

# Enhancing Job Retention and Advancement: The Challenge of Changing Cultures

A Report on the Practices for Advancement Success Project (PASS)  
funded by the Joyce Foundation



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# 1

# Introduction

**The increased focus** on retention and advancement strategies in the workforce development field results in part from the passage of welfare reform legislation, including the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 and implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. These policy changes have brought retention and advancement concerns to the forefront, and they challenge state and local agencies to focus on how low-income workers secure long-term, self-sustaining employment. Although the current economy offers employment opportunities in relatively low-skilled jobs, particularly in the service sector, individuals must advance to better paying jobs in order to gain economic self-sufficiency. State and local efforts cannot simply focus on helping individuals find work. These efforts must also address workers' abilities to retain their jobs and advance in the labor market.

This longer-range public strategy is requiring workforce development agencies to also assume new roles. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) encourages workforce development practitioners or service providers both to become more responsive to employer needs and to serve a broader clientele that includes currently employed individuals in addition to the long-term unemployed and welfare recipients facing multiple barriers to employment. WIA also encourages practitioners to link with a One-Stop career center system, thereby streamlining workforce development services through better integration at the street level. In general, helping low-wage workers stay employed and progress in the labor market is becoming a central component and strategy of both the welfare and workforce development systems.

Research suggests that some workforce development programs are focusing on only one element of the labor market process – immediate job placement. Interviews with businesses, however, suggest that they value job retention (lower turnover) and career advancement (increased productivity), and are interested in how the public sector can be an ally in addressing these matters.

While there has been little rigorous research to establish the long-term effectiveness of strategies to help entry-level workers sustain employment and obtain better jobs, research conducted by Manpower Demonstration Corporation in June 2000<sup>1</sup> and reviewed by the Center for Law and Social Policy in May 2001<sup>2</sup> indicates some common approaches. Key lessons for providing retention and advancement services include the following:

- Combine pre-employment services with more intensive post-employment case management practices.
- Provide a flexible, individualized mix of services — job search, work-focused education, life skills, and vocational skills training — that meets identified employer needs.
- Provide services in an environment that models the workplace, with high expectations for punctuality, attendance, and effort.
- Ensure that frontline staff understand local employer needs, education and training options, and each person’s skills and interests.
- Create opportunities for participants to develop supportive relationships with staff and peers that can be maintained beyond pre-employment training into the employment phase.
- Create staffing structures that allow services to be provided during nonstandard hours (lunch time, evenings and weekends) and out in the field.
- Target employers who offer jobs with higher than average wages, benefits, and room to advance.
- Partner with employers to create customized entry-level training and upgrade training that is offered at the worksite during work hours.
- Follow up frequently, especially during the critical first weeks of employment.
- Connect low-income, working parents to new mechanisms for obtaining help with job advancement, such as one-stop career centers or other kinds of service brokers that can offer worksite, evening, and weekend services.
- Restructure education and training to meet needs of working parents (modular curriculum, evening/weekend hours, on-site child care).
- Provide financial aid and support services for working, low-income parents to upgrade skills on their own.

This report results from a desire by the Training, Inc. National Association to test some of these strategies and the assumptions behind them, to see how they impact retention and advancement services within the Training, Inc. network.

<sup>1</sup> Strawn, Julie and Karin Martinson. Steady Work and Better Jobs How to Help Low-Income Parents Sustain Employment and Advance in the Workforce. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, June 2000.

<sup>2</sup> What’s Next in Welfare Reform? Presentation by Julie Strawn, Center for Law and Social Policy

## The Practices for Advancement Success Project: Core Purpose and Goals

To put theory into practice and to test some assumptions that policy makers, employers, and practitioners may have about effective retention and advancement strategies, the Training, Inc. National Association received a two-year grant from the Joyce Foundation in 1998 for the Practices for Advancement Success (PASS) Project. The focus of the project was to evaluate how practices that have proven effective in Training, Inc.'s pre-employment job training programs for low-income participants could be successfully adapted for use in the employment environment to enhance job retention, additional skill development, and job advancement. Many of these practices were similar to the strategies already identified by previously cited research as potentially effective. The overarching project goals were:

- To develop replicable models and guidelines to apply successful pre-employment training practices to post-employment support, in order to increase low-income participants' chances for job retention and advancement;
- To develop more understanding of some of the practical issues blocking collaboration between government funders, private employers, and community agencies for the common purpose of enhancing the success of new workforce entrants; and
- To share learnings from this research in the form of practical recommendations, guidelines and materials helpful to policy makers as well as employers, service providers, and participants.

Training, Inc. National Association (TINA) partnered in this research with the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), with Training, Inc. member sites in Chicago and Indianapolis, and with local community employers and government agencies. This project has been a critical part of a national Training, Inc. focus on strengthening its practices around the issues of long-term job retention and job advancement.

The primary focus during the first two years of funding was on identifying and beginning to implement practices that could enhance job retention and advancement. These practices were informed by Training, Inc.'s own pre-employment strategies, research results, and by conversations with others recognized in the workforce development field in this area.

TINA then obtained a third year of funding from the Joyce Foundation in order to apply the learnings from years one and two and to be able to gain more insights around issues experienced during the project, in particular:

- Issues around participant needs in transitioning from training to the workplace;
- Staff and organizational issues involved in moving beyond a short-term job retention to a job advancement focus; and
- Issues around successful employer involvement in developing a long-term job retention and advancement strategy.

## Key Assumptions Around Job Retention & Job Advancement

As a learning organization, Training, Inc. was very interested in testing some “assumptions” it saw underpinning current welfare reform and workforce development legislation and some existing theories about effective retention and advancement strategies. These assumptions relate to four “actors” in the employment transition process:

1. Participants looking for training and employment assistance
2. Practitioners or service providers
3. Employers, and the
4. Public funding system.

These assumptions include:

- **Participants** – Through facilitated experiences, participants will adopt life and career goals (both short-term and long-term), and will be motivated to gain more skills and advance on the job.
- **Practitioners/Service Providers** – Practitioner front-line staff will become more oriented toward the long-term goal of self-sufficiency and will take on the role of “career advancement support” for both employed participants and for employers.
- **Employers** – Employers will identify and support employees with advancement potential through training and coaching, and will welcome practitioner involvement as an intermediary to assist with these activities.
- **Public Funding System** – Early work attachment to low-wage jobs plus transitional benefits, sanctions, case management, and further training will result in retention and advancement.

The above assumptions provided the impetus for the PASS project staff to explore more deeply possible strategies around retention and advancement. While we understand these assumptions are gross generalizations, we believe it’s important to set forth the context in which we as practitioner organizations were working. We’ll revisit these assumptions as part of the discussion of our learnings and recommendations later in this report. We hope this report will be helpful to policy makers as well as employers and service providers in their efforts to increase low-income participants’ chances for job retention and advancement.

