



Expert Dialog

Employer Workforce Needs Assessment

Introduction

Scaling Apprenticeship coaches have been engaging in frequent discussions with grantees on the challenges and successes of communicating, engaging, and working with employers to adopt and expand apprenticeships — both registered and unregistered — with special attention to working in the COVID-affected economy. This dialog leverages the expertise of people who have been longtime proponents of apprenticeships, and who have been in the trenches using apprenticeships as a tool to help shore up employer workforce needs and lead workers to higher-paid careers.

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Meet the Experts

Jeff Brown

Jeff Brown is the Director of Workforce Development for a community-oriented marketing firm in Richmond, Virginia. Prior to entering the private sector, Jeff served as Director of Workforce Development for the Commonwealth of Virginia, and Director of Workforce Services for the Virginia Employment Commission. Jeff has worked closely with community, economic, and workforce development agencies across the country, and he was responsible for oversight of Virginia's Registered Apprenticeship programs when he served as Commissioner of Virginia's Department of Labor and Industry.

Paul Champion

Paul Champion 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 multinational 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.

Dina Igooe

Dina Igooe is the Associate Director of Business Development for NIMS. Dina is also deeply involved in the development and execution of four large-scale NIMS' U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Scaling Apprenticeship grants. She has worked in the field of manufacturing and logistics credentialing for several years and has extensive grant writing and project management experience. She provides apprenticeship, credentialing, structured job training, and employer engagement technical assistance to large and small businesses and other stakeholders.

Dialog

Thank you for taking the opportunity to help us better understand the importance of conducting employer needs assessments and how Scaling Apprenticeship grantees can begin the crucial process of understanding their current and future employer partner's business needs.

Needs Assessment Importance

Why is it important to conduct a needs assessment?

Dina (DI): It's extremely important to conduct a needs assessment because we want our apprenticeship programs to close the gap between training and the required performance. That's an overall goal of everybody who goes into and engages in an apprenticeship program.

One crucial challenge is not understanding what training your company may need. In order to learn about that, you have to assess what the company already has at a baseline. That's the reason why it's so important to know where you're starting from.

Paul (PC): From my point of view, an organization needs analysis, or, as they're called in Europe, training needs analysis. Training Needs Analysis addresses why you need to do it, what you need to do, and when you need to deliver it. A lot of work-based learning is sometimes all about holding that employer's hand and helping them identify their short-, medium-, and long-term company needs.

Employers sometimes ring up and say "I hear you can help us develop an apprenticeship." Then when you start to expand the apprenticeship, you can quite clearly see that they have not had enough information about the program. They do not know exactly how it's going to transpire and how it's going to work out in their business.

Training needs analyses address:

1. Why you need it
2. What you need (short-, medium-, and long-term)
3. When you need to deliver it

DI: We can all agree that different employers need different types of solutions. We can't have a one-size-fits-all approach; each company is unique. This is why conducting needs assessments are so important.

In your view, what are the best ways to help businesses engage in constructive self-evaluation that they can then put to use in constructive ways?

PC: I think it depends on what they are looking at. Sometimes, we go into a debate with an employer who says, you know, "I need to move my middle workers to high-level jobs, but I don't know what skills my employees have or how to go about it." If somebody's going to move from a mid-level position to a high-level position, when they move, what are the Day 1 skills that they need? And it might be they just need to upskill on one or two things, or they might need a whole program that puts that individual on a work-based learning journey. It could also be an apprenticeship.

Guiding question:

What **Day 1** skills do starting employees need?

Part of the employer conversation is helping them understand that a four-year degree isn't always needed for the jobs they seek to fill. These conversations make employers widen their options and think about the actual skills they need for their business and believe are vital to the employee positions available or being created.

Helping Employers Identify their Needs

How do you help businesses to understand the importance of taking the time and maybe even making the time to fully understand and articulate their needs?

DI: One of the things that we've done on our end is adapted a simple system called Smart Training Principles for apprenticeship models. These seven basic universal principles apply to Registered Apprenticeship models and any structured OJT [on-the-job training].

For instance, one such principle is "training from the end." So, what performance is needed in order to get the desired result and/or product? What's your stakeholder environment? Everyone has a role and a responsibility, the trainee, the manager, the mentor. What is everyone's role? You have to separate trainers and evaluators because there has to be impartiality in the way you evaluate how well people are doing in the program. How do you structure this OJT?

