

The Workforce Board Meta-Story

Once upon a time, in a perfect world, every person who wanted a job had one, every worker was engaged in a way that tapped their talents and abilities and every business reaped the rewards as a result. In this perfect world, right here in Washington, every community flourished because the skills of workers were balanced with the needs of business.

Perfection is hard to achieve. But viewing our workforce system as a way to unlock the potential of our residents, our businesses and our communities, can show us how our system fits together to create a place for everybody—a place where nobody gets left behind.

In this perfect world, high school students explored career possibilities at an early age. They sat down with counselors and teachers, and they thought hard about what they wanted to do next and how they planned to get there. They had a variety of opportunities to learn first hand about the world of work and how what they learn in school might apply. Many students found their passions in Career and Technical Education classes, where they learned about health care, technology, business, and other career paths. Academics were never abstract but rooted in the real world and relevant.

All students graduated from high school with a plan—whether it was a 13th year certificate or an advanced degree. Some attended community and technical colleges to prepare for a career. Others entered apprenticeships to train for highly paid trades. Still others set their sights on a four-year degree. Every one of them punched the state’s Self-Sufficiency Calculator and discovered the actual cost of living in their corner of the state. So there were few surprises and more opportunities for success as they moved ahead with their future, instead of false starts, dead-end jobs, and a “10-year drift.”

But even in a perfect world, there was a need for second chances and new directions. Some changed their minds about careers. Others needed a tune-up to keep pace with technology and other changes. Still others discovered their jobs didn’t pay enough to cover mortgages, children, health care, and other real-world concerns. They needed another path to achieve their goals. They met with WorkSource job counselors who connected them to programs that helped them retrain. Some lacked academic skills and job skills and entered innovative community college programs such as I-BEST to build up both. Others took advantage of workplace-based learning, gaining valuable new skills while on the job. Still others used online learning to fit education into their schedule, so they could keep working, and paying the bills, as they studied for the future. Plentiful financial aid helped all workers achieve a critical 13th year of education and workers were granted credits for prior experience to accelerate their progress.

In this world, employers understood their biggest asset wasn't the fastest technology or the newest piece of equipment, but their people. So much so, that employers and employees viewed one another as partners, and lifelong learning was a shared goal. Employers regularly funded Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs), contributing a dollar-for-dollar match with employees, who could then afford to go back to school. Never again did employers reluctantly fill slots with under-qualified workers, or worse yet, let key positions go unfilled. Apprenticeship training was expanded in vital fields such as aerospace and state support for customized training and workplace-based education for working adults grew. Employers sat down with educators from community and technical colleges and other stakeholders as part of Industry Skill Panels, ensuring workers had the right mix of skills for the specific jobs employers needed to fill.

At the same time, enrollment capacity was expanded for professional and technical programs at community colleges, helping students prepare for in-demand jobs in every corner of the state. As Washington's workforce grew stronger, so did the state's businesses, which expanded at the fastest rate in the nation. Washington became a global leader, and the state's economy grew stronger still as Washington businesses expanded into markets around the world. Meanwhile, word about Washington's workforce spread beyond the state and more businesses relocated here, eager for the same competitive edge.

In the end, all of Washington prospered as workers' talents and abilities were fully tapped, strengthening the businesses who hired them, who in turn expanded and grew. This growth never ended. It was cultivated carefully and with the precision that comes from partnerships where every one listens and learns. At the end of the day, as residents relaxed in their backyards or watched their children play, they felt secure and happy, knowing they, their companies, and their communities were on solid financial footing, working together as they moved, rung by rung, step by step, toward an even brighter future.