

# Scaling Work-Based Learning

A Framework for Effective  
Employer Intermediaries



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# Delivering on the Value of Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) experiences, including internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships, provide employers with access to emerging talent and allow learners to build valuable skills through hands-on work. These experiences are increasingly of interest in both K-12 and postsecondary systems as they strengthen individuals' ties to the labor market, helping to prevent underemployment and unemployment,<sup>1</sup> and are critical to building a workforce that can drive a globally competitive economy. Yet, despite these benefits, the U.S. has failed to systematically invest in work-based learning practices or opportunities. In 2023, an estimated **8.2 million learners** sought internships, yet only **44 percent** of them found one. Even fewer — just **30 percent** — had work-based learning experiences marked by clarity, supervision, and skill development.<sup>2</sup> Employers often want to offer work-based learning programs, but face barriers such as limited staff to manage programs and supervise learners, difficulty designing programs, challenges finding qualified candidates, and obstacles complying with labor laws and rules governing internships and apprenticeships. Grappling with these significant barriers for employers — and ultimately unlocking them — is critical to enabling millions more learners to experience the benefits of work-based learning.

## The Role of Employer Intermediaries in Work-Based Learning

Employer intermediaries can play a vital role in addressing these challenges. These organizations fill the gaps that exist between industry and the education/workforce system, and provide specialized capacity to help employers launch, scale, and implement work-based learning programs. Intermediaries play a critical role in supporting work-based learning within businesses of all sizes. They are especially important for small and medium-sized companies, which often lack the resources to develop work-based learning programs on their own, yet account for most new job growth.<sup>3</sup> Globally, countries that have scaled high-quality work-based learning institutionalized the functions of employer intermediaries to reduce friction for employers.<sup>4</sup> Although several national organizations have defined aspects of intermediary work, especially within apprenticeship, there are no comprehensive or widely embraced national definitions or standards for employer intermediaries.

*Employer intermediaries are organizations that work closely with employers to create and manage work-based learning initiatives including, but not limited to, internships and apprenticeships.*

1. Dave Clayton, Nichole Torpey-Saboe, and Elaine W. Leigh, "The Power of Work-Based Learning," (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, October 2023), <https://www.strada.org/reports/the-power-of-work-based-learning>.

2. Candace Williams, Jennifer Thornton, Elizabeth Hughes, and Kristen Fox, "Expanding Internships: Harnessing Employer Insights to Boost Opportunity and Enhance Learning," (Washington, DC: Business-Higher Education Forum, September 2024), [https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/BHEF\\_Expanding\\_Internships.pdf](https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/BHEF_Expanding_Internships.pdf).

3. "Small Businesses Contributed 55 Percent of the Total Net Job Creation from 2013 to 2023," (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Economics Daily, May 1, 2024), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/small-businesses-contributed-55-percent-of-the-total-net-job-creation-from-2013-to-2023.htm>.

4. Diana Elliott and Miriam Farnbauer, "Bridging German and US Apprenticeship Models: The Role of Intermediaries," (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, August 2021), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104677/bridging-german-and-us-apprenticeship-models.pdf>.

In 2025, an action group of intermediary organization leaders, researchers, and policy experts came together to define and guide the practice of employer intermediaries in order to grow work-based learning opportunities. In a new Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries, shown on page 3, we define employer intermediaries not by the specific type of organization that they are, but rather **by the functions** they perform to help employers design, implement, and scale work-based learning programs. Our action group experts worked together to identify and define **five key functions of employer intermediaries**<sup>5</sup> that support work-based learning:

## Five Key Functions of Employer Intermediaries

### Employer engagement

Cultivating relationships with employers to understand their talent challenges and build buy-in for work-based learning as a viable talent solution.

### Solutions design

Involving and representing employers in designing and negotiating talent solutions with learning providers that address employer needs and expand opportunities for learners.

### Solutions brokering

Connecting employers with the right partners to grow talent pipelines.

### Implementation support

Helping employers adopt and sustain work-based learning programming that yields lasting impact.

### Administrative support

Simplifying processes for employers related to work-based learning administration and funding.

We acknowledge that other functions may be necessary to support learner success, such as transportation supports or student skill development, but ground this Framework in our action group's hypothesis that anchoring in **employer needs** is the most important unmet gap to increase the supply of work-based learning opportunities. To that end, the action group also recommended evaluating the success of employer intermediaries more consistently and quantitatively. We suggest five indicators of effectiveness grounded in an intermediary's ability to meet employer needs, listed in the following Framework.

5. Colorado Workforce Intermediary Toolkit, (Denver: SyncUp Colorado, 2021), <https://www.syncupcolorado.org/toolkit>.

# Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries

The Framework outlines three levels of effectiveness across the five key functions that employer intermediaries perform. Policymakers, funders, and intermediaries themselves can use this tool to guide their efforts to expand high-quality work-based learning opportunities.