## The Project Partners

### Training, Inc. National Association

The Training, Inc. National Association is a network of non-profit workforce development organizations assisting low-income adults and older youth to develop the skills they need for good jobs. Training, Inc. affiliate programs—sponsored by local YMCAs, YWCAs, state agencies and community colleges—are located in Albuquerque, Boston, Chicago, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Newark and Pittsburgh. For 28 years, Training, Inc. programs have provided a variety of pre-employment training and placement services to help low-income individuals and families move toward self-sufficiency. More than 15,000 persons have participated in programs ranging from 8 to 24 weeks in length. These programs integrate technical skills training with life skills and work ethic skills, and then provide job search, placement, and retention assistance. While programs originally focused on business office skills training, sites in Newark and/or Indianapolis have added information technology programs in PC Technician skills.

Local Training, Inc. programs were established from 1975 through 1992 by locally based partnerships involving business, government, educational and community organizations. The Training, Inc. National Association was established in 1986 by leadership of local programs as a vehicle for exchanging and promoting best practices between sites. Through Ford Foundation funding, TINA developed a strategic plan and established its first national staff position in 1997. Its objectives were to identify core “essential practices” and to share those both within the Training, Inc. network as well as with other workforce development practitioners.

As lead agency in the PASS Project, the Association:

- Provided overall coordination;
- Enhanced the Training, Inc. (TI) tracking system to document retention/advancement services as well as participant and employer feedback;
- Helped organization staff gain information from other model programs doing work on retention/advancement issues; and
- Facilitated continuous reflection on PASS outcomes and learnings.



## **Training, Inc. Affiliates – Chicago and Indianapolis**

Established in 1975, the YMCA Alliance in Chicago (formerly the YMCA Training Alliance) is the oldest of the Training, Inc. programs. The Alliance’s 16-week vocational office skills training program in its Chicago Loop location serves approximately 150 persons per year, and was the focus of the PASS Project. It also operated a welfare-to-work program on Chicago’s south side at its Roseland branch, as well as job placement and hospitality training programs at Lawson House YMCA, a Single Room Occupancy Residence in the north Loop area. These two programs—which had not been using the Training, Inc. “model”—were added to the scope of the PASS project to provide some experience with different types of program interventions. Participants in these Alliance programs might also have participated in other related programs, including GED/Basic Skills training and an introductory assessment/career-planning module called “First Step Up,” through which all office skills participants enter the program.

Training, Inc. Indianapolis was established in 1981 and operates in partnership with Ivy Tech State College. At the time of the PASS project, its 13-week Career Track program focused on office skills development and life management skills, and included intensive office simulation, employer internships, placement assistance and job retention coaching. Since then, it has established a PC Technician program (begun in 2001) to be a “second step” for Career Track graduates.

At the start of the PASS Project, the programs in Chicago and Indianapolis already had a history of hiring relationships with a number of major employers, including banks, hospitals, insurance companies, state and local governments, and large non-profit organizations. They also had in place linkages with a variety of supportive services in the community, including child care providers, domestic violence shelters, counseling centers, transitional housing, and other emergency services.

Included in the PASS grant from the Joyce Foundation was funding for a coordinator—one for Indianapolis and one for Chicago— to facilitate these activities:

- Implementation of proposed PASS retention and advancement activities;
- Maintenance of the local databases on interventions, outcomes, and participant issues;
- Liaison work with teams of participating employers and other organizations;
- Problem solving with staff Job Coaches around retention and advancement strategies to identify obstacles and possible responses; and
- Evaluation of new training or coaching models being developed.



### **Corporation For A Skilled Workforce**

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), a national nonprofit policy organization based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was established in 1991 as a workforce development policy and change management organization. CSW has offices located in Indianapolis, IN; Kansas City, MO; Charlotte, NC; Harrisburg, PA; Portland, OR and Washington, D.C. The CSW team brings many years of experience in the workforce development field leading change at the national, state, and local level. CSW principals have extensive experience working with workforce boards (both local and state), employment and human service agencies, education and training institutions, employers, community based organizations, and state and local elected officials to develop leading edge workforce development systems and to manage transformation issues at all levels.

CSW's role was to help the PASS project team with:

- Defining the research questions and desired products;
- Locating other relevant research;
- Identifying data needed and possible processes for obtaining that data;
- Assisting with team reflections and capturing the relevant learnings;
- Framing and documenting focus groups and interviews with various “actors” in the process; and
- Preparing the project report.

### **Program Participants – PASS Study Group**

The project initially involved 178 participants, who completed their various programs and began to obtain employment in late 1999/early 2000. These participants included:

- 74 employed graduates from the Indianapolis Training, Inc.'s office skills program;
- 37 employed graduates from the Chicago YMCA Alliance's office skills program;
- 27 welfare-to-work program graduates from the Chicago YMCA Alliance Roseland site; and
- 40 graduates from the Chicago YMCA Alliance Lawson House site.

Staff from all three Chicago program sites participated throughout most of the three-year project, but there was significant turnover in the front-line job coaching staff of the Roseland and Lawson House programs during the life of the project. Partially because of this turnover and possibly also because those program participants received training services for a much shorter period of time, it proved more difficult to remain in touch with them for follow-up purposes

throughout the duration of the project. Therefore, the project partners decided only to present the outcome data for the 111 office skills graduates in Chicago and Indianapolis in this report. However, from our experiences with the other Chicago programs we believe that the learnings and recommendations would apply to those participants as well.

While both programs were somewhat similar in terms of demographics, a higher percentage of the Chicago participants had their high school diplomas or GEDs. Neither program required a GED for program entry, although they did have requirements for minimum math and reading level scores. Chicago’s requirements were slightly higher than Indianapolis in this respect.

At the time of the project, funding for the Indianapolis program was primarily through the county TANF agency, hence the higher percentage of TANF recipients. Those who were not TANF participants were funded through foundation scholarships. The Chicago office skills program was funded through a more diverse mix of resources, including TANF, JTPA/Workforce Investment Act vouchers, and the Illinois State Board of Education.

In both programs, participants tended to have held a number of jobs prior to entering the training. In fact, the average number of jobs held prior to entry overall was 3.0, with an average job length overall of 13.7 months. But the duration of prior jobs varied greatly by individual. Employment was typically in these types of positions: cashier, nursing aide, light assembly or warehousing, child care, entry-level clerical, food service, child care, housekeeping, and some supervisory positions within those fields.

Project participants who were receiving TANF assistance averaged 14.3 months on assistance, although this number varied greatly by individual.

### *PASS Project Office Skill Participant Demographics*

	Chicago	Indianapolis
<b>Number of Participants</b>	37	74
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	86%	97%
Male	14%	3%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
African-American	83%	85%
Asian	--	1%
Caucasian	3%	11%
Hispanic	14%	3%
<b>High School Diploma / GED</b>	84%	69%
<b>TANF Recipient</b>	54%	77%

## PROFILES OF PASS PARTICIPANTS:

### TRESSA

**Tressa** was 21 when her TANF case manager referred her to the YMCA Alliance in Chicago. She had two children ages 1 and 4, and described herself as “persistent, headstrong, and determined.” She was ready to be working, and at the time didn’t care what the job was. She had managed to get out of an abusive relationship. She had tried a couple of community college training programs and knew she was interested in computer systems and helping others.

