

TAKING THE INITIATIVE ON

# JOB S & RACE



innovations in workforce development for minority job seekers and employers



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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
A FRAMEWORK FOR RACE & WORK READINESS	4
EMPOWERING MINORITY MALES	10
THE JOBS INITIATIVE PROCESS	12
LESSONS LEARNED	19
CONCLUSION	22
RESOURCES	24

# INTRODUCTION



In 1995, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched a \$30-million demonstration project known as the Jobs Initiative. This eight-year, six-city project provides support and assistance to community groups, employers, foundations, and community colleges engaged in helping disadvantaged, low-skilled workers secure family-supporting jobs. This initiative is intended to connect regional labor markets and low-income, inner-city neighborhoods in the following cities: Denver, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Seattle.

Broadly, the Jobs Initiative in each community is working to

- support innovative jobs projects,
- change public and private employment-related systems,
- engage employers in jobs projects,
- focus on labor market retention and career advancement, and
- build new and effective information networks to reach job seekers.

Low-skilled, low-income job seekers have historically had significant problems finding and keeping family-supporting work. Since 80 percent of Jobs Initiative participants are people of color—60 percent are black—arguably the most important lesson of the initiative is that the experiences and needs of young minority job seekers should guide the initiative’s jobs investments.

Traditional employment and training programs, however, have typically not considered the structural

and personal impacts of race on jobs and job seekers. Recognizing the importance of addressing these issues has prompted the Jobs Initiative to seek a better understanding of the dynamics of race and labor markets.

At its design stage, the Jobs Initiative recognized that racial discrimination persisted in regional labor markets and that the specific workforce needs of young men of color were not being adequately addressed. Implementation of the initiative had not proceeded very far, however, before the initiative sites called for more concerted attention to the complex interplay of race and regional labor markets.

Learning to talk about race and regional labor markets has nonetheless proved daunting. While racial discrimination persists and employer discussions of “soft skills” sometimes undervalue the character, values, and life skills of minority job seekers and workers, it is also true that the historic isolation of many communities of color from economic opportunity has resulted in a lack of job readiness skills, technical skills, and the confidence that job seekers can indeed obtain desired success by diligently working for it.

This report offers a perspective about how to think, talk, and act about the complexity of race and regional labor markets, particularly for low-skilled workers. We offer this perspective, the lessons we are learning, and the helpful tools we have identified and, in several cases, developed, as a contribution to improve the practice of workforce development for job seekers, workers, and employers alike.



## A FRAMEWORK

# FOR RACE & WORK READINESS

The labor market for low-skilled job seekers has not functioned well for at least a generation. The persistence of joblessness and poverty in inner-city, minority communities is particularly disturbing given the nation's unprecedented economic prosperity and the strongest job market in memory.

The benefits of this long economic boom in the form of family-supporting jobs have not sufficiently trickled down to low-skilled workers, especially workers of color. In fact, the unemployment rate is highest among black men who dropped out of high school, hovering near 17 percent. By comparison, the unemployment rate for white high school dropouts is 7.5 percent, according to 1998 Bureau of Labor Statistics data. In addition to an unemployment rate that is approximately four times higher than the national average, a persistent race-based wage gap exists affecting low-income, low-skilled workers. According to the Russell Sage Foundation's multicounty study on urban inequality in the labor market, relative earnings for blacks in 1996-97 remained at 65 percent of white earnings, the same as for 1979.

Jobs Initiative sites found that even during a time when employers were desperate for workers, race-based discrepancies persisted in the labor market experiences of low-income people of color. That finding suggested that the Jobs Initiative needed to respond—not just to the challenges of hard skills and social supports—but to other employment barriers, including the perceptions, skills, and practices of employers and job seekers.

However, changing the employment outcomes for low-income job seekers would also require working in collaboration with employers, some of whom resisted hiring inner-city residents because of racial or gender bias. Yet these practices are changing as many firms acknowledge the increasingly diverse workforce and the business costs of high turnover and low job retention.

When it became clear that issues of race, ethnicity, language, and culture had arisen in a number of workforce situations, Jobs Initiative sites requested technical assistance from the Foundation.

The Casey Foundation responded in 1996 by convening the first of a series of meetings on the unique issues pertaining to minority men. Subsequent meetings focused on job readiness, cultural competence, and site-based experiences.

Two broad objectives emerged from these discussions with sites, employers, workforce experts, and young adults:

- There was a need to increase awareness of how issues of race, ethnicity, language, culture, and power manifest themselves in workforce development training, policy, practice, system reform efforts, and actual employment.
- There was a need to develop tools for helping workforce actors develop culturally competent interventions throughout the entire workforce development process, from the minute a candidate walks in the door to long after employment placement.

By conducting cross-site conferences, commissioning a series of reports, sponsoring literature reviews, and creating discussion groups on race or ethnicity and culture, the Foundation has developed a range of resources on race, workforce, and regional labor markets that should be useful to a wide array of workforce practitioners.

## THE SOFT SKILLS FACTOR

The information exchange during these early meetings on race and regional labor markets repeatedly identified the concept of “soft skills.”

Defined loosely as the capacity to interact and function appropriately in the workplace, soft skills can include everything from dress to language, communication styles, and level of motivation. Some employers see black and Latino men as lacking in soft skills, a factor that has prevented those men from securing and maintaining family-supporting work.

Soft skills by definition are complex and cannot be easily quantified. The assessment of what could constitute soft skills is therefore inherently open to racial distortions, as has sometimes occurred in the application of employment-screening tests.

A number of employers and a fair number of job-training providers, however, maintain that effective workforce development for low-income people of color is primarily an issue of soft skills preparation; but that, according to the Jobs Initiative sites, represents a superficial analysis of how race and ethnicity influence the labor market experiences of low-skilled job seekers.