It is important that models are truly competency-based. It is also important that we help employers understand that self-paced, not time-based, models can be the most beneficial to adult apprenticeship students. And we like to say competency-based all the time, but really showing that someone who may only really need to upscale in two different job roles takes much less time than someone else who is coming in brand new and really needs training on a much broader level.

Sometimes getting them to understand the importance of taking the time for defining their needs starts with helping them grasp the nature of true performance validation, what it really means. We help them to understand performance measures and begin to identify what those look like for their programs.

How can you help employers understand and identify the difference between what they have got and what they want?

DI: Self-evaluation is integral in helping employers along with this. Employers can use self-evaluation surveys to obtain results-driven reports. The reported results of these surveys should show the employer where they have gaps in knowledge and skill. It is crucial for employers to take this information and begin to think about what training behaviors they want to develop to address the gaps.

It is essential to identify what the program is doing that is not ideal so they can begin to develop a plan for improvement. This can be done through intentionally structured apprenticeships that utilize more beneficial behaviors.

What steps do you think businesses need to take to clearly articulate the skill sets that they believe workers have to possess in order to be successful candidates?

DI: Employers must keep things simple. It is essential to identify what skills they need for their companies. They then need to ensure that the training they approve is tied to the skills they need. It is essential to base your needs off solid information. The information can be found internally, through interviews and an assessment of processes needed to complete work for business, but it can also be found externally. So, for instance, you can split it up into three areas of assessment: training, methods, and tools, that's it. Consider what modes of trainings are available. Then consider the methods; there are pre-apprenticeships, classroom training, and on-the-job training methods. For tools, there are how-to principles and best practices. After they have considered all options, they examine what they are currently offering (self-assessment) so they can begin to think about a plan to move forward. It also

Questions to help employers articulate needs:

1. What performance is needed to get the desired result and/or product?
2. What's your stakeholder environment?
3. Who is responsible for the outcome?
4. How do you structure this OJT?

Areas to assess when articulating needs:

1. Training content
2. Training methods
3. Training tools

gives them the opportunity to align their training principles with their training program goals and objectives so they can create best practices and scale successful programs.

Universal Training Principles = Best Practices

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| 1. Train from the End | ➤ What performance is needed |
| 2. Stakeholder Environment | ➤ Everyone has a role & responsibility |
| 3. Separate Trainers and Evaluators | ➤ Impartiality in evaluation |
| 4. Dual Training Environments | ➤ How to structure OJT |
| 5. Competency-Based | ➤ Self-paced, not time-based |
| 6. True Performance Validation | ➤ Performance Measures (PMs) |
| 7. Win-Win | ➤ Credentials |

You need a champion as well who can also serve as a stakeholder, providing input into what is needed for a successful candidate. So if you have simple processes in place you can show employers that you can streamline the implementation of an apprenticeship program. This helps them see a simple way of bettering their companies. If you do this, they are going to say absolutely, yes, implement a program, especially if there's money already from the government like a U.S. Department of Labor grant that pays for it.

PC: I think one other thing that Dina just hit on there is that some employers, they have a training program of their own that they've used in the past and they don't realize the value of it. Sometimes, the simplest way to get things up and going is to encourage the employer to re-energize an existing program.

Needs Assessment Challenges

Can you give a couple of real-life examples of common problems that you identify with a needs assessment?

DI: Not understanding the importance of how ideal training behaviors can help with training outcomes. I will be talking about ideal training behaviors for manufacturing, but honestly these could apply to any industry.

Ideal training behaviors for performance outcomes:

1. Utilize hands-on training
2. Train on actual or simulated workplace tasks
3. Require competence in all identified required job duties

For instance, an ideal training behavior is using hands-on training. Hands-on training is ideal for outcomes requiring practical experience. Alternative methods such as classroom or online coursework are best used for reinforcement and adjusting to individual learning preferences. Ideal behavior number two: train on an actual or simulated workplace task. That would be another ideal behavior. Behavior number three: include experiences demanding competence in all required job duties. So, training is often broken down into smaller chunks to progressively impart information, transfer skills to trainees. The

modern workplace requires employees to exhibit attained competencies from multiple chunks of training for a single task. So training must prepare these people to think critically and apply attained competencies.

In opposition, using coursework as a primary training method only without the hands-on portion is not ideal training behavior.

PC: I see lack of an understanding of the business environment to be a real problem. Sometimes, the employers are reviewing their future skills demands and their future needs based on what was happening eight months ago. When this occurs, we have to help them realize that they're working and developing their business in a different world. The environment has changed and their company needs must reflect that. We help them to think outside the box and look at different things to build their needs analysis, not just on the skills but also on what that business might look like in the future. All of these conversations help them figure out what skills they need apprentices to have to help their companies flourish.