Tressa was referred by the Alliance’s First Step Up program for their Office Skills program, based on her interest in developing computer skills. During life planning workshops she identified five goals for herself: complete training, get and hold a job, obtain bank and credit card accounts, buy a car, and find reliable child care. Her long-term goal was to get her Masters degree. While in the training she at first had an attendance problem, but then improved.

### TAMMY

**Tammy** entered training in Indianapolis in 1999 at age 29, a single mom with three children ages 9 to 11. Her entry TABE scores were low – 4.7 in Math and 4.8 in English. She was receiving TANF, Food Stamps and Social Security income for her daughter. She and her children lived with her parents. She needed to get her GED. She’d had five previous jobs in a variety of occupations, the longest of which lasted 10 months.

During her time at Training, Inc., Tammy did not have consistent child care for her pre-teen children, and when she first started she had attendance and punctuality problems. She struggled with basic math concepts and was embarrassed by that. She described herself to the group as “dull, a homebody, and boring.” But during the latter part of the training, the simulated company was a good experience for Tammy and she “caught on.” She worked well with the team, but showed little individual initiative. Her skills, meanwhile, showed dramatic improvement and her TABE scores increased significantly. Tammy’s long-term goal in the career planning process: to get her GED and a customer service job by 2005.

### STACY

**Stacy** was 25, single with three children, and was referred to Training, Inc. Indianapolis by a friend who was a graduate. Her prior work history consisted of brief temporary assignments in warehouse or housekeeping positions, but the physical demands of those were too great. She was working on her GED through the public school system; she had TABE scores of 10.9 in Math and 7.5 in Language. She was receiving Food Stamps, and her mother had received TANF assistance. Two of her children suffered from asthma, and she had a suspended driver’s license.

Stacy said that the training was “hard – a challenge for me,” but that she stayed because “a lot of people were there for me – my friends and Peggy, my trainer.” She struggled in the beginning with attendance, but worked hard to increase her typing and computer skills. As part of the career planning process, she said she wanted to be an electrician – “mostly because I like the pay and I’m a hands-on person.” Over the thirteen weeks she showed much improvement in both skills and confidence, although she had medical problems related to exhaustion. She missed several days of her internship because of illness.

# 2

## The PASS Project: What We Set Out To Do

The focus question posed by the PASS project was how essential practices used in the Training, Inc. pre-employment programs could be adapted to support job retention and advancement, and what learnings might be gained that would be useful to other providers, employers, and policy makers.

### Training, Inc. Essential Practices

As part of its national work, Training, Inc. has identified its core philosophy and three key strategies that contribute to its success. TI describes its basic philosophy as “Imaginal Education,” a belief that in order for someone to develop successful behaviors, they often need new images of themselves and their environment. Changes in behavior can happen when someone receives a variety of messages that contradict existing images – for example, messages about their strengths, employers’ expectations, etc. With this philosophy as a foundation, Training, Inc. programs are based on these three key strategies or practices:

- 1) **Creating a supportive learning organization**—for both trainees and staff. The program provides a “safe environment” with the personal and emotional support needed to complete training and retain employment in the midst of challenging circumstances. There are regular opportunities to “stop the action” as mistakes or poor decisions are made, so that trainees can reflect on other possible actions and solidify their learnings. Another key component of this practice is support teams using other trainees and graduates, as well as the use of volunteer mentors for additional one-on-one support. Other aspects of this practice include intentional emphasis on accommodating many learning styles so that all participants can “win,” helping participants develop reflective and problem solving methods to deal with personal and family issues, frequent goal setting and celebrations of progress, and activities which allow trainees to affirm the strengths of others who are different in age, race, or perspective. Underlying this practice are accurate and complete information systems to guide the planning of staff and trainees to accomplish identified objectives.
- 2) **Simulating the workplace** – by creating a “culture of work” within the program, staff help trainees experientially learn the expectations and consequences of the job environment. Aspects of this “contextual learning” approach include creating a physical business-like space; performing hands-on business applications that use actual work-like tasks; implementing workplace policies of attendance, dress,

language and performance; simulating supervisor-employee relationships; experiencing organization workflow and the need to solve problems as teams, through a simulated company; and receiving regular performance evaluations. Local employer internships and extensive employer volunteer involvement are also components of this practice. Simulation motivates participants to engage more actively in the learning process and increases self-confidence as participants see themselves performing functions that they had not imagined they could do and that are clearly relevant to their goals of success in a job. Trainees gain confidence in “taking responsibility” for their actions.

- 3) **Building broad community partnerships** that will provide the resources for the above practices and enable participants to move toward self-sufficiency. Partner employers see the value of investing in the program as they assist with curriculum design, host internships, serve as mentors and volunteer trainers, and underwrite financial or technology needs. Educational partners assist with GED attainment, tutoring, and offer credit toward further degree work. Community partners assist with case management, child care and transportation issues, and offer a broad array of counseling and emergency assistance services. Together these partners provide a web of support that communicates to the participants that they are valued members of the community.



## Project Design – Applying Training, Inc. Essential Practices

During the first year of the PASS project, staff in the participating programs went through an intensive process of identifying various ways these core practices might be adapted to support retention and advancement of the target group of program graduates. The following strategies emerged from that process.



After agreeing on these general strategic areas, each of the participating sites in Indianapolis and Chicago then identified a combination of ways to intensify current programming as well as new activities that could implement the strategies. While the focus of the project was originally on post-employment activities, the planning team identified strategies that often began with intensifying certain activities within the training period, such as career goal-setting activities. It quickly became clear to program staff that a stronger foundation emphasizing post employment goals needed to be established during the pre-employment period for the post-employment activities to work most effectively.

# THE PASS PLAN

The matrix below summarizes the kinds of activities the various program sites planned for implementation.

## Learning Organization

### *Existing Activities to Intensify*

- Build upon initial career planning activities
- Host additional celebrations of retention and advancement success
- Conduct more frequent and intensive follow-up
- Document issues and progress on goals through database
- Re-establish trainee mentoring program

### *New Activities*

- Identify career paths within targeted companies and skills necessary to move in career path
- Host peer support “value added” events for graduates regarding advancement at work
- Publish graduate newsletter

## Workplace Simulation

### *Existing Activities to Intensify*

- Lengthen employer internships
- Increase use of business and graduate panels
- Expand number of mentors and extend involvement to one year
- Create stricter attendance policies

### *New Activities*

- Offer new workshops during training and post-employment regarding business culture and language

## Collaborative Partnerships

### *Existing Activities to Intensify*

- Make more referrals of graduates to supportive services
- Make more frequent employer follow-up contacts

### *New Activities*

- Target “advancement-oriented” employers for further work with their entry-level employees – i.e., planning, workshops
- Refer more graduates for advanced training

Not every site chose to implement activities in every strategy area. Following are examples of activities that sites implemented for each strategy.