Function	Emerging Innovators <i>Independent effort, individual-led, establishing early practices</i>	Program Builders <i>Coordinated practice, organized, program-based, consistent</i>	Trusted Partners <i>Strategic, partnership-led, integrated into the business, efficient, reduces complexity</i>
<b>Employer Engagement</b> <i>Cultivating relationships with employers to understand their talent challenges and build buy-in for WBL as a viable talent solution.</i>	Builds relationships with employers and begins identifying talent needs, without clear program models or structures.	Uses structured needs assessment and consistent program or service models to respond to employer needs.	Acts as a trusted advisor to employers and is their first call for entry-level talent; leverages a deep understanding of employer pain-points and opportunities to build the case for WBL.
<b>Solutions Design</b> <i>Involving and representing employers in designing and negotiating talent solutions with learning providers that address employer needs and expand opportunities for learners.</i>	Engages employers in early design conversations and helps them pilot initial WBL solutions.	Consults employers in structured design processes, such as selection of related technical instruction, to adapt and implement proven program models to address talent challenges.	Co-designs new WBL solutions that are timely, adaptable, responsive to changing talent needs, and positioned for long-term business planning versus more transactional, short-term WBL experiences.
<b>Solutions Brokering</b> <i>Connecting employers with the right partners to grow talent pipelines.</i>	Connects employers with education and training partners through personal relationships to communicate talent needs.	Cultivates and grows a reliable roster of education and training partners with consistent referrals and clear expectations of entry-level talent.	Strategically matches employer priorities with education institution and training partner capabilities; provides accountability for quality outcomes (e.g., student readiness for WBL; hiring commitments).
<b>Implementation Support</b> <i>Helping employers adopt and sustain WBL programming that yields lasting impact.</i>	Provides hands-on support to employers piloting WBL programs, with some effort to simplify processes.	Offers standardized technical assistance, tools, and troubleshooting to strengthen program delivery and WBL outcomes.	Directly facilitates WBL implementation for employers through creation of job descriptions, support with candidate recruitment and screening, development of trainee tasks, training of supervisors, development of mentorship programs, identifying resources to improve WBL engagement and retention, and strategic recommendations of braided funding and technology tools to scale impact.
<b>Administrative Support</b> <i>Simplifying processes for employers related to WBL administration and funding.</i>	Assists employers with initial paperwork, compliance, and funding processes.	Uses tools and shared services to streamline administration and improve efficiency.	Manages administrative activities such as payroll, compliance, intern/apprentice placement, apprenticeship registration, employer of record services, and data reporting.
<b>Sample Indicators of Effectiveness as Intermediaries Move Along Continuum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Heightened employer awareness of WBL as a solution and increased volume of WBL opportunities</li> <li>Less complexity for employers engaging in WBL (employers know where to go, solutions are available and in place)</li> <li>Acquisition of new employer partners and retention of existing employer partners</li> <li>Tangible return on investment demonstrated for employers, such as reduced time to hire, increased retention, and productivity of entry-level hires</li> <li>Stronger education and workforce outcomes (e.g., educational attainment, lower underemployment, and reduced workforce shortages)</li> </ul>		

## The Role of System Architects

A common challenge is coordinating the activity of many different types of intermediaries within an ecosystem. One solution that is emerging is the development of backbone organizations that can be thought of as system architects, aligning stakeholders to tackle shared goals, identifying existing and missing functions in a region, and advocating for policies that benefit the broader workforce system. In other cases, an existing intermediary might decide to take on an additional role of coordinating functions and assets across an ecosystem. Ultimately, this coordination can help reduce complexity for employers and drive stronger collaboration across education and workforce systems.

## What States Can Do to Optimize Work-Based Learning Through Employer Intermediaries

An employer intermediary is typically most impactful when the ecosystem around it has the conditions for work-based learning to thrive. State and regional leaders can support more employers in scaling work-based learning opportunities by taking the following actions:

- **Set a clear goal and vision for work-based learning**

Establishing a clear, shared goal for work-based learning allows stakeholders to align their efforts and work toward common outcomes.

- **Invest in data sharing systems to track work-based learning participation and outcomes and inform student and employer decision-making**

When designed well, integrated data systems — such as state longitudinal data systems or P-2OW data systems — can connect information across education, workforce, and employer systems (e.g., adding a job type field to UI wage records or tracking WBL experiences on college transcripts), helping leaders, employers, and learners understand who is participating, where gaps exist, and which programs are delivering strong outcomes.

- **Provide funding mechanisms to incentivize intermediary effectiveness and employer participation in work-based learning**

At the state level, tax credits, grants, and other outcomes-focused funding mechanisms can be powerful tools to encourage employers to develop or expand work-based learning programs.

- **Articulate the roles and responsibilities of players in the ecosystem**

Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of players in a work-based learning ecosystem is valuable for ensuring coordination, accountability, and efficiency.

- **Reduce barriers to participation and collaboration for all stakeholders**

Because successful work-based learning programs often are built through partnership, reducing barriers to collaboration, such as through creating aligned communities of practice or providing incentives for partnership, is a powerful way to achieve greater scale.

## Use Cases for the Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries

Early adopters from within our action group shared how they are using the Framework to achieve greater impact and efficiency in their work.