Beginning the Process of Assessing Employers

How do you begin the process of assessing employers? How do you get them to start?

PC: The way that we start it is we try and look for some of the great things that the employer has already done. We then build on the conversation by starting a discussion about skills-led recovery. We talk about how you support current employees to get skills that will raise the game in those areas so businesses have a more robust set of skills.

It is important to ensure that employers understand the requirements of, and their roles in, building and supporting a world-class apprenticeship program. This can begin by working with employers to, first, look at their current job descriptions to clearly identify the Day 1 skills. Second, employers need to identify knowledge and behaviors that the employer expects from starting an apprentice. This usually leads to a refocusing of their current job descriptions. After employers have identified Day 1 skills and knowledge and behaviors, they should amend job descriptions to better fill open roles through the apprenticeship model.

Steps to identifying needs:

1. Review current job descriptions to identify **Day 1** skills
2. Reflect on necessary apprentice knowledge and skills
3. Amend and/or create job descriptions

DI: With technology moving so fast, and obviously with this whole situation with COVID, it is clearer than ever that training and retraining are essential to helping businesses pivot quickly. No longer are companies training on these 30-year-old occupations. Having a journeyman card used to demonstrate that you knew everything in your occupation; that is no longer true. We call it the complexity gap; technology is moving way faster than any one person can grasp even in their whole career.

Employers can start with breaking down job roles that can be stacked into a really masterful career. These occupations are stackable, but can also prove profitable on their own. Employers can begin by changing their mindset. So instead of focusing on how to upscale an entire occupation, it's really just picking different job roles that may or may not make up a full career. Because the technology moves so fast, there's really no way for someone to master everything that's happening in their field in 30 years.

What's the best way to help employers distinguish between essential employee attributes, like the ones that you talked about earlier, and those that are just desirable employee attributes?

PC: We moved from the apprenticeship sales process to the apprenticeship consultation process. It goes back to that journey with the employer; we approach our engagement with employers at the doors about how apprenticeships can support employees to get the skills needed and also help them get into family-sustaining careers.

Through the consultation process, we look through their job descriptions and we ask questions. We ask them if apprentices actually need the amount of school and experience that they are asking for in their job posting. And then we look at how the job description can be reworded to attract people into those apprenticeship roles. It all goes back to that Day 1 skill element: what do they actually need? How confident do you need them to be? What level of understanding do you need them to have?

Employee attribute questions to consider:

1. Have you listed the appropriate amount of desired years and experience for the occupation?
2. What essential skills does the person starting in the position need?

We've talked a lot about the frontend of the process, but businesses are really focused on the backend of the process. How does conducting needs assessments

impact the bottom line, right? They want to know how implementing a program helps their business thrive.

DI: Yeah. I think that's the \$64,000 question! Having benchmarks set up from the beginning before the program gets going is essential for making a business case. You need to collect data on each trainee and each trainer. The better the trainees do, the better the trainers evaluate it. I think it's an important piece because then everybody is in it together. In the end, the better your people do, the better the employer does. So having a benchmarking system of not only students against each other, but one that looks at how the program is performing is important. The employer also needs to have a system in place for measuring any possible gaps in their training. The better trainers you have, the better trained your employees, the more money a company can retain.

Tools for identifying business benefits:

1. Attrition rate
2. Retention numbers
3. Information on the impact of employee soft skills on the bottom line

Let's say you're using a certain apprenticeship model and the company down the street is using the same one. Maybe you're working with different colleges. Having the schools involved in that is also important. Then everybody can see where they land in comparison to everyone else. As we know, nobody likes to lose, so showing that your program is really working and actually knowing where your program is, even if it is a little bit below the curve, is helpful for improvement. You can't fix a problem if you don't know if exists. Employers appreciate hard numbers. Make a business case by showing them the ROI [return on investment], things like attrition rate. Give them information on how apprenticeship programs can help with

retention and the establishment and improvement of soft skills that help save money in the end.

PC: Employers tend to forget the strength of the employees that they have. Sometimes the first step is changing the mindset of leadership, and then moving on to change the learning culture. Once a culture of learning and upskilling is ingrained in their business, it becomes something that they continue long-term. We have seen strong models where employers who have found themselves being still and not knowing what to do move to being able to complete their own assessments on their employees to identify existing skills and gaps in knowledge.