—How workforce boards and one-stop centers provide services and the amount of funding available can vary based on local or state policies and other factors. Employers should be aware of this as they begin to explore what services might be available.
- **Business Services Specialists**—Most workforce boards or partners have staff whose job is to understand and address employer needs, and are often assigned to work with (and specialize in) specific industries.
- **Industry-based partnerships**—Workforce boards often facilitate business-led partnerships of employers, education/training providers, and government agencies to identify and address specific employer needs (hiring, training, etc.)
- **Roles of Boards vs. Centers**—Which entity an employer should work with depends on their needs and goals. State and local boards are typically more involved in the strategic alignment of partners, programs, and resources, driving policy and funding priorities, and implementing industry partnership and career pathway strategies. One-Stops/American Job Centers provide services to businesses such as candidate recruitment/screening, as well as to job seekers and workers such as job search assistance, training, and access to support services.

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