- **A Midwest statewide intermediary** is using the Framework to facilitate convenings and trainings with all the regional intermediaries in the state to help improve their effectiveness.
- **A governor's policy advisor** is using the Framework to inform measuring and monitoring intermediary performance for a statewide grant program for intermediaries.

- A **regional economic development organization** is using the Framework as it prepares to sunset a federal grant to inform community partners what functions need to be in place to support a healthy apprenticeship ecosystem.

## Conclusion

Work-based learning programs deliver real value to both learners and employers, but the widespread expansion of opportunities depends on strong employer intermediaries. The Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries provides a roadmap for intermediaries to enhance their effectiveness, highlighting key functions and indicators of effectiveness. We invite intermediaries, policymakers, funders, and system architects to use the Framework, share insights, and collaborate with us to strengthen work-based learning ecosystems. Together, we can drive greater impact, scale opportunities for learners, and build a more connected, high-performing workforce.

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# Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries: Organizational Use Cases

The following use cases offer examples for how different types of organizations can leverage the Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries to support their efforts to expand work-based learning.

## **Employer Intermediary**

You are a regional workforce intermediary focused on health care, working to strengthen collaboration between employers and training providers. You've been effective in connecting partners with each other for early pilots, but aim to improve your ability to expand work-based learning to meet growing industry demand.

Recognizing the need to operate more efficiently, you work to assess your current performance and identify opportunities to strengthen your impact. You use the Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries to evaluate your organization's proficiency across key functions: employer engagement, solutions design, solutions brokering, implementation support, and administrative support. Facilitated discussions with staff and partners help identify where the organization sits on this spectrum and reveal specific areas for improvement.

The Framework provides your organization with a clear roadmap for moving from an emerging innovator to a trusted partner in the service you deliver to employers. You are better equipped to help employers design, implement, and grow talent solutions that meet their needs while providing quality learning experiences for workers.

## **Government/Policymaker**

You are a state workforce agency planning to update your policy or programmatic strategy for expanding work-based learning across priority industries. To ensure your approach is effective, you must decide where to target programs and how to tailor support for workforce organizations at varying stages of development. With a diverse field of potential partners, from emerging sector collaboratives to trusted partner intermediaries, you need a consistent Framework to determine how you can have the greatest impact.

To do this, you connect with workforce intermediaries across the state and use the Framework to assess how they perform key functions. The Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries allows you to identify which organizations demonstrate readiness for scaling WBL and which may benefit most from targeted capacity-building support. It also informs your agency's broader strategy by helping you understand which intermediary functions are underdeveloped or missing within the ecosystem.

With this newfound clarity, your agency can make more strategic use of its various policy tools (incentives, policy directives, convening authority) to grow work-based learning in the state. The Framework helps you identify strong anchor partners for statewide initiatives, guide technical assistance efforts, and ensure that resources are targeted toward building long-term intermediary capacity.

## **System Architect**

You are a statewide workforce backbone organization that serves as a system architect, coordinating education, employer, and intermediary partners to build a stronger, more cohesive work-based learning ecosystem. You help the system run smoothly so that partners work together to create quality learning opportunities and meet industry demand.

Your organization recognizes that the strength of the overall WBL system depends on the capacity of the individual organizations within it. Partners such as intermediaries, training providers, and community colleges vary in how well they perform employer engagement, solution design, and implementation support. To strengthen this system, you need a way to assess capacity, guide improvement, and coordinate partnerships to allow organizations to specialize and focus on what they do best.

Your organization decides to adopt the Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries as a tool for technical assistance, capacity building, and partnership support. Through one-on-one consulting and communities of practice, you help partners assess their current performance and identify concrete steps to move from foundational to advanced proficiency in each function. The Framework provides a common language for diagnosing challenges, setting goals, and indicating which functions must be performed across the system as a whole. By using the Framework, your organization promotes excellence across the ecosystem and helps ensure that every partner is equipped to contribute effectively to work-based learning partnerships.

## **Funder**

You are a regional foundation that plans to invest in efforts to expand high-quality work-based learning opportunities. With limited funding and a large number of potential grantees seeking support, you want to ensure your resources are deployed strategically to strengthen the overall WBL ecosystem without duplicating efforts. While many organizations contribute to this work, their roles and levels of capacity vary substantially. To target investments effectively, you need a clear understanding of which intermediary functions already are being performed well and where gaps remain.

You use the Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries to assess organizations in the field based on their proficiency in the five intermediary functions. Using this assessment, you develop a landscape map that charts organizations to show where the functions are being performed well and where there is need for improvement. This map helps guide funding decisions by showing where investments and capacity building are needed to close gaps in the WBL system. You also use the Framework to structure your portfolio of grants and intentionally balance your investments so that some are aimed at building emerging innovators while others work to scale trusted partners.

The Framework gives you a guide to help understand what a fully functional WBL ecosystem requires and how different organizations contribute to it. By using the Framework to inform your strategy, you can align their investments to build a more coordinated system, ensuring that all essential functions are covered and that employers, training providers, and higher education institutions can collaborate effectively.

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