



Expert Dialog

Aligning RTI and Post-Secondary Programs

Introduction

Under the Scaling Apprenticeship Program, the hallmarks of a quality apprenticeship, among other criteria, require partnering organizations to deliver on-the-job training, related technical instruction, and industry-recognized credentials. However, the RTI interests of employers may not be perfectly aligned with the content of post-secondary programs. The goal of this dialogue is to provide grantees with practical tips, ideas, messages, and approaches for adapting post-secondary programs to serve as RTI.

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Meet the Experts

Chris Spence

Chris has a 20-year career in workforce development and strongly believes that communities thrive when businesses have strong workforces and people have opportunities to advance in careers. He is focused on helping organizations design, resource, implement, and improve responsive workforce development systems. Chris launched his advisory firm New Growth Group in 2010. Since then, he has worked in over 150 communities in 23 states advising on workforce development initiatives.

Paul Champion

Paul has worked in apprenticeships for the past 30 years and is an advocate for the global "Apprenticeship and Skills Revolution." He is focused on supporting employers, workforce agencies, States and the Federal Government to develop and implement world class Registered Apprenticeships. Paul has advised several multi-national corporations and overseas governments on global workforce development issues and written many publications and blogs on apprenticeships. Outside of being CEO of TranZed Apprenticeships, he is Executive Director of Apprenticeships at Woz Enterprises and is a subject matter expert for various consulting organizations.

ASSESSING STACKABLE CREDENTIALS

In the post-secondary world, the term “stackable credential” refers to vertically stacked credentials where there's a hierarchy of short-term, intermediate-term, and longer-term credentials that add up to an associate's degree or bachelor's degree. But they also could be positioned horizontally with the goal of accumulating knowledge, without building towards a degree.

In your experience, how do employers think about stackable credentials? Does it line up with the terminology that is used in the post-secondary world?

Paul Champion (PC): I think that the “stackable credential” terminology is starting to mean different things to different people. What we are hearing from employers is that if they're bringing in apprenticeships into their business, they are most concerned with the skills that apprentices are gaining through Related Technical Instruction (RTI) regardless of the stackable structure.

They just want to know that the related instruction that the apprentice or apprentices are getting allows them to apply the skills that they need in the business. My feeling around stackable credentials is that they should increasingly have their place within apprenticeships. It is great that apprentices can earn postsecondary credentials within an apprenticeship as long as colleges are keeping in mind that businesses are prioritizing skills.

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Where postsecondary institutions can get in trouble is if stackable credentials and those short courses are not kept up to date. So, we must be careful that they don't become detached from what the employer is looking for. Employers get concerned if courses don't match their needs closely enough. Many postsecondary institutions do a great job keeping in mind that there is no employer engagement without relationship. Employer engagement is not just walking in and saying “apprenticeships are great, your return on investment is going to be \$1.50 for every \$1 you put in.” Instead, it's all about building a relationship around

what the employer needs, and then building an apprenticeship solution around those pain points. Stackable credentials are one tool in building that relationship.

EMPLOYERS AND RTI

Postsecondary institutions have many tools available to design apprenticeship programs with flexibility that align with what employers want, including more recent tools such as micro-credentialing, micro-internships, and digital badging along with traditional certificates and degrees. Can you speak a little about how flexibility in credentialing is an advantage to apprentices and employers?

PC: The big thing is that you've got flexibility with postsecondary institutions. The flexibility for organizations to come together to develop an apprenticeship solution that works for an employer and uses resources available in postsecondary institutions is huge. You can get the best of all worlds by plugging in something in-demand by the industry and providing deep support for apprentices.

In the community college sector, there are multiple opportunities to address employer needs. Whether you call it a micro-credential or a digital badge, it is the ability to flex or customize a curriculum to suit the individual needs of employers. Another important opportunity is the ability to flex the methodology for recruitment, enrollment, and apprentice support to meet the real time demands of employers.