It does not mean that the issue of soft skills is an imaginary one. The current economic environment emphasizes education and hard skills, but problem-solving abilities and interpersonal skills, including the capacity to communicate effectively, are given equally high emphasis among employers. Young men of color often feel that their potential, in the face of difficulties communicating on the job or other soft skill deficiencies, goes unnoticed.

Philip Moss and Chris Tilly, authors of *“Soft” Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems*, found that because of competitive pressures, employers are indeed demanding and putting increased emphasis on the value of soft skills. The researchers maintained that because “employer assessments of the soft skills of current or potential workers are invariably subjective, racial discrimination can enter into such assessments.”

While soft skills preparation is absolutely necessary for most people who have no experience in the workplace, the Foundation and the sites would agree that in their experience, references to the lack of soft skills training often are used by employers as “a smoke screen to discriminate,” in the words of St. Louis Jobs Initiative director Tom Rhodenbaugh.

And employment discrimination, whether or not it is cloaked in the language of soft skills, is a real factor.

According to the Washington-based Fair Employment Council, nearly one out of every four employers discriminates on the basis of race or ethnicity or perceived

## RACE, JOBS & SOFT SKILLS

After it became clear that Jobs Initiative sites were having trouble placing men of color in jobs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation convened a meeting around the issue of soft skills and race. Programs were encountering real barriers to placement for candidates of color, especially black men, primarily because employers believed they lacked certain attributes, or soft skills. Based upon similar experiences across sites, the Casey Foundation and the Jobs Initiative programs consulted a diverse group of experts on the racial gap in labor market outcomes to understand the impact of race and soft skills on disadvantaged workers in need of—but unable to secure—long-term employment.

In addition to Jobs Initiative site directors, the group included such experts as sociologist Elijah Anderson, author of *The Code of the Streets*; economist John Jeffries; Margaret Simms of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; George Paajanen, Ph.D.; Personnel Decisions International; and Edward DeJesus of the National Youth Employment Coalition. Also attending were researchers Chris Tilly and Phillip Moss, authors of “Soft” Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Outcomes. One result of this meeting was the creation of the Work Readiness Index, another was the New Orleans Jobs Initiative’s soft skills curriculum, “21st Century Success Principles.”

Over the course of two days in 1997, the participants sought to make sense of what

amounts to a Gordian knot of an issue through discussions that covered everything from identification of the current theory surrounding labor market effects of race and soft skills to recent findings from studies that identify best practices for addressing the issue.

What participants found was that definitions of soft skills can vary by industry, trends or shifts in the economy (such as more service jobs versus more industrial jobs), culture, priorities, and specifications for certain work. But the group used as its initial working definition one crafted by Moss and Tilly: “skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge.” According to employers, two clusters of soft skills resonate—interaction and motivation.

In the fields of sociology and anthropology, there is evidence that the environment is significant in the development of soft skills. For example, Elijah Anderson discusses “code switching”—the ability to speak and act differently in different situations—as a method that allows individuals who are raised in the inner city to perceive different “norms” that operate in other settings and to adjust their behavior accordingly. This capacity acknowledges differences between neighborhood and workplace culture. Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, author of *When Work Disappears*, theorizes that one reason inner-city residents may lack soft skills is that, as jobs leave cities, workers left behind have no

role models to follow. Thus, they never learn the art of code switching.

From revelations like these, several observations and recommendations emerged. Chief among them was that a clearer definition of soft skills was critical, as was a new instrument to measure soft skills. Some meeting attendees involved in addressing directly the issue of soft skills in their work (STRIVE is an example) talked about their methods. Participants raised the issue of soft skills as a subtle form of employment discrimination based on race that led to an initiative-wide framework to proactively confront the issue of race and work readiness.

Jobs Initiative site leaders decided in conjunction with the group that they needed to develop some specific activities to begin dealing with soft skills, including revising marketing strategies to counteract negative images of minority men and documenting successes and the experiences of practitioners to identify what works.

It can be argued that this session represented a turning point in the course of the Jobs Initiative that led to several innovations and important additions to the field of workforce development—even beyond the Work Readiness Index—including the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies’ soft skills research and the introduction to the Fair Employment Council’s “Getting a Job is a Job” curriculum.



race-based differences. Discrimination is twice as likely to be a factor in hiring and firing decisions for jobs located in the District of Columbia than in the surrounding suburbs. It also is more likely to be a factor in sales, service, and office jobs than for blue-collar positions. Through face-to-face testing, the council found that the rate of overall discrimination for Latinos is roughly 22 percent and for African Americans, 24 percent. White applicants were found to have nearly a 50 percent higher accessibility to job vacancies than were African-American applicants.

In tests where black and white applicants were offered the same job, nearly 20 percent of the white applicants were offered a higher starting wage.

The above findings would seem to suggest that the labor market does not operate in a completely objective manner.

According to economists Patrick L. Mason and Rhonda Williams, editors of *Race, Markets and Social Outcomes: African Americans in the U.S. Economy*, a collection of research-based essays on race and the labor market, “many economists are willing to accept that race is a significant factor in U.S. economic and social affairs” unless the discussion focuses on how race works in the political economy and against minorities. Race matters, the authors claim, when economic discussions focus on “antisocial behavior” such as reliance on welfare, lower labor market participation, or unemployment. Yet, the same economists maintain that race does not matter when the discussion centers

on race-based disparities in wages and employment. Mason and Williams have compiled a compelling series of arguments to provide persuasive evidence that the market is indeed affected by race.

“Competition does equalize, but it also differentiates,” says Williams, a Ph.D. economist at the University of Maryland. “And it does determine outcomes in our market life. Markets do not operate outside of history and culture.”

New research and the experiences of the Jobs Initiative sites support those observations.