### **Expanding the Career Planning Process**

Both the Chicago and Indianapolis sites created additional workshops as part of their training curriculum that focused on short-term and long-term goals, as well as the steps that were needed to begin moving toward those goals. Originally these workshops had been part of the early orientation/assessment components of the curriculum, but the results of those first workshops were built upon in later workshops during the training.

### **Providing Peer Networking and Support Activities**

The Chicago Alliance site planned and implemented at least three different events for peer support and networking. They first surveyed PASS project participants about skill building sessions and other workshops they were interested in, as well as the best times for scheduling. Based on this input, the staff created Saturday events that provided help with additional computer skills, workshops on financial and housing issues, and fun items like raffle prizes. Children's activities and lunch were also part of the events. The third event was actually a shopping trip on a chartered bus to look for interview outfits at an outlet mall. The trip also included refreshments, a movie, and discussion while on the bus. The first two events attracted 6-8 graduates (plus their children) and 10 graduates and families came for the bus trip.

At the Roseland welfare-to-work site, staff obtained a grant to secure a van for helping graduates get to their employment sites. As part of this service, they planned for staff who also rode on the van to provide job coaching activities.

Both sites hosted graduate reunions/focus groups and approximately 15 participants were involved in Chicago and 22 in Indianapolis. These events, which were held on Saturday and included lunch and activities for children, were structured to get feedback from graduates on additional training they wanted. Because they were providing helpful input to the project, graduates received \$20 for their participation.

Indianapolis also revised the format of its quarterly newsletter to have more of a focus on graduate news and success stories.

### **Re-Establishing Mentoring Programs**

Indianapolis decided to re-direct staff resources into a mentoring program that had languished because of staff turnover. After finding it more difficult than expected to recruit enough volunteers for each trainee to have a mentor, the site experimented with a group mentoring approach that paired 3-4 volunteer mentors with groups of 8-10 trainees. They also hosted mentor orientation sessions and several "de-briefing" sessions for both mentors and mentees. Mentors were asked to make a commitment of one year to their relationship with a trainee or group of trainees.

### **Increasing Graduate and Employer Follow-up Contacts**

Both sites increased the frequency of their contacts with graduates and employers. Graduates were contacted at 14, 30, 60, 90, 180, 365 and 540-day benchmarks, while employers were contacted less frequently – usually 3-4 times during that same period.

Both sites increased their use of “retention rewards” – a series of gifts and recognitions provided to acknowledge successful retention over extended periods of time. These rewards included a coffee mug with flowers, photographs of the graduate, calendars/planners, and a variety of gift certificates for groceries.

### **Strengthening Data Systems**

Training, Inc. National Association worked with consultants to design additional sections of its national database that would capture feedback from trainees and graduates in quantitative (ratings) format as well as anecdotal information on employment progress and issues.

The database revisions also tracked follow-up services provided, including participation in various PASS activities.

### **Offering Advanced Skills Training**

Both Chicago and Indianapolis sites offered graduates the opportunity to receive further computer skills training, either on Saturdays or at night. As mentioned above, some Chicago graduates took advantage of this. Although a focus group of graduates in Indianapolis indicated strong interest in further computer and Internet training, when staff tried to schedule the training very few graduates signed up. The original vision of the PASS team was that by the third year of the project they would be connecting graduates to higher education activities at local colleges, but experience during the project suggested that most graduates were not ready to continue their learning that quickly.

### **Enhancing the Culture of Work Elements in the Training**

Indianapolis lengthened their internships from one week to three weeks to provide additional workplace experience before trainees sought employment. They also created curriculum for new workshops – facilitated by private sector volunteers – on understanding “business language and corporate culture.”

### **Targeting Specific Advancement-Oriented Employers for Partnerships**

Indianapolis targeted several employers – a bank, an insurance company, a hospital, and a state agency – as advancement-oriented employers who already had a strong hiring relationship with Training, Inc. PASS staff had conversations with human resource personnel in those companies about partnering on projects like a mentoring program and career planning workshops for Training, Inc. graduates and their other entry-level employees. However, shifting human resource priorities and – in some cases – turnover in the human resources role meant that discussions broke down before site-based programs could be implemented.

Both sites hosted focus groups with employers to discuss the goals of the PASS project and to get in-depth input about the issues managers and supervisors faced around retention and advancement of their entry-level employees and Training, Inc. graduates, in particular.

## Implementation Successes and Struggles

Implementing the activities described above did seem to produce some benefits for graduates and staff. But there were also unanticipated challenges, as summarized in the matrix below.

### Strategy: Expanding the Career Planning Process

#### *Initial Successes*

The Career Advancement conversation implicitly began by changing staff language from “getting a job” to “stepping stones for a career” – imaging the program from Day One as “long-term support” for the participant journey to self-sufficiency. Additional life planning workshops throughout the training helped participants see the relationship between life and career goals.

#### *Challenges and Struggles*

Maintaining a consistent focus on life and career goals as participants moved from module to module and then into the job was difficult, with several different staff involved in the process. Goals were not always entered into the database, which meant they were not easily identifiable or accessible.

Knowing when to engage participants in planning for “the next career step” on the job was difficult – often 90 days post-employment was too soon.

Graduates did not always welcome the long-term follow-up support of staff because, as one graduate commented, they were ready to move on, “beyond the welfare system.”

### Strategy: Providing Peer Networking and Support Activities

#### *Initial Successes*

Graduate focus groups helped some graduates experience “long-term support.”

#### *Challenges and Struggles*

Only small numbers attended after-work or weekend “support events” – which was discouraging for staff that had invested a lot of time in their planning and set-up. They were reluctant to keep trying the approach again, when already feeling “stretched.”

### Strategy: Re-Establishing Mentoring Programs

#### *Initial Successes*

Mentoring during the program was often a positive experience for both participant and mentor – whether in a one-on-one or a group mentoring situation.

#### *Challenges and Struggles*

Recruitment of mentors was difficult when employers began downsizing staff and requiring more from their employees. Employers who were approached were hesitant to establish in-house mentor relationships for their new TI employees.

Maintaining the group mentor connection worked while trainees were in training, but was very difficult once trainees found jobs. Staff didn’t have time to fully support the relationships, and when there was staff turnover the mentoring process lost the support it needed.

## Strategy: Increasing Graduate and Employer Follow-Up Contacts

### *Initial Successes*

Regular graduate contact at 14-30-60-90-180-360-540 days was more consistent follow-up than previously occurred, and helped participants feel that “the staff cares.”

More documentation in the database of anecdotal information on progress and issues—including job and performance satisfaction ratings—provided a better understanding of participant motivators and needs.

Recognition of retention and advancement tangible achievements inspired participants to keep in touch.

Providing incentives for responding to follow-up calls, e.g., bus passes, helped raise the response rate.

### *Challenges and Struggles*

Often, employers did not respond to requests for follow-up performance information beyond “employed” status.