Postsecondary institutions have the flexibility to work with employers to see exactly what day-one skills are needed, and then to build a holistic solution, including curriculum around that. When we do this, we sometimes end up with new modules that need to be written, resulting in a mesh of different things such as recognized-stackable credentials, new modules, and recruitment and support systems to meet those requirements.

After designing a curriculum that meets employer and apprenticeship needs, how do you capture the result?

PC: In Europe, in their competency-based programs, a lot of the time you have to prove competency three times through three different methodologies. That is one approach to prove competency.

The other thing is, where do you put that evidence? How do you have that in a methodology so that once you have proved it, somebody can come in and see that evidence stored somewhere and track it from a distance?

To address this, in addition to employing blended learning techniques, my company has worked with a world-class online learning provider to digitize curriculum content. We have built a platform to manage the whole apprenticeship program and capture the competency of apprentices who have gone through that program. We felt it essential to deliver world-class knowledge and digitally capture competency to ensure quality assurance, and world-class management.

FLEXIBILITY VS. ADAPTABILITY

In your view, is there a trade-off between flexibility and adaptability and rigor?

Balancing Flexibility and Quality:

1. Make quality a built-in goal of your apprenticeships
2. Don't loosen standards just to achieve more apprenticeships
3. Establish high standards through wraparound curricula and stackable credentials

PC: I think we must realize that at the end of the day, the quality of an apprenticeship program is built in at the time of developing the program. What concerns me at times, and I have seen this the world over, is that there are two things happening when you start to build a robust apprenticeship program: everybody wants to see more apprenticeships, so there is this grab for growth, and then everybody tries to make it easier to call something an apprenticeship. The quality suffers.

There doesn't have to be a tradeoff. It goes back to the first thing that we talked about. If you're building around stackable credentials make sure it's high-quality and make sure the credentials meet what employers need. We can't let ourselves drift into a model where, because we want more apprentices, we build things that there is no demand for just because it is easier to do.

CREDENTIALS AND APPRENTICESHIP MODELS

How can apprenticeship programs employing the use of stackable credentials ensure quality no matter the length of the apprenticeship, including short-term apprenticeships?

PC: We need broader agreement about the terms upon which you should graduate from your apprenticeship. Postsecondary institutions have the capability to support this type of broader agreement in several ways. For instance, postsecondary credentials are often transferable to other institutions, which means there is a broader agreement on the quality of content in those programs. Also, Registered Apprenticeships can use competency-based models to finish people earlier if they have competency, which addresses concerns about lengths of time. The other thing, that I do not think is used a great deal, is granting credit for prior learning and prior experience. You get two people who come to the table who want to be an apprentice, and one might have already completed some of those stackable credentials, and therefore should not have to repeat that if it is still relevant. You can reduce the amount of the RTI.

In tech, for instance, you might have somebody who has a GitHub profile where they can show you the coding and programming that they have done. You can do accreditation for prior experience or competency against that.

MANAGING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATION

Can you give an example of a challenge that postsecondary institutions face when working to build apprenticeships around stackable credentials?

PC: I'll give you an example of a conversation. A university came to us a while ago and asked if we could develop an apprenticeship in the tech sector. Right up front, we asked, who is this going to help? Have we got an employer or group of employers in mind?

Their whole idea was that the curriculum they already had was world-class and could be turned into an RTI for an apprenticeship, and then the employers would just turn up on the doorstep. Unfortunately, the post-secondary institution could not deliver; their curriculum was a bit theoretical and just didn't meet the practical rigor expected by employers.

Sometimes postsecondary institutions expect employers simply to sign up the apprentice on a degree course while doing their job, but that's not effective employer engagement. Apprenticeships endeavor to deliver degree-level knowledge with freedom from the degree infrastructure.

I think there is a massive opportunity to develop world-class apprenticeships, but I think we've had people working in silos who are all great at something, but never come together to figure out how to put them together.