The Russell Sage Foundation’s multicity study of urban inequality, which surveyed more than 8,600 African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and white household members and 3,200 employers in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles found that employers are less likely, based on racial attitudes and bias, to hire black men compared with every other group and were, in fact, more likely to turn down blacks who applied for jobs. Moss and Tilly found similar employer attitudes.

Despite facts like these, employers and those in the business of placing low-skilled workers are reluctant to acknowledge the role employment discrimination plays.

“Of course race has nothing to do with this, right?” New Orleans Chamber of Commerce Vice President Barbara Johnson says facetiously. “I think that there

# THE FAIR EMPLOYMENT COUNCIL OF GREATER WASHINGTON

In 1996, the Casey Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites discerned the difficulties that local programs were having in placing men of color in jobs.

That cross-site frustration eventually culminated in a larger dialogue about employment discrimination and low-income job seekers of color. The Foundation discovered through word of mouth that the Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington (FEC) was working on employer-testing guides to measure discrimination. As part of its search for information and partnership expansion efforts, the Foundation invited the FEC to present its employment discrimination research findings to Jobs Initiative project directors in 1998.

A private, nonprofit civil rights organization established in 1990, the FEC is dedicated to the goal of equal opportunity in employment throughout the nation. The FEC conducts research, education and outreach, training, testing, and a program of private enforcement to eliminate employment discrimination. In carrying out its mission, the FEC undertakes a full range of activities, from voluntary compliance to litigation. What the FEC has found through copious research is that employment discrimination is very much

alive and active, although it has become more subtle and sophisticated.

The FEC helped the Casey Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites to gain greater understanding about jobs discrimination, its reality, and the issues it raises for job seekers of color in the labor market. The FEC has completed several major surveys, and the results indicate that employers' treatment of job seekers varies.

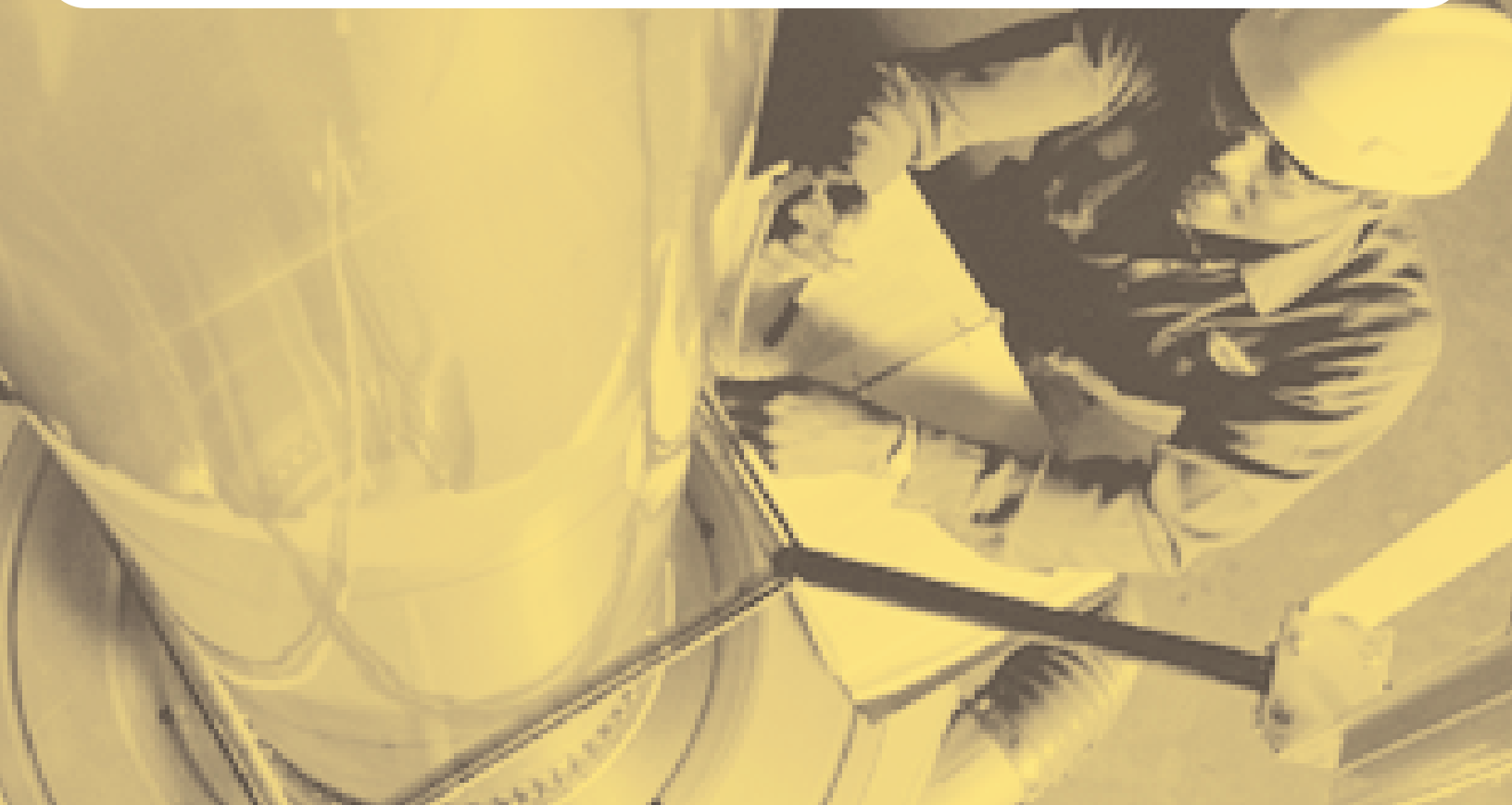
- In two separate surveys, roughly one in four employers treated African-American applicants less favorably than white applicants with the same qualifications.
- In a survey pairing Latino and white applicants, Latino job seekers were discriminated against 22 percent of the time.