During crunch times, it was difficult to maintain staff resources (time) to do regular long-term follow-up beyond what funding contracts require, and to enter information into the database.

## Strategy: Strengthening Data Systems

### *Initial Successes*

Regular review with staff of follow-up data was helpful to maintain focus on results and to design specific strategies for different needs.

After several experiences with analyzing data from the project, staff eventually saw the value of increased work with the database.

New data forms provided more consistency and structure to follow-up conversations with graduates and employers.

### *Challenges and Struggles*

It was difficult to maintain staff and documentation continuity over the entire period of follow-up, so data was not always complete.

## Strategy: Offering Advanced Skills Training

### *Initial Successes*

It worked well in Chicago to offer practical training in a “family-centered event” that included activities for children.

PC Technician training in Indianapolis proved to be the most attractive “advanced skills” option – because of clear wage increase possibilities. (This actually began at the end of the PASS Project period.)

### *Challenges and Struggles*

Most graduates didn’t respond to opportunities to upgrade skills through evening or weekend training – unless the value to the participant clearly outweighed the additional “hassle” and loss of family time.

## Strategy: Enhancing the Culture of Work Elements of the Training

### *Initial Successes*

Longer internships provided more experience and relationships needed for advancement.

New workshops on career goal setting and using the language of the “bottom-line culture” of the workplace better prepared trainees.

### *Challenges and Struggles*

## Strategy: Targeting Specific Advancement-Oriented Employers for Partnerships

### *Initial Successes*

More frequent and regular focus groups with employers were helpful tools to keep curriculum up to date and to develop the image of “we’re your partner.”

Conversations about career paths with employers were helpful to staff in placement matches as well as in training sessions on workplace culture.

### *Challenges and Struggles*

Supervisors and human resource personnel were more and more consumed with day-to-day operations, meeting bottom-line goals, and shifting company priorities. Turnover at companies impeded relationship building.

## Results – Retention & Advancement Outcomes

Overall, the retention/wage advancement outcomes for the PASS participants (office skills graduates only) were as follows:

	Chicago	Indianapolis	Overall PASS
<b>Employed 3 months after initial hire</b>	85.0%	87.9%	87.0%
<b>Employed 6 months after initial hire</b>	75.0%	81.8%	79.8%
<b>Employed 12 months after initial hire</b>	85.0%	86.4%	86.0%
<b>Employed 18 months after initial hire</b>	78.0%	71.4%	74.1%
<b>Average starting wage after initial hire</b>	\$8.81	\$8.23	\$8.44
<b>Average wage 12 months after initial hire</b>	\$9.49	\$9.34	\$9.39 (an 11.3% increase)
<b>Average wage 18 months after initial hire</b>	\$10.09	\$10.77	\$10.51 (a 24.5% increase)

There were 11 graduates among the Chicago and Indianapolis sites that staff were unable to stay in contact with—about 10% of the study group. Retention rates were lower at the six-month benchmark than at the one-year benchmark because if graduates left their original placement job it tended to be around the 4-6 month mark. They would then find other employment and would be employed at the one-year follow up.

Overall retention results showed a significant increase from years prior to or during the early stages of the PASS project, as seen by this comparison of Indianapolis outcomes:

### *Retention Rates—Indianapolis*

	1999	2000	2001 (PASS)
<b>90-day Retention</b>	71%	80%	87%
<b>180-day Retention</b>	63%	70%	81%
<b>One Year Retention</b>	75%	71%	86%

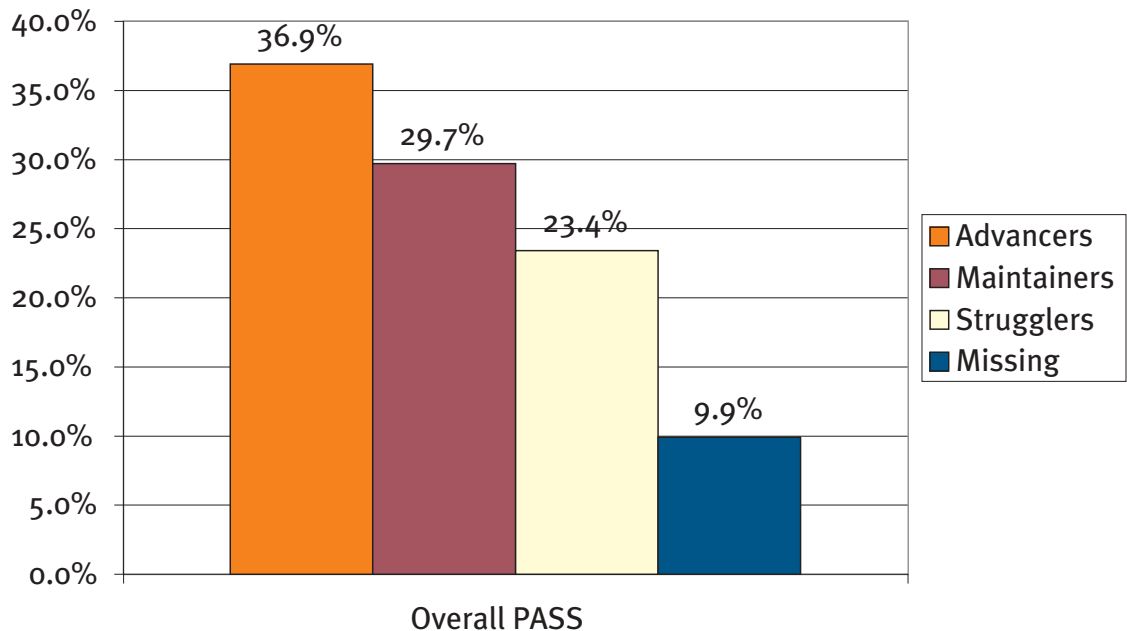
## Discovery – Participant “Outcome Groups”

As the PASS team of staff, the TI National Association director, and CSW staff reflected on emerging outcomes early in the third year of the project, it became apparent that participant outcomes could be grouped into three different categories. There were graduates who seemed well on their way to higher wages through advancement, those who were maintaining employment but not showing much income gain, and those who were struggling to just maintain consistent employment. Using this intuition, the team sorted their participant outcome information using the following definitions, to see what else could be learned:

- “Advancers”: Consistent employment (no gaps longer than three months) that includes benefits and wages of at least \$9.00/hour by the 12 or 18-month mark.
- “Maintainers”: Consistent employment reaching a wage level of \$7.00-9.00 by the 12 or 18-month mark; employment may be in temporary positions or positions with no benefits.
- “Strugglers”: Inconsistent employment; no position held for at least six months.

Using these data-based definitions, the combined group of Chicago and Indianapolis office skills graduates had a “split” as shown in Figure 1. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the graduates met the “Advancer” criteria, 30% the Maintainer, and 23% the Struggler. Because the “Missing” 10% often had their phones disconnected, it’s possible that many of them would also be in the Struggler category, but this assumption is only based on a small number of cases.

