

WORKADVANCE PARTNERS

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WorkAdvance is a national initiative, currently operating in Northeast Ohio, New York City, and Tulsa, funded through the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a public-private partnership administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The Social Innovation Fund combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the United States. This SIF project is led by the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City and the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) in collaboration with MDRC, and is operating in eight cities nationwide. Funding for WorkAdvance was also provided by The Corporation for National and Community Service, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Open Society Foundations, The Rockefeller Foundation, Benificus Foundation, Ford Foundation, The Fund for Our Economic Future, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Surdna Foundation and The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc.

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SKILLING UP

Business partnership to build career pathways

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THE NEED

Although the Great Recession hit Northeast Ohio (NEO) hard, employment in manufacturing is rebounding and driving regional job growth. Productivity is increasing, and manufacturers are demanding a more highly skilled labor force. Since 2010, manufacturing employment in the region has grown by more than 7 percent, or 8,400 jobs,¹ but many Northeast Ohioans are not adequately prepared to meet the requirements of the available openings. Forty-seven percent of Northeast Ohio adults have no education past high school and lack relevant job skills.² Companies report challenges finding skilled workers to hire – a challenge exacerbated by retirements, emerging technology, and recent re-shoring (manufacturing jobs returning to the US).

WorkAdvance, an initiative coordinated by Towards Employment (TE) across Northeast Ohio, offers a continuum of appropriately aligned, sector-specific workforce services that successfully meet

THE WORK

Hose Master is a designer and manufacturer of specialized flexible metal hoses and metal joints. Employing on average 250 people, Hose Master utilizes state-of-the-art manufacturing equipment at a 250,000 square foot facility in Cleveland and a second plant in Houston, Texas. The company has persistent challenges finding skilled welders; at the same time, the proficiency of the entry-level workforce is of paramount importance. Hose Master initially engaged with WorkAdvance to hire participants for both general labor and welding positions. However, because the company's welding processes are highly specialized, recent graduates of general welding training programs lacked the skills to immediately meet Hose Master's needs. WorkAdvance staff recommended a customized welding program to train the company's current high performing general laborers for more highly skilled welding positions, followed by targeted recruitment and preparation of new employees for the general labor positions. It is unlikely Hose Master would have developed such an approach on its own. According to Production Manager John Baker: "the resources to coordinate and manage this type of endeavor would be somewhat overwhelming to anyone here along with their normal duties." Hose Master worked closely with WorkAdvance staff to develop the advancement and backfill model because "Towards Employment staff has the knowledge, skills and connections in the education industry to make this a viable solution," continued Baker.

business needs and move low income individuals into quality jobs, with established career pathways and supports for advancement.

This case-study explores a key WorkAdvance strategy: partnering with targeted businesses to advance low-wage incumbent workers and backfill the entry level jobs vacated by the advancing workers with WorkAdvance graduates recruited from low-income, disadvantaged applicants. High performing entry level employees who have a demonstrated track record of strong work ethic and the intangible characteristics that make them a good "fit" for the business are ideal candidates for upskilling to fill open middle skill positions. When investments in upskilling and advancement include a strategy to recruit and screen strong backfill candidates from workforce initiatives like WorkAdvance, businesses derive value and current and new workers gain opportunities.

The first step in the process was a meeting among TE's WorkAdvance staff and Hose Master's Production Manager and front line supervisors. This meeting resulted in two strands of work: deepening WorkAdvance staff understanding of the work culture and responsibilities of the new welding positions in order to develop customized career advancement curriculum and job coaching strategies; and researching and selecting a training provider who could customize the welding instruction. Both required significant engagement and input from Hose Master supervisors and managers. Ultimately, Lakeland Community College was selected as the training provider and its instructors spent time at Hose Master learning proprietary TIG welding processes and developing the customized technical training.