The FEC uses employment testing as one tool to measure discrimination. Employment testing may be defined as a social science procedure creating controlled conditions under which employers' candid responses to the personal characteristics of job seekers can be measured. In the tests conducted with black and white testers in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, two differences in job opportunity are striking:

- Opportunities for job interviews: Overall, 48.3 percent of white testers received interviews, compared with 39.6 percent of their black partners.
- Job offers or referrals: Some 46.9 percent of white testers who were interviewed received job offers, compared with 11.3 percent of their African-American counterparts.

The FEC's presentation of its body of data, combined with other factors, was a basis for the developing framework around race or ethnicity and work readiness that the Jobs Initiative sites are refining.

Perhaps the most useful tool for the Casey Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites has been the FEC's "Know Your Rights and Responsibilities" module, which is part of the "Getting a Job is a Job" curriculum. Now available to Jobs Initiative participants, the curriculum—which uses hypothetical situations to demonstrate potential discrimination as well as personal responsibility—provides an overview of relevant laws against employment discrimination and information about how to file complaints with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or state and local human rights agencies.



are screens employers have that they use to eliminate people who shouldn't be eliminated. We're trying to show that these people have the skills."

Jobs Initiative associate Malik Ahmed, president and CEO of the St. Louis-based community development organization, a Better Family Life, sums up the situation accordingly: "There are a lot of stereotypes that employers have not been willing to free themselves of. The perception of the urban, inner-city, African-American adult is one of being a problem."

Ahmed adds that while these stereotypes may not be true they are comfortably familiar. "The so-called soft skills gap is exaggerated. A lot of these people have excellent communication and interpersonal skills. But the [soft skills gap] is stereotyped as an African-American or person-of-color problem."

The Casey Foundation and sites agreed that it was critical to examine theory, research, practice, and assessment to understand how relevant soft skills are to employers and the process of work readiness. It was equally important to study recent evidence of employment discrimination and to learn about and devise strategies for informing job seekers and employers of ways to reduce discriminatory practices.

One strategy for reducing bias in the workplace is to stimulate honest dialogue between Jobs Initiative sites and business leaders.

Carol Hedges, a Denver Workforce Initiative administrator, recalls a Colorado manufacturer who for years had required a high school equivalency diploma for certain positions. However, a survey conducted by the Jobs Initiative determined that the actual tasks required for the work at this job site called only for an eighth-grade education, which pointed out that the lack of a diploma did not necessarily equate with lack of skills or good work ethic. The Denver employer changed its employment criteria based on the Denver Workforce Initiative's assertion and now employs Jobs Initiative graduates.

Companies that have approached "hard-to-employ" candidates with a new perspective have found that, in spite of spotty work histories or other issues like substance abuse or criminal records, many of these workers are "good" employees as long as they are well prepared and motivated.



## MINORITY MALES

“Work preparation is not just getting someone a job. It’s about supporting a young man’s self-esteem and confidence, rebuilding character,” according to Aaron Boyd, with the Ogontz Avenue Revitalization Corporation.

This sentiment, expressed by a participant at the initiative’s initial meeting on effective workforce development strategies for young men of color, has shaped the guiding philosophy of the Jobs Initiative.

As with the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a classic tale of a young black man’s experiences in the American South and North, the men served by Jobs Initiative sites are often prone to the “invisible man” syndrome. Unseen, because people refuse to see them, these young men feel undervalued and underestimated. They lack a presence and a voice in workforce development efforts created on their behalf as well as in the workplace.

Far from belonging to a monolithic population, these men crave exposure to a wide range of life opportunities that might fuel their imaginations and feed their aspirations. The goals and ambitions of young minority men reach far beyond first- or entry-level job opportunities; yet, these are not the types of jobs usually marketed to this population.

Jobs Initiative sites have had to develop and incorporate new outreach strategies, training paradigms, and tools to meet the specific needs of young, lower-income men. These strategies encompass a targeted

marketing component to reach young men where they are (they may not read *The New York Times*). The development of inclusive job information networks, since many low-skilled job seekers are disconnected from conventional information networks, is arguably the most important tool linking socially and geographically segregated communities of color to work.

“A lot of people don’t have a place to turn to,” says William S. Lee, a recent graduate of the New Orleans Jobs Initiative who was placed as an electrical mechanic with Bollinger, Inc. Lee was working a dead-end, low-paying job with little or no hope for advancement prior to getting involved with the Jobs Initiative. The ideal set of contacts a low-skilled person should have includes prominent actors in local labor markets, such as workforce development professionals, community colleges, foundations, community-based organizations, government agencies, and, perhaps most important, employers. Lee had none of these. Helping people like him to get in the door with new employers is one of the most valuable services the Jobs Initiative performed, he says.

Programs need to know whom they serve in order to create strategies that are sensitive to race and ethnicity, community of origin, life experiences, and desired program goals. Recruiting young Puerto Rican men from the Bronx for a leadership program will require a different strategy from one targeting Afro-Cuban men for an entrepreneurship program.

Paying attention to diversity in designing effective recruitment and retention strategies can increase the likelihood of success among job seekers from different backgrounds.

Sites employ program staff who are genuinely concerned with the outcomes for participants in a personal and professional sense, promote exposure to a wide range of opportunities to sustain interest and encourage ambitions, and use older male role models as well as peer support to encourage job seekers. Choosing the right person to carry the message is especially important. Young men of color are able to bond with older minority men in ways they cannot relate to white men or women. But Jobs Initiative sites report that these young men respond positively to any person, regardless of race or ethnic background, who can answer “yes” to one of four criteria:

- Does the person look like me?
- Has the person been through experiences similar to mine?
- Is the person the “best” at whatever he or she does?
- Can the mentor or trainer relate to my situation?

In addition, community-based and culturally aware experiences are important. Efforts centered on a community need—whether in the area of health, community service, or leadership—attract a high level of commitment among young minority men.