**Figure 1: PASS Outcome Groups - Splits**



# OUTCOME GROUPS

## TRESSA (AN ADVANCER)

**Tressa** took a temporary assignment in the visitor services department at one of the Chicago museums. She was hired on by the museum in a position that required her to work nights and weekends, which was difficult for her childcare arrangements. But after eight months she moved to the Membership department when a friend in the museum told her of another position before it was officially posted. At the 18-month mark, she was working weekdays at \$10.50 an hour with a lot of room to advance. But her supervisor told her she will need a degree to advance to management, so Tressa planned to re-enroll in college in 2002-2003.

She's appreciated the regular phone calls from the YMCA Alliance, and wishes that she could "re-enroll" to improve her typing skills. She credits her own "drive" to her mother and her children. "I did it on my own – I didn't ask for help, except through prayer. I want my children to see Mommy doing the right thing. There are also a lot of strong African-American women around me at the museum – so far I haven't talked with them, though."

## TAMMY (A MAINTAINER)

**Tammy's** internship was at a government office in Indianapolis, and even though she still had some punctuality problems they offered her a full-time position as a Clerk, making \$7.26 with benefits. A year later she received an 8% raise to \$7.84/hour. Six months later, she applied for a promotion in her department and is now a Secretary, making \$8.86. She learned about the opening from her supervisor, who encouraged her to apply. "I really hadn't considered it before then," says Tammy. "We have reviews every six months, but we don't really discuss goals – just things we need to improve on."

What does she like about her job? "The atmosphere is pleasant, there is lots going on, my co-workers are friendly, and it's stable," says Tammy. She has now been able to move out of her parents' home and into her own apartment.

Tammy still doesn't have her GED. "Since I was applying for a promotion in my own department they were looking at my work rather than my GED. But I know I'll need it to apply in another department," she says. What would be the primary motivator? Increased pay, she says, would allow her to fix her car. "But I want to sit here for a year or more – job security is what I need right now. The kids are still too young to be left alone at night while I go to school. So I've put that plan on hold, since I don't want to have to find a job with different hours."

## STACY (A STRUGGLER)

**Stacy** has had six positions since graduating from the Indianapolis program in early 2000. She left a telemarketing position after two weeks because "I hate sales." She lost a temporary position because of a medical problem. She was enjoying a data entry position when after five months the company moved to a location that was too far to travel to in an unreliable vehicle. She worked two restaurant positions to pick up some cash, but that was all she was able to find without her GED. Her last position in data entry also ended when she realized it was really telemarketing.

Stacy says that TI stayed in touch with her and was encouraging, but the lack of a GED was her main barrier. She finally enrolled with a neighborhood-based program to work on her GED, and obtained it in 2002. She has a new set of goals – to get a college degree and to work in a math-related field. She's back at Training, Inc. looking for an entry-level position using data entry or math.

## Employment & Wage Outcomes

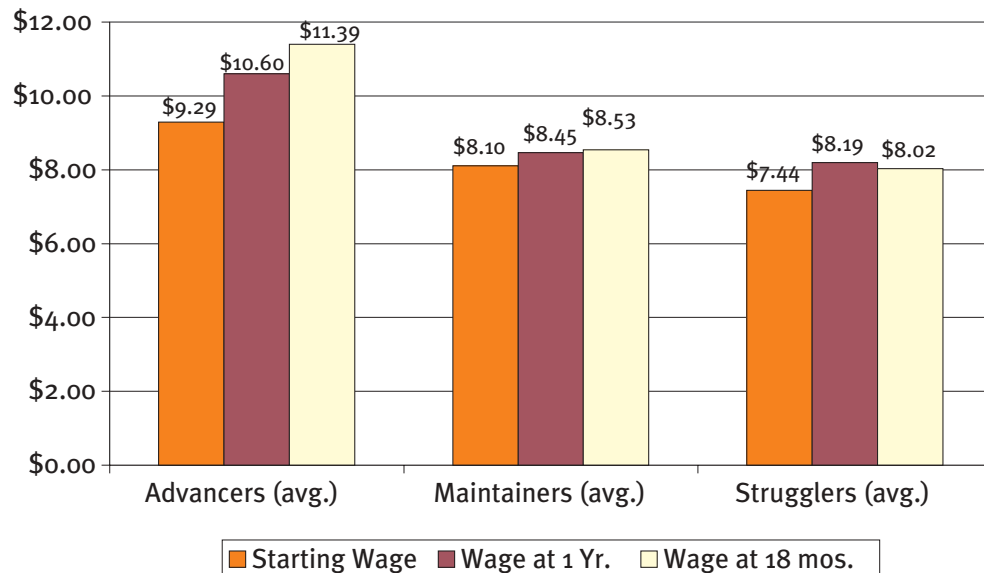
All three outcome groups tended to change jobs at least once during the 18-month follow-up period. Advancers averaged 1.8 jobs during that period, Maintainers averaged 1.9, and Strugglers averaged 2.7 jobs. In terms of types of initial positions obtained by the three groups, the data showed these major job types:

- Advancers – Customer Service Representatives, Administrative Assistant/Secretary, General Office, Data Entry, Receptionist
- Maintainers – Customer Service Representative, Cashier, General Office
- Strugglers – General Office, Data Entry, Customer Service, Telemarketing

While the types of jobs that graduates obtained were often similar, Advancers tended to obtain more full-time positions or temporary positions in larger companies that could lead to benefit-paying permanent jobs. While the Strugglers had more jobs in the retail sector, all three groups had positions with banks, insurance companies, government offices, or temporary placement firms.

Figure 2 shows the wage gains demonstrated by the three outcome groups. The Advancers group averaged \$9.29 in starting salaries and increased their salaries overall by 14% after one year and an additional 9% after 18 months. The Maintainers, on the other hand, averaged starting salaries of \$8.10 and an increase of only 5% after 18 months. Even at 18 months, the Maintainer average salary of \$8.53 was well below the starting level of the Advancers. The Strugglers, who tended to lose jobs more often, had average starting wages of \$7.44 but showed a more erratic wage gain pattern because second and third jobs tended not to be related to initial positions.

**Figure 2: PASS Group Wage Advancement**



## Benefits

In terms of benefits, 100% of the Advancers had jobs with paid medical benefits by the end of the project period, and 79% of Maintainers had jobs with benefits. On the other hand, only 50% of Strugglers obtained jobs with benefits.