Hose Master worked with WorkAdvance and Lakeland Community College staff to create a schedule that would make it as convenient as possible for participating employees. Hose Master committed to hosting the training onsite and adjusting work schedules to assure employees could go straight from work to training; WorkAdvance committed to delivering the advancement training and coaching onsite at the workplace during evening hours. The partnership involves cost-sharing: Hose Master provides the welding booths and pays for consumables (~\$980/per person); WorkAdvance covers the cost of the advancement training/coaching and the community college instruction (~\$1,100/per person).

Once training plans were established, Hose Master identified

WorkAdvance is coordinated by Towards Employment, a Cleveland-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to empower individuals to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency through employment. Towards Employment helps individuals prepare for jobs, get jobs, keep jobs and advance into careers. Through holistic programming and strong employer partnerships, TE builds skills and confidence, removes barriers to employment and helps individuals meet employers' workforce needs. With a 37-member staff and an annual budget of \$3.7 million, Towards Employment has served more than 128,000 people in its nearly forty-year history.

WorkAdvance seeks to boost the earnings of unemployed and low-wage working adults by helping them obtain quality jobs in targeted sectors with opportunities for career growth. WorkAdvance delivers a continuum of appropriately aligned services to meet business needs and move low-income individuals onto manufacturing and healthcare career pathways. WorkAdvance offers career advancement workshops, wrap-around supports, technical skills training, job placement, and up to 2-years of sector specific career coaching.

potential participants and referred them to WorkAdvance staff to provide an overview of the WorkAdvance program, the commitment required, and the opportunity for them to move from low-wage general labor jobs paying \$10-11/hour into welding positions paying up to \$21/hour. Eleven Hose Master employees enrolled in WorkAdvance and committed to completing two-weeks of career advancement training and 200 hours of welding training. The first cohort of Hose Master incumbent workers is currently engaged in their welding training and 90% are still on track to advance.

The next step is recruiting and preparing candidates for the "backfill." WorkAdvance staff will recruit 15-20 new applicants based upon Hose Master hiring criteria. These applicants will be recruited from neighborhoods surrounding Hose Master—many with high poverty and low labor-force participation rates. Once enrolled, WorkAdvance applicants will receive career-readiness training customized to Hose Master's manufacturing environment, including an enhanced level of shop math provided by Lakeland Community College. Hose Master has agreed to interview participants who successfully complete the WorkAdvance workshop. The first backfill cohort is expected to start in early 2015. Any participants not hired by Hose Master will be placed in other manufacturing positions.

THE IMPACT

WorkAdvance has helped Hose Master solve a gap in its workforce by creating a two-tiered career pathway: a step-up for incumbent workers to advance into higher-skilled positions and an on-ramp for lower-skilled workers to gain general labor employment. Hose Master Production Manager John Baker applauds the partnership with WorkAdvance as enabling the company to provide training opportunities for its workers which would not otherwise have occurred due to barriers related cost and management time. Through WorkAdvance, Hose Master learned about and connected to community resources that helped address its workforce needs, while also broadening its recruitment pool and providing opportunities for new entrants to the workforce. After hiring several WorkAdvance participants who performed well in their jobs, Hose Master was willing to deepen the partnership and pursue the internal advancement/backfill program.

“Morale is higher. Our people are motivated by the opportunity to participate in this program. We're filling hard-to-fill skilled positions. And the backfill candidates from Towards Employment are strong. It's a major win for us.”

John Baker
Production Manager, Hose Master

THE NEXT STEPS

Additional cohorts will be trained in the future at Hose Master. As a result of the shared funding model, the cost of training and placements has been reduced for both parties. The model is viewed as an effective way to leverage private funds to create opportunities for low-skilled individuals. TE seeks additional business partners to replicate a similar model.



Towards Employment



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¹ Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc, Analyst, accessed November 11, 2014

² National Skills Coalition Middle-Skill Jobs State-by-State. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Ohio-Middle-Skill-Fact-Sheet.pdf> on 11/7/14.