Work and simulated work activities are valuable because they provide an intensity of experience with adults in a structured setting that allows high expectations, discipline, accountability, and an opportunity for the participant to gauge his own success in completing an assignment.

Long-term job retention and eventual self-sufficiency, which are the goals for this population, require significant life changes and support for those changes beyond job placement. As a consequence, Jobs Initiative sites focus on asset building as opposed to deficiencies, meaning sites build on job seekers’ strengths and respect their dignity and talents and offer them support during and after placement. The program solicits the input of job seekers and employers as well as other stakeholders who are all part of an ongoing dialogue about best practices to create new economic opportunities for residents.

Edward DeJesus, president and founder of the Youth Development and Research Fund, describes a critical turning point for young people as an “inner awakening” that happens either by making a conscious decision or by epiphany after which one takes control of one’s life and future. At this point individuals are able to seize opportunities such as those available for work preparation and placement. Although this awakening may occur at different times for different people, participation in a program may inspire the awakening to happen.



# THE JOBS

# INITIATIVE PROCESS

Foregoing easy answers like the soft skills fix, the six Casey Foundation Jobs Initiative sites have—in response to what they have learned from and about young men of color—devised a radically different set of workforce development strategies that emphasize long-term employment over short-term job placement.

The Jobs Initiative approach to workforce development and placement emphasizes three key components for an effective program:

- engaging employers,
- retention and advancement, and
- systems reform.

## ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

Historically, job-training initiatives for the disadvantaged have treated employers as “advisors” instead of primary customers, according to Darryl Burrows, director of the New Orleans Jobs Initiative and the driving force behind its innovative job-readiness curriculum, “21st Century Success Principles.” As a result, he says, many job-training programs have failed to make the right employer-to-employee match, often delivering workers who lack the skills the employers needed.

Some workforce development consultants have created testing instruments they claim can assess and measure soft skills and job readiness. But these tools may incorporate preconceived biases against people of color and often rely too heavily on what employers perceive they need (or want) as opposed to providing an accurate and true measurement of the skills or needs of

potential workers. As a result, many low-income job seekers traditionally have been “screened out” of consideration for job-training programs, or the real issues standing between individual and jobs with career potential were not identified. In response to this dilemma, the Denver Workforce Initiative, in conjunction with the University of Colorado at Denver, developed a tool called the Work Readiness Index, which helps illuminate the potential, strengths, and weaknesses of job seekers without the inherent biases apparent in other measurement tools.

Even though Burrows approached employers with a new type of relationship in mind, he encountered employer reluctance to participate in job-training efforts for low-income workers because of cultural assumptions and racial stereotypes.

“I had my own analysis of the four people we selected [through the New Orleans Jobs Initiative] even before we hired them,” admits Jim Smith, engineering and technical manager at Bollinger, Inc. “A real big problem around here is that there are so many people who are unemployable. People who would really prefer not to have a job. It is hard for an employer to weed those out and find folks who really want a job.”

Smith signed on with the New Orleans initiative, even despite his concerns, largely because his company was desperate for workers. “It turned out much better than I had anticipated. . . . Every one, except the one we had to fire, exceeded my expectations.”

“There is nothing better than success stories and leadership in the business community; people who can explain why this is to their economic advantage and

bottom line,” says Ira SenGupta, a cultural competency training manager with the Cross Cultural Healthcare Program in Seattle.

It is the experiences of people like Smith that can begin to break down the barriers that keep some employers from giving black and Latino men a chance.

Sites regularly exchange strategies and curricula designed to promote similar employer epiphanies. The Denver Workforce Initiative created an employer companion curriculum to the employee-focused model of “Workin’ It Out,” which seeks to improve self-awareness for disadvantaged job seekers, while also building interpersonal and problem-solving skills on the job.

“Managing to Work It Out,” a cognitive skills and human relations training course for frontline supervisors, seeks to broaden “cultural competency” or cultural understanding on both sides—that of the employer and that of the employee—and to reaffirm that new rules and modes of interaction are needed, not just for job seekers to succeed in the work place, but also for employers or supervisors to succeed at managing a racially and culturally diverse workforce.

Helping employers and managers to understand the importance of cultural competency is a challenge in itself.

SenGupta says one of the first things she does with her Seattle clients is help them to recognize that everyone, even someone who does not see himself or herself as “different,” comes to the workplace with a unique perspective. Those whose perspectives match that of the worksite’s corporate culture will be most comfortable, or at least most familiar, with the worksite’s rules

or norms. Those same “norms,” however, will be foreign to people who come to the worksite from a different cultural perspective.

Consequently, cultural illiteracy has emerged as a significant and powerful factor for employers and job seekers—where unbridgeable differences in meanings and understanding that pertain to language, appearance, personal interaction, or even religion form an effective divide between workers and employers, with workers inevitably losing.

“In working with institutions and individuals I use the [concept of] power in culture and ethnocentrism,” SenGupta says. “He who has power, designs reality. So, how does someone who doesn’t have power function in that reality? What are the emotions that powerlessness brings?” Once employers successfully answer these questions they can begin implementing strategies to deal with this issue.

## RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT

Cultural illiteracy has consequences for employers and employees. For employers, a high employee turnover rate can hurt morale, create instability, and cause an expensive drain on a company’s bottom line. It can cost between \$3,000 and \$30,000 to replace a worker, therefore those costs provide an incentive for employers to work toward keeping their employees and learning to manage a diverse workforce.

“You have to show [employers and managers] what the compelling reasons for cultural competency are,” SenGupta says. “It is not just a feel-good thing, it is a bottom-line issue.”



## THE NEW ORLEANS JOBS INITIATIVE CURRICULUM

After Darryl Burrows assumed leadership of the New Orleans Jobs Initiative (NOJI), he made a round of visits to area employers and asked a fundamental question:

“What would it take to get you to hire low-income residents, many of whom live in public housing?”