Have you seen examples of post-secondary institutions that do an excellent job of blending apprenticeships with general education?

PC: If you look at other nations that have really good apprenticeship programs, they build in a level of those key work skills and key academic skills. They are co-requisites. But in the American system, it is really difficult to get a level of consistency about what an apprenticeship is and what it looks like. In the U.K. and other systems, they are all standard across the whole country. Granted, it's a much smaller country.

What we do is, we turn and say, "Well, the school system should be doing that." But if you work at it, there are ways of doing it, and other systems have it embedded in. And community colleges may be leaders in that.

Let's talk about work readiness, which some call "soft skills." Employers sometimes say they need someone that can just demonstrate the right work readiness skills, and they can be developed from there. How does apprenticeship grapple with that?

PC: If an apprentice leaves because the employer's sick and tired of them not communicating well, everybody loses. It is important for providers to create solutions to address issues that may arise between employers and apprentices to ensure both the apprentices and employer achieve what they set out to. Providers should support the apprentice and the employer to get to the root cause of any issue, including any issues stemming from work readiness gaps, to ensure that the issue is addressed.

Are there scenarios where it's easier to facilitate the development of flexible apprenticeships and make apprenticeships successful?

PC: On the employer side, some people think that we develop apprenticeships like a Navy SEAL. Like we go into the business, develop the apprenticeship, get out, and nobody knew you were there. But we have to educate employers who want apprenticeships. They have to be invested, they have to be active, and they have to be present. The training of mentors is important too.

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Situations where there are good relationships between intermediaries and the apprentice are helpful. For example, we've had apprentices ring our organization up and say, "The manager's just given me this task. I know you have taught me how to do it, but I have just forgot. Can somebody

help me? Can somebody talk me through how to do it?" We will get the tutor on the phone and resolve the issue quickly.

Also, the education provider relationship is important. It is not just about delivering training and testing competency, it's about that wraparound support. That needs to be built into how we, the intermediaries and the colleges and all of us, take care of that apprentice, and we take care of that employer.

FINAL WORD

What final words of advice would you provide the scaling apprenticeship grantees on a topic of aligning post-secondary credentials with apprenticeship RTI?

PC: I think a couple of things. First, don't go for the easy route. Don't think in terms of, "An employer wants this, so what we're going to do is, we're going to tell the employer that we can choose those established things and make it easy." Really dig to find out what the employer wants, because an employer will go for whatever looks easiest at the start. When you get into the apprenticeship, the employer will say, "But hang on, I'm not actually getting this skill out of my individual that I need."

Paul Champion's Recommendations:

1. Identify employer needs
2. Get buy-in from the employer
3. Develop helpful partnerships
4. Be attentive to employee and employer needs throughout the process

Make sure that the employer's not just a passenger in this. Tell them that they must play a part in developing this, especially figuring out how to use stackable credentials, because it will only come back to bite them in the end. Having a program that is employer approved and built collaboratively is far better. If you cannot build them yourself, there are some great off-the-shelf qualifications that you can use that really have

meaning for an employer. You can also engage a partner to help design one that works well.

Try and find trusted partners that you can work with. We need to create a big tent to scale this up and make our apprenticeships world-class. That is a big promise to live up to, and it requires partnership.

And I know that it goes without saying, but half the people who are delivering apprenticeships tell me, “Yeah, it’s going perfectly.” But when I ask, “When is the last time you reviewed the curriculum? When did you talk to the employer about what you needed? When did you last sit with the apprentice and make sure they’re learning everything they need?” They often do it at the start and stop toward the end. We must be attentive and more involved with employers to make sure this works.

For more information on understand the key elements of credentials, including identifying credentials that help individuals get the skills they need to acquire quality in-demand jobs please see DOL’s guidance below.

DOL’S Guidance on Credentials:

Training and Employment Notice (TEN)25-19: [Understanding Postsecondary Credentials in the Public Workforce System](#)