## Demographic Characteristics

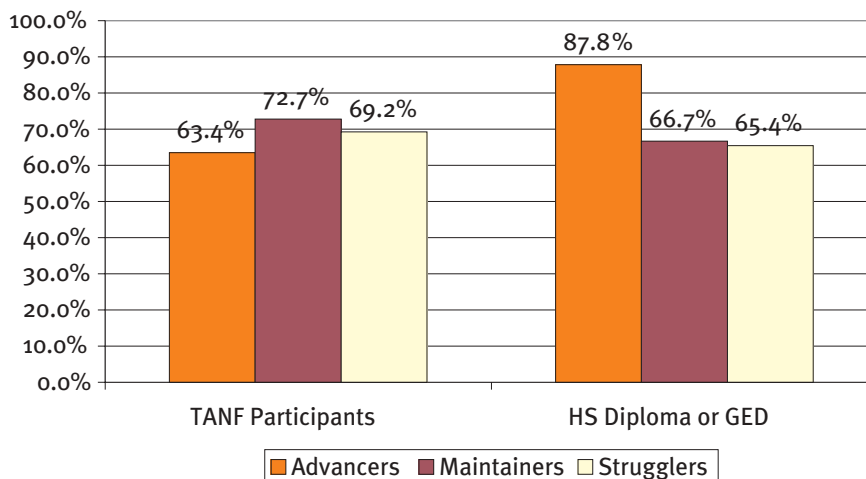
While the numbers are still relatively small, some patterns did emerge. As shown in Table 3, the percentage of TANF participants in the Advancers group was lower than the percentage of TANF participants in the two other groups, although not by a significant amount. On the other hand, the percentage of Advancers with their high school diploma or GED was far greater than comparable percentages for the two other groups.

In addition, as shown in Figure 4, those in the Advancers group that received TANF tended to have far fewer months of assistance (average of 11.3 months) than did the Maintainers and Strugglers, who averaged approximately two years on assistance. This suggests that the Advancers as a group who were receiving TANF were possibly using those benefits because of some “temporary poverty” situation, whereas the Maintainers and Strugglers may have had a more long-term or generational experience with public assistance.

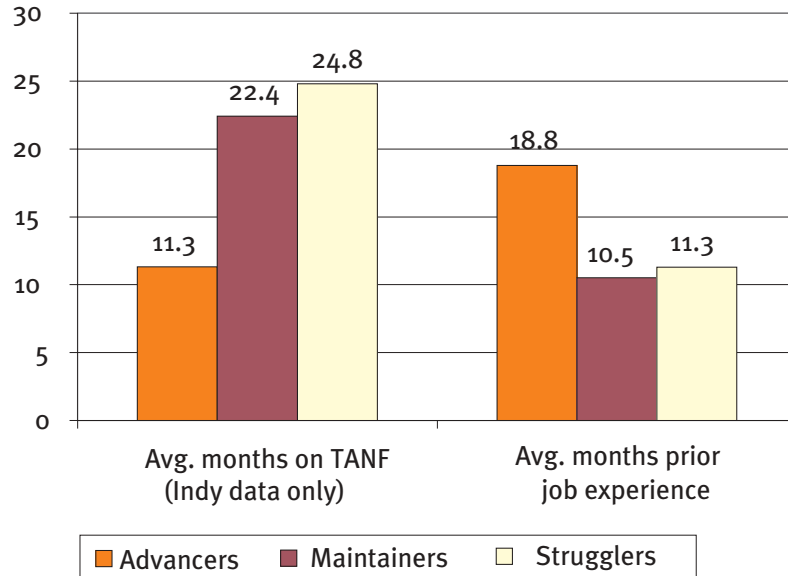
The Advancers also had much stronger work histories, averaging 18.8 months of prior work experience, while Maintainers and Strugglers had work histories averaging around 11 months. However, there was no significant difference in the types of jobs participants had held prior to training, which included cashiering, housekeeping, some clerical, assembly or production, sales, child care, and corrections. All three groups also included participants who had some supervisory experience before entering the training program.

The PASS team also looked for trends in other demographic data. But there seemed to be no difference in the three groups in areas such as the number of children in participants’ families or a variety of personal barriers.

**Figure 3: PASS Groups by TANF & Education Status**



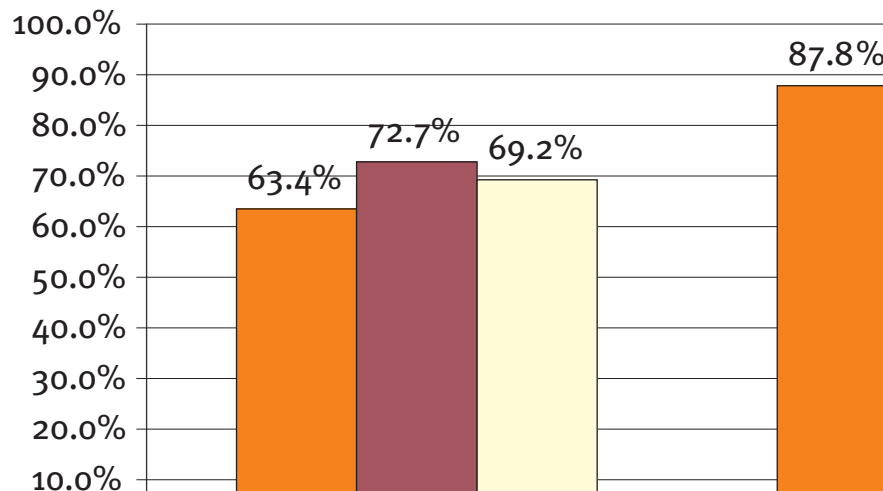
**Figure 4: PASS Groups by Months of TANF Assistance and Work Experience**



**Effect of PASS Interventions**

How did the interventions of various PASS activities differ among the three outcome groups? As indicated in Figure 5, participation in PASS-related contacts—career planning sessions, mentoring contacts, on-the-job follow-up conversations and peer support events—varied little between the Advancers and Maintainers. There was, however, less overall interaction with the Strugglers, most likely because it was more difficult to stay in touch with them when they were not employed. In terms of peer support events after the training programs had ended, 35% of the Advancers attended one or more events, 18% of the Maintainers took advantage of them, and only 5% of the Strugglers attended.

**Figure 3: PASS Groups by TANF & Educ**



## Qualitative Characteristics

Initial review of data about the three outcome groups during their time in training did not show significant differences between the three groups in terms of technical skill gains, but this is an area for further review. As staff reflected on some of the more qualitative characteristics of the three outcome groups, they noted these things:

- Advancers tended to be those who took more initiative, had more “support resources” available to them, and therefore often had less difficulty dealing with challenges.
- Maintainers usually had good attendance and punctuality, but were less willing to take risks. They also seemed to have less self-confidence while in training.
- Strugglers tended to be those who either had more personal issues challenging them or less resources to deal with those barriers. They had more attendance issues during the program and also struggled with managing conflict.

# 2

## Learnings and Recommendations: Confronting “Culture Change” Challenges

The PASS Project’s main focus was to evaluate how practices that have proven effective in Training, Inc.’s pre-employment programs could be successfully adapted for use in the post-employment environment. It also tested some assumptions that policy makers, employers, and practitioners may have about effective retention and advancement strategies.

Each of the programs implemented a number of different strategies to work with graduates once they found employment, and overall retention and advancement outcomes were as good or better than before. But we found that some of the strategies were much more difficult to implement than anticipated, and it was even harder to assess which particular strategies had made a difference in someone’s success.