Employers responded with the inevitable refrain: “Provide me with residents who have good and reliable work habits and I’ll hire them.” Adding that they could provide hard job skills, employers emphasized what they needed were employees who arrived at work on time, were dressed appropriately, and could get along with their supervisors.

Burrows understood that job-training programs had often failed to deliver workers who had the skills employers needed, be they hard skills or the more amorphous soft skills.

To address the question of adequate preparation, Burrows brought together employers, grassroots organizations, and several nationally recognized educators to explore the work readiness issue employers say they care most about. Serving on the NOJI Board of Directors are chief executive officers and representatives of community-based organizations, church groups, foundations, and a local community college.

“We have bank presidents working — and joking — with public-housing residents,” said Burrows. “Creating these relationships is an integral component of our overall strategy.”

This facilitation of new relationships recognizes that jobs are currency and part of a network based on relationships and the exchange of information.

All of the above-named groups and individuals, with the Casey Foundation’s support and funding, figured prominently in the development of the trademarked “21st Century Success Principles,” a 21-day curriculum NOJI created that incorporates several notable innovations in workforce development training. At a fundamental level, the NOJI curriculum—and, by extension, the Jobs Initiative—employs a radically different approach to workforce development and training. Shunning the traditional “work first” paradigm—meaning the program tries to place the candidate in any job available as he or she navigates the training program—the NOJI approach seeks to “equip participants with employer-identified hard and soft skills in the shortest time possible.”

The program found its philosophical genesis in the work of Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, who theorizes that the emigration of employers and jobs from inner cities has left a void resulting in a lack of socialization and in social isolation of those left behind. Without examples to follow, inner-city residents cannot learn appropriate workplace behavior.

NOJI incorporates a new approach to work readiness that combines Wilson’s theory and

the pedagogical method of renowned teacher Jane Vella, whose methods join self-discovery and dialogue. Unlike other job-training programs, which include a much too broad and unfocused “life skills” component, NOJI advocates longer term training and advancement based on skill acquisition.

The curriculum is tied to an employer skills assessment, and participants progress based on their successful completion of projects. Not only do employers monitor all aspects of training, there also is a complete section of the course for job seekers on understanding the workplace environment and an attempt to address residents’ lack of knowledge about work expectations. Community-based organizations and institutions such as churches play vital roles in recruitment and retention of participants.

NOJI has teamed with employers who offer jobs in four high-wage, high-growth industries: manufacturing, construction, health care, and office systems. The result is a program that provides a high return on the original investment and encourages long-term self-sufficiency over short-term gain by preparing people for jobs that sustain families, building a skilled workforce that business needs to grow the local economy, and advocating for public policies and regulatory reform that promote sustainability of community workforce development efforts.



## THE JOBS INITIATIVE PROCESS *(continued)*

The forging of strong ties with employers' associations and Chambers of Commerce also helps to educate employers about the economic benefits of working with disadvantaged populations or people of color.

On the employee side of the equation, sites have created strategies and curricula aimed at confronting challenges that may lead to high turnover.

The Denver Workforce Initiative curriculum "Workin' It Out," according to Director Carol Hedges, also is "aimed at uncovering the connections between beliefs and values which stem from cultural influence and behavior." The course is interactive, and it uses real-life language and story examples to illustrate its objectives. Its central aim is to promote cultural understanding in an effort to help employees overcome barriers that may lead to their leaving.

The course also has a mentoring component. Each job seeker is assigned a community coach. These peer guides are people who have had life experiences similar to the current job seekers' and who have successfully managed to find work. This peer mentor component has proven extremely effective in other, similar job-training programs, such as STRIVE, which provides extensive attitudinal and industry-focused training followed up with close supervision during transition to the workplace. The primary benefit of such an

approach is that the coach is a real-life role model who also acts as a part of a jobs information network.

## SYSTEMS REFORM

To make sure that programs are effectively serving their populations, Jobs Initiative sites are accountable for developing business plans that stress good management; quantifiable outcomes such as job placement, retention, and wages; and system reforms that will lead to better workforce development programs.

It should be noted that no single system could improve the lives of families living in areas of concentrated poverty: collaboration among all community stakeholders is key. Long-term change will require a commitment from all parties concerned to change attitudes; the employment and training system; social services; company hiring practices; and local and state policies that directly or indirectly prevent low-income job seekers, especially people of color, from finding or taking advantage of opportunities.

Systems reform requires new ways of thinking about private and public investment in communities. Community-based organizations need technical assistance, financial assistance, and other resources that enable them to design more effective, accountable, and outcomes-based programs. The majority of workforce



## THE WORK READINESS INDEX

In 1997, Personnel Decisions International, a Minneapolis-based organization, made a presentation to a Foundation-sponsored meeting of experts, practitioners, Foundation personnel, and academics on its method of assessing the employability of job candidates. What the Casey Foundation discovered then is that there are plenty of companies claiming to have created tools that can assess the soft skills of job seekers. However, in reality, there is no one set of soft skills: Soft skills differ depending on the industry, employer needs, and myriad other factors. In fact, most of these tools measured whether a test taker fit the expectations of the employer. These measurement tools also seemed questionably fair and inherently biased against job seekers of color. There was no instrument, as far as

the Jobs Initiative sites knew, that could reliably and fairly assess an individual's readiness for the workplace.

In response to this dilemma, the Denver Workforce Initiative, in conjunction with the University of Colorado at Denver and with support from the Casey Foundation, began in 1998 developing a tool to accurately measure not just suitability to an employer's needs, but the capacities of the test taker as well as that individual's aptitudes and proclivities. For example, the Work Readiness Index can distinguish between gregarious and introspective individuals, in an attempt to place people in jobs where they fit: A "talker" may do well in customer service, whereas an introvert may do well working at the computer all day.

