

Washington State Jobs Initiative Employer Insights Report

What Effective Employer Partners Do



Washington STEM

Insights for backbone organizations from Washington Jobs Initiative
employer site visits

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Overview

Backbone organizations leading sectoral partnerships spend much of their energy recruiting, supporting, and retaining employer partners. This document highlights what makes for a strong employer partner — the traits and practices that distinguish the employers engaging most effectively in workforce development. Knowing what those partners look like, and what the best ones already do, helps inform the way backbone organizations recruit, coach, and support employers.

These insights are drawn from five Washington Jobs Initiative (WJI) site visits conducted by Washington STEM across manufacturing, healthcare, and clean technology employers: JumpStart King County, CLT Care Academy & CLT At Home (Vancouver), Spindle Dynamics (Tacoma), Aquagga (Tacoma), and Urban Accessories with Amcor (Tacoma). They are not a representative survey. They are a close look at employers who are engaging effectively in workforce development efforts — and a chance to name the practices worth looking for, encouraging, and supporting across the WJI network.

The profile of a high-impact employer partner

Across very different industries, the employers who engage most effectively in workforce development efforts — in training, hiring, and supporting participants — share a recognizable set of traits:

- Leadership is hands-on and present. Owners and executives are engaged in daily operations and know their teams — Spindle Dynamics' owners work alongside staff; CLT's CEO personally leads orientation and meets every new hire.

- They hire for aptitude and attitude, not credentials they don't need. None of the manufacturers require a four-year degree; they hire people willing to learn and build their skills on the job.
- They treat training as core operations, less as a perk. Training is budgeted, protected, and understood as essential to running the business — less as an optional benefit.
- They invest in the people they already have. Incumbent-worker upskilling is a deliberate strategy, from CNC cross-training to international technical training.
- They build dignity and belonging into the workplace. Recognition practices, respite spaces, and inclusive facilities are visible signals that people are valued.
- They see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. The best partners are willing to connect, learn from peers, and engage workforce intermediaries rather than operate alone.
- They lead with relationships, beyond transactions. Their engagement with workforce programs is rooted in mutual benefit and a long-term orientation.

What the best employers do

1. Training and upskilling

The employers profiled treat workforce development as something they build, not something they passively receive.

- Training is embedded and ongoing. At Aquagga, training (OSHA, hands-on work with the deconstruction units) is framed as essential to keeping operations running. Skill-building (like testing and iterating) is part of the expected work.
- They make long training investments deliberately — and protect quality. Spindle Dynamics invests six-plus months to bring a new hire to proficiency in precision spindle work, intentionally protecting craftsmanship rather than rushing it.
- They open non-degree, skills-based pathways. Spindle, Urban Accessories, Amcor, and CLT all offer positions that don't require a four-year degree, training people to meet their specific workforce needs and expanding who can enter advanced manufacturing and healthcare careers.
- They upskill incumbent workers, not just new hires. Urban Accessories has offered training to craftspeople via CNC operations; Spindle sent two staff to Europe through a Workforce Central grant to learn emerging technologies and expand supplier networks.

- They remove cost and readiness barriers from day one. CLT lowers the cost barrier by bundling exam and certification fees into tuition, and builds day-one readiness by adding CPR, bloodborne-pathogen, and food-worker certifications and starting soft-skills practice (a daily "good morning") on the first day.

Where backbones can help:

- Broker connections to training funds and grants.
- Match employers to training providers for specific needs.
- Surface non-degree training programs and pathways aligned to the jobs employers are hiring for.
- Support employers' transition to skills-based hiring practices.
- Fund the tuition and fees that remove cost barriers for participants.
- Reduce application barriers to increase accessibility to ongoing workforce training.

2. Retention and culture

These employers keep people because of how it feels to work there, not in spite of it.

- Presence and relationships are the retention strategy. Spindle employees named flexibility and deep relationships with present, engaged owners as the top reasons they stay — above offers elsewhere.
- They build real career mobility. Amcor's plant manager started as a temp; at CLT, students go on to work alongside their former instructors as peers once they are out doing care work; and CLT is developing a Home Care Aide-to-CNA bridge to widen the jobs people can reach.
- They make dignity visible. Pinning ceremonies and recognition walls at CLT, respite and creative spaces at Spindle, honor-code food pantries, and inclusive facilities all signal that people belong.
- They treat trainees as employees. The JumpStart program coaches employers to handle performance, attendance, and concerns through their normal processes, holding trainees to the same expectations — and offering the same support — as any other team member.
- They onboard with structure. CLT assigns a dedicated staff member to coordinate a new hire's first client hand-off, provides advance materials, and keeps a 24-hour point of contact for questions in the field.

Where backbones can help:

- Support employers to develop and implement strong onboarding and career-advancement practices.

- Help employers develop inclusive workplace practices that strengthen belonging and retention, building from any retention efforts already underway.
- Coach employers to treat trainees as employees, holding them to the same expectations and support as any other team member.

3. Ecosystem engagement

The employers profiled engage meaningfully with the broader workforce development ecosystem — connecting with peers, intermediaries, and training partners.

- They engage in peer-to-peer employer learning. When Urban Accessories hosted Amcor during a WJI employer site visit, the two manufacturers exchanged practical knowledge on the spot — safety demo conversations that pointed to future collaboration opportunities, employee-engagement approaches — and set up a reverse tour for Urban Accessories to visit Amcor. Shop-floor conversations between peers provided valuable insight.
- They participate in the workforce ecosystem, not just hire from it. Urban Accessories' training began through IMPACT Washington and Workforce Central; CLT remains active with WorkSource and local boards; Aquagga benefited from using local suppliers to support the completion of projects.
- They draw on the wider system to reach people often left out. CLT stays active with WorkSource and local workforce boards, and refers English-language learners to a local college for language support before welcoming them back. These connections extend opportunity to those too often excluded — including first-generation students — and open more inclusive pathways into good jobs.

Where backbones can help:

- Convene peer-to-peer site visits and tours so employers learn from each other.
- Refer and connect employers to other partners across the workforce ecosystem.
- Connect employers with the supportive services and programs that expand opportunity to those often excluded.

How backbones can use these insights

- Recruit employers who match this profile. Look for hands-on leadership, skills-based hiring, training treated as core operations, investment in current workers, inclusive workplaces, and a relationship-driven, ecosystem-minded approach — **these traits predict effective participation better than size or sector.**
- Coach existing partners toward these practices. The approaches in this insight report — incumbent-worker upskilling, skills-based hiring, structured onboarding,



treating trainees as employees, and building inclusive workplaces — can be shared with and adopted by other employer partners.

- Keep expanding partnerships across the ecosystem. Look for new opportunities to connect employers with peers, training providers, funders, and supportive services that can deepen and expand their participation in the workforce development ecosystem over time.

Prepared by Washington STEM as the implementation partner for the Washington Jobs Initiative. Insights drawn from employer site visits conducted by the WJI technical assistance team.