

Employer Solutions to Expand Work-Based Learning: Economic Advisory Commission Workgroup Recommendations

Working Draft - 4/19/2022

Background & Process

On March 23, 2022, a Fairfax County Economic Advisory Commission (EAC) workgroup engaged with local stakeholders, the Department of Economic Initiatives (DEI) and the Department of Family Services (DFS) to consider how Fairfax County employers can utilize work-based learning (WBL) as a strategy to hire, develop and retain skilled workers. In consultation with regional experts on WBL from the Economic Development Authority, the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce, the Northern Virginia Community College, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), among others, DEI and DFS prepared a briefing paper and led participating EAC members in the working session. EAC members discussed and generated recommended solutions to address the challenge statement.

EAC Working Session Challenge Statement

How can more Fairfax County businesses utilize work-based learning initiatives to open new talent pools, reskill workers, and increase retention of skilled talent?

EAC Working Session Recommendations

EAC members proposed a wide set of recommendations and suggestions. The DEI and DFS team structured these into two primary categories described in the following sections:

Category 1: Recommendations that directly address the challenge statement and more immediately respond to employer hiring needs.

Category 2: Other important, longer-term initiatives that build the regional talent pipeline and promote alternative career pathways.

The recommendations in Category 1, those that directly address the EAC challenge statement, will be the focus of the next steps and discussion with the full EAC at the April 19, 2022, meeting. After EAC input, county staff will work with the Board of Supervisors, EAC members, institutions, and WBL stakeholders to consider opportunities, with a special focus on building in existing initiatives, to further develop proposed solutions into actions.

Category 2 includes initiatives or proposals focused on building the talent pipeline and may be longer-term. Many of these proposals are in development or being executed and will continue to be considered by County agencies, FCPS, and other partners for continued growth.

CATEGORY 1: RECOMMENDATIONS THAT DIRECTLY ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE STATEMENT AND RESPOND IMMEDIATELY TO EMPLOYER HIRING NEEDS

Prioritized recommendations for full EAC consideration to support employers and expand WBL through a centralized WBL platform, customized technical assistance, champion connection, and incentives

Recommendation 1: Support Expansion of a Work-Based Learning Cohort Programs. The EAC working group recommends increasing opportunities for WBL through the expansion of cohort-based programs (including internships, apprenticeships, or other work-based learning). This would provide a more centralized support system to help employers establish effective programs, including in small and medium firms that may not have the staffing capacity to operate a program on their own. The cohort model could apply to both intern/apprenticeship groups and employer groups and would increase the scale and efficiency of these programs. This concept relies on maximizing the peer-to-peer sharing that would occur between multiple interns at one company and/or employers in the same occupation or sector working together on WBL implementation and adoption. This would also take some of the administrative burden off employers and create a more rewarding and successful experience for all.

Recommendation 2: Develop an Opportunity Fund for Employers to Implement WBL. Creation of an incentive program could help small- and medium-sized firms establish paid work-based learning opportunities including internships and/or apprenticeships. The investment should leverage resources from the government and private sectors. The EAC workgroup members suggested a shared cost model, i.e., where the public and the private sectors each contribute to the costs associated with WBL implementation/adoption.

There is some funding available right now for these programs, such as ICF's [Lead4IT](#) (Learning, Employment and Economic Development for Information Technology), a U.S. Department of Labor grant and others. But additional support is required to engage more employers and help smaller firms effectively participate.

Recommendation 3: Fund a Work-Based Learning Exchange for Employers. Employers need help to build a quality WBL program –including knowledge of what resources are available, how to get started, and how to operationalize, manage and scale their programs. This is particularly true for smaller businesses. A WBL Resources and Exchange Platform and solutions team will help identify private sector champions, bring champions together to share best practices (including by sector/size), and provide consultative or support services to enable them to establish and operate WBL. Services or support could include establishing business-to-business mentoring (for example, connecting a firm interested in implementing WBL together with a firm that has had done it successfully), toolkits (such as guides to get started, resources, best practices, etc.), and direct resource connections (such as funding and how to access, or other networks to support). There are a few existing platforms to build from, including the [Work in Northern Virginia Employer Resources Webpage](#), [Virginia Career Works Employer Solutions Team Webpage](#), and [The NOVA Chamber Greater Washington Apprenticeship Network](#). However, leveraging these resources to build an operational and scalable exchange will require a vendor-neutral Employer Solutions team to develop on-the-ground engagement among more firms. These WBL specialists could work closely with employers to identify their specific pain points, build awareness of the range of resources available, match them up with solution strategies, and help make connections with partners to launch or expand a WBL initiative tailored to meet their business needs.

CATEGORY 2: PROPOSALS THAT BUILD THE TALENT PIPELINE, PROMOTE ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHWAYS AND OPEN RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Additional suggestions from the EAC working group focused on expanding talent pools through changing attitudes and actions among employers, workers, parents, youth, and workforce systems – including promoting alternative career pathways and recruitment strategies.

- **Build Awareness among Middle and High School Students and Families about Alternative Career Pathways to Expand the Local Pool of Prospective Workers Pursuing Diverse Fields.** The EAC working group recommends building awareness of alternative career pathways in addition to college among middle and high school level students, particularly low-income and diverse students. FCPS stats indicate that 90% of FCPS high school graduates are college-bound, but only 60% complete college within six years. This trend may indicate a potential goals mismatch or awareness of the benefits of alternative pathways to a job (such as building trades). We need to reach out to youth at younger ages and use a variety of pathways to educate and create awareness, for example through afterschool programs. Outreach could also include a marketing and education campaign and parent education to promote “multiple” alternatives to college as excellent pathways to success.
- **Increase Access and Utilization of the Summer Paid work experience program that is jointly supported by FCPS and the County’s workforce development programs.** This will provide opportunities for youth to be exposed to the world of work at a young age. The support provided by coaches and navigators coupled with financial incentives has been demonstrated as a best practice to support youths’ workforce readiness.
- **Help Employers Adopt a Skills-based Model for Entry-level Job Applications.** Employers need to redefine entry-level job requirements and hiring processes and break it down by skills as opposed to relying solely on degrees. What do students/prospective employees really need to be matched up with employers? This proposal will require employer-focused consultative services to assist them in moving towards skill-based hiring and talent management processes. These services may be bundled into previous recommendations such as internship cohorts, B2B consulting and workforce system services.
- **Bridging the Gap between Employer Demand for Talent and Workers’ Interest in Career Advancement.** Employers of all types are experiencing an unprecedented talent management crisis on multiple fronts, including the 'great resignation.' Recruiting challenges are disrupting businesses across many if not all business sectors. Demographic signposts indicate that this talent crisis will be with us for the foreseeable future. However, there is a disconnect between the region’s workforce development service providers focused primarily on benefits to “workers” and employer-focused service providers, resulting in a systematic mismatch between talent supply and demand. This may also lead to missed opportunities to collaborate on programs that benefit both workers and employers. Because WBL provides proven benefits to both groups, expanding WBL programs can help bridge this gap and contribute toward inclusive economic prosperity in our region.