In this manner, the Work Readiness Index, which is available to all Jobs Initiative sites, is an impartial learning tool that job seekers can use to establish what is expected of them in the workplace as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

The Work Readiness Index has proven to be a highly valuable asset. Similarly, the Denver Workforce Initiative created two other tools to help assess the issues that must be addressed on the job in order to encourage retention. "Workin' It Out," seeks to improve employees' self-awareness. "Managing to Work It Out," a tool for frontline managers, helps deal with an ethnically and culturally diverse workforce.

## THE JOBS INITIATIVE PROCESS *(continued)*

development efforts undertaken by community-based groups have been underfunded, understaffed, and often marginalized because funders—both public and private—have been unwilling to commit significant, long-term resources.

Recent policy changes have raised the stakes. Welfare reform time limits on benefits now require that recipients find work. Yet, long-term welfare recipients tend to fall into the hard-to-employ category. Absent the government safety net, not only has work for mothers become a necessity, but in the quest to support children, work for fathers is essential as well.

This reality raises the stakes in workforce development efforts targeted to hard-to-employ men of color. The search for solutions to break what is often an intergenerational cycle of unemployment and poverty for these individuals and families, especially children, is crucial.

Linking low-income residents with family-supporting jobs that offer career advancement ultimately requires broad systemic change and “buy-in” among all affected stakeholders—low-income workers, employers, elected officials, community-based organizations, government agencies, and others. Accordingly, the six Jobs Initiative sites also have struggled to bring together organizations and groups that traditionally have not shared missions, perspectives, or goals.

From its inception, for example, the New Orleans Jobs Initiative was built on strong relationships. NOJI has

encouraged the full participation of a wide range of stakeholders—low-income residents, community organizations, church groups, business leaders, foundations, and a local college—to work together to create a workforce development system that prepares public-housing and other low-income residents for family-supporting jobs. As a result of its collaborative efforts, African Americans are finding employment in sectors of the economy once considered off-limits to people of color.

The Philadelphia Jobs Initiative, meanwhile, is operated by a nonprofit community investor that seeks to attract growing companies that will, in turn, agree to hire trained workers from disadvantaged communities. The community investor has inaugurated a workforce services program that is tailored to young or smaller companies that are trying to manage a low-skilled workforce. The program links smaller companies to neighborhood organizations that are in touch with possible job candidates. It also helps these firms develop appropriate human resource policies and obtain welfare-to-work wage subsidies, tax incentives, and other government-related training assistance.

Agencies, community groups, state and local agencies, business leaders, and unions participated in the design of the St. Louis Regional Jobs Initiative. Coordinated by a regional planning agency for the St. Louis metropolitan region, the initiative operates jobs projects in health, construction trades, and business

services, and it includes a program to connect chronically unemployed adults to jobs along the MetroLink line. This program, known as WorkLink, is a joint effort between St. Louis Community College and Better Family Life, a nonprofit organization that provides cultural, economic, and educational programs for the development of African-American families.

The Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) represents a cooperative effort of business, labor, and the grassroots community to link disadvantaged residents to good-paying jobs. Changing the attitudes of employers and transforming the lives of the poor represent key agenda items for MJI. So does improving the ethnic diversity of the workplace by linking higher paying jobs to persons of color and to others traditionally excluded from career-oriented employment. Through creative collaborations with local unions, MJI maintains important initiatives in the printing, construction, and manufacturing sectors.

The Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) is run by the city of Seattle and is seeking to place, retain, and advance low-income residents in family-supporting jobs by improving the overall workforce development system. From the start, SJI has actively engaged businesses, colleges, labor unions, foundations, and nonprofit agencies in planning this comprehensive cross-sector initiative. Serving a highly diverse population, SJI has created an office occupations project that has achieved some of the highest retention rates among all Jobs Initiative sites.



## LEARNED

The Casey Foundation and its six local sites regard the Jobs Initiative as an experiment in progress that has evolved in response to new challenges, information, and promising practices. The Foundation has tapped into a growing network of experts, practitioners, research, and experience to respond to needs as they arise and to produce lessons that should be relevant for the entire workforce development field.

In this light, the Jobs Initiative and its sites have sought to develop a framework not only for making sense of the interplay of race and regional labor markets, but also for developing effective interventions that produce lasting labor market connections for low-skilled job seekers.

While much remains to be done in the arena of race and regional labor markets, five broad lessons resonate across and beyond the Jobs Initiative sites. These lessons are summarized as follows:

1. Continuing employment discrimination coexists with a lack of job readiness and job confidence in many inner-city communities. Thus, it is imperative to address these complexities in designing workforce development programs.
2. The need for cultural awareness is present from the workforce intake process through the employee's job retention. It is a central issue. Everyone throughout the entire workforce delivery continuum must develop cultural competence skills.
3. A growing network of individuals and organizations in workforce development have experience in addressing employment barriers related to race, ethnicity, and gender. Thus, the opportunity for collaboration and information sharing among these stakeholders should be seized.
4. Addressing the many dimensions of race and job readiness and cultural competence pushes the workforce field into new territory. Therefore, new approaches and tools must be developed to meet the needs of workforce development providers.
5. Finally, vigilance is required at every step of the way. Complacency about progress made and our understandings of what happened in the past may blind us to new ways that young adults are disadvantaged in labor markets because of race, ethnicity, and gender.

First, it is always necessary to be aware of the dynamic of race and ethnicity and how it differs across individual, group, industry, and regional contexts. The Fair Employment data, the Moss and Tilly study, a substantial body of additional research, and the experiences of the Jobs Initiative sites demonstrate that employment discrimination is a fact of life for many people of color seeking and holding jobs, especially black men. There is, therefore, a need to increase our collective understanding of how issues of race, ethnicity, language, culture, and power manifest themselves in workforce development training, policy, practice, system reform efforts, and actual employment.

## LESSONS LEARNED *(continued)*

The Jobs Initiative's design did not originally address the full complexities of race and employment. As a result of their experiences, however, the Foundation and Jobs Initiative sites began to explore the issues of race, job readiness, and cultural competence. As new questions were raised, the Foundation found itself in new territory. Yet the failure to anticipate the depth and breadth of these issues may actually have benefited the initiative because it required the Foundation and the sites to rethink their approach to workforce development. They were compelled to try new things, think more expansively about job readiness, and create new tools.

Second, issues of race, ethnicity, language, or culture may have an impact throughout the entire workforce development process, from the minute a candidate walks in the door to long after employment placement. This is where cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse racial and ethnic groups becomes critical. Issues of race and ethnicity need to be kept "on screen" at all times in planning, implementing, and evaluating the results of workforce development efforts to help low-income job seekers secure and maintain family-supporting jobs. The Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites first determined the need for greater cultural awareness along the workforce development and placement continuum. They then took steps to acquire knowledge and help workforce actors (including employers) to change the way they design workforce programs.

The Jobs Initiative has discovered that there is no single point in the process of implementation at which race and ethnicity should be addressed. Rather, these issues must be kept at the center of the work through each stage of workforce development, from initiative design to recruitment of job seekers; partnerships with community-based organizations and job-training providers; working with employers; targeting of jobs projects and sectors; and data collection on hiring, retention, advancement, and wages.

Third, collaborating and sharing knowledge about race, labor markets, and job readiness are paramount. The Jobs Initiative has relied upon the expertise of a network of individuals and organizations. The Foundation and the sites believe these experts are a critical part of a growing network of workforce development professionals who are pioneers in addressing race and ethnicity issues for low-income job seekers of color.

In addition, collaboration among a wide assortment of community stakeholders reflects the belief that a range of services, actors, and expertise is needed to change the prospects for low-income job seekers. Prominent examples include the Denver Workforce Initiative's partnership with the University of Colorado to develop the Work Readiness Index, and the New Orleans Job Initiative, which engaged employers, job-training providers, and community-based organizations to

develop its job readiness curriculum, “21st Century Success Principles.”

Fourth, new approaches to workforce development are needed for low-skilled job seekers. The Casey Foundation has supported investment in a number of tools to facilitate the advancement of low-skilled job seekers in the Jobs Initiative. These include the three Denver-created assessment and teaching tools, the New Orleans job readiness curriculum, and research studies and practitioner resources published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies on soft skills and employer tools for workforce diversity.

The Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites have also identified tools developed by others. One such tool is the “Know Your Rights” curriculum developed by the Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington.

Fifth, vigilance is key. Lower than expected job retention rates signal that more attention should be given to workplace practices, job quality, and advancement opportunities. A recent survey of Jobs Initiative participants reported that 12 to 15 percent perceived some form of discrimination, probably an underestimation given the limitations of self-reporting. One important way to maintain this vigilance is through ongoing engagement and support of participants and employers.

# CONCLUSION





As of December 2000, the six Jobs Initiative sites had placed more than 5,528 individuals and served more than 1,700 employers. More than 50 percent of the individuals placed had family incomes below \$9,000 annually and close to half received some type of public assistance prior to Jobs Initiative enrollment. The majority of enrollees—60 percent—were black, 12 percent were Hispanic, and 9 percent were Asian, with men and women being equally represented.

Preliminary findings are promising indicators that the Jobs Initiative approach works with low-skilled job seekers. Participants have increased hours worked per week and experienced hourly wage and earnings increases from \$8.09 to \$9.15 per hour, representing a gross salary increase of \$2,250 per year.

The initiative has also succeeded in helping low-income residents access benefits. Prior to Jobs Initiative participation, only 32 percent of enrollees had access to medical benefits. After enrollment that rate more than doubled to 84 percent upon initial placement. In addition, participants tend to work longer weeks and more weeks per year than they did before, which leads to greater earnings. Perhaps most striking are the early retention indicators. Among those enrollees placed early enough to measure, 75 percent stayed on the job for three months, 64 percent have stayed for six months, and more than half have reached the one-year benchmark.<sup>1</sup>

Because the Jobs Initiative started during a unique period of economic prosperity and during the course of welfare reform, it is demonstrating that strikingly similar workforce issues affect former welfare recipients, low-wage workers, and hard-to-employ individuals. The lessons learned through the Jobs Initiative have significant implications for the design of future policy, programs, and practice in this area.

A large share of these overlapping populations includes people of color. The Jobs Initiative's confrontation of race and ethnicity issues, the willingness to adapt, and the application and refinement of a cultural competence framework show great promise for workforce responses that address issues of race in all of their complexity.

The Casey Foundation and the Jobs Initiative sites have such faith in their developing paradigm that they are building a cultural competence framework for use in Jobs Initiative sites as a tool for assessing and identifying more ambitious strategies for addressing issues of race and ethnicity.

As the six Jobs Initiative sites prepare for the next phase, they will use the lessons they have learned not only to help transform the lives and employment prospects for individual low-skilled job seekers of color, but to influence the systems and policy changes necessary to make workforce development more effective for low-skilled workers.

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<sup>1</sup>The Casey Foundation's definition of "retention" is conservative: It requires only that a person has been working, not that the person has held the same job over time; it assumes breaks in employment of no more than 30 days; and it requires that any subsequent job pay at least as much as the previous job.



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The Annie E. Casey Jobs Initiative is an eight-year, six-site demonstration effort designed to help low-income residents living in designated neighborhoods find jobs that pay family-supporting wages. All of the sites are managed by "entrepreneurial intermediaries" that represent varied types of organizations, ranging from a private foundation to a city agency. Information about the Jobs Initiative and new developments in workforce reform can be found at [www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative](http://www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative).

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