The most helpful learnings from the PASS project may be those that came in the midst of discovering how difficult implementation really was. It became apparent to us that some of the assumptions made by policy makers as a basis for current workforce development policies are not necessarily “real.” The various “partners” involved in the project – the participants, the practitioner organizations, the employers, and the funding agencies – did not always behave or respond in ways we anticipated. But further reflection leads us to suggest that this is because they are being asked to change part of a long-standing “culture” – a change process that takes considerable time and effort.

The following pages describe some of our learnings in these areas, as well as some initial recommendations that emerge from those insights.

### Working With Employers

#### Assumptions

Our assumption going into the PASS Project – based on some of the “work first” assumptions – was that employers will supply the on-site tools for advancement, will be motivated to identify and support advancing workers, and will welcome practitioner involvement as an intermediary to assist with advancement.

## Our Learnings – the “Culture” Issues

With many employers of PASS participants, there seemed to be more of a “culture of retention” that sees employees as “inputs” to maintain maximum productivity, rather than a “culture of advancement” that views employees as “assets” to be developed – perhaps because there is little practical incentive to do the latter. Employers focus on business profitability. Our experience was that even where employers and staff at the human resources level said they were committed to the advancement of their employees, there often was neither the time nor the institutionalized process to support that commitment at the supervisor level. In this situation, those with Advancers characteristics—who are more prone to take initiative and may have more resources—will still seek out training and advancement opportunities, even if it means finding another job. But the Maintainers and the Strugglers, who are less proactive, might not get enough assistance to succeed.

### LESSON 1

*Employers welcome early help with retention, but some don’t have an expectation of intermediaries beyond that.*

Most of the employers interviewed during the PASS Project welcomed the involvement and early follow-up activities of program staff. Employers (human resource staff and supervisors) also said that they appreciated the efforts of job developers who took time to get to know a company’s particular work environment and job realities, because they could then make a better “match.” They found the follow-up activities of program staff helpful, because it let them know there were other resources available.

In fact, several employers said that they wished Training, Inc. staff made more frequent contact with them, especially in the first three months on the job. After three months, said one employer, a quarterly contact was sufficient. Another employer said she wished she knew more about what the program’s goals and needs were, so that she could work better with staff around a particular new hire. In one of the focus groups, an employer said that Training, Inc. staff should actually hold them more “accountable” for what is happening with their new employee.

There were some employers, however, who questioned whether longer-term help from Training, Inc. as an intermediary could foster a dependency that got in the way of the employer/employee relationship. Others noted that Training, Inc., in playing the intermediary role, had to be careful that there was not a stigma attached to the program graduate among his/her peers on the job because of special follow-up activities.

### LESSON 2

*Employers expect entry-level employees to take “personal initiative” for their own development – this approach works well for Advancers, but is much more difficult for the Maintainers and Strugglers.*

Even when employers did have on-site skills training or career coaching available, a number of employers surveyed noted the “lack of desire” or self-motivation among their new hires to pursue the next steps for advancement. Most employers said it was up to the new employee to take the initiative in pursuing more training or additional responsibilities, and they often didn’t see that initiative.

*“I don’t think it’s your responsibility (Training, Inc.’s) to get them to the next career step. It’s their career. Your job is to make sure they have better confidence, strong desire and a good work ethic. That’s hard enough as it is. The graduate and their supervisor have to take it the next step.”*

-Employer Focus Group Participant

*“We have training and mentoring opportunities here...but it’s up to the individual to be proactive and ask for them. She also has to negotiate with her manager for a time that can work for the department.”*

-Interview with PASS Employer

When asked more about their observations, some employers felt that older employees were perhaps less motivated because they were comfortable with where they were. Seeking more training or additional responsibilities would cause more stress than any small financial gains would warrant. On the other hand, employers of younger, less experienced hires felt that fear of failure was often a factor in the lack of desire, and they saw that nudging employees to take small new steps often helped.

### LESSON 3

*Very few employers had a systematic career planning or staff development process for entry-level workers beyond semi-annual or annual performance evaluations.*

*“In my company, a supervisor’s department will be charged for the training of one of their employees, plus she’s going to lose that person’s time. Why would she be motivated to do that?”*

-PASS Employer  
Focus Group

Few companies that had employed PASS graduates reported that they had a career planning / job coaching process for their entry-level hires outside of the opportunity provided by semi-annual or annual performance evaluations. In most cases, there was not a defined career path, although this was less true in the hospitality industry jobs that some of the Chicago welfare-to-work participants secured. While employer supervisors seemed to want to provide ongoing coaching and mentoring, the frequency of it actually happening varied.

Focus group and employer interviews during the PASS project also revealed that even though employers perceive that new hires bring a lot of “soft skill” issues to the job, if training was provided it was primarily technical or computer training. However, a few employers also offered customer service and communications training, because of the nature of their entry-level positions. Companies offering this training tended to be the larger employer organizations. How much that training was actually advertised or promoted to employees seemed to vary widely. The training offered by smaller employers was much more informal and on an “as needed” basis, based on supervisor initiative.

### LESSON 4

*Front-line productivity demands compete with staff development and advancement efforts.*

Even though employers often cite problems with employee turnover, the fluidity and faster pace of corporate life makes keeping a focus on retention and advancement support increasingly difficult for some companies. As some companies downsize to maintain profit, employees and managers are stretched just to make daily operations work. Human resource representatives in PASS focus groups acknowledged that even where it was company policy to provide training for entry-level employees, supervisors would often cite production pressures as a reason to delay the training until sometime in the future.

There were a few companies, however, who stressed that because of the tight job market (at that time) they worked hard to create an environment that encouraged new hires to stay and grow. PASS graduates at those companies verified that increased social activities for employees, feedback sessions, and cross-department teams helped new employees feel like they are appreciated and valued.

At the same time, staff remarked that it was harder than ever to get return calls or feedback on new hires' progress from supervisors or human resources personnel. In some cases, there seemed to be a "don't mess in my business" response.

Another example of the difficulty of getting employer involvement in these issues was that Indianapolis staff spent numerous hours in meetings with five targeted employer partners for the PASS Project. The purpose of these meetings was to plan ways that Training, Inc. could support those employers' retention and staff development needs. In one case, conversations collapsed when the main human resources contact resigned his position. In two other cases, a merger and a facility move sidetracked the project's efforts. In the last two, difficulty in scheduling meetings with company staff on a timely basis made it impossible to maintain momentum.

*"Focus your energies on the best supervisors, because supervisors' approach to advancing their employees will vary greatly. Let them know what you are trying to accomplish, how you can help them with their goals, and what their role needs to be."*

-PASS Employer Interview

## Recommendations

To enlist the employer as a partner in the advancement effort, practitioners must deal with a culture that may often value retention over advancement. Programs must work with supervisors and managers to clearly identify the return on investment for developing front-line employees and for collaborating with intermediaries to provide long-term support.

Specific strategies for practitioners include:

- Screen and target employers for their "advancement practices" – in-house training, career advising, etc. – and nurture relationships with supervisors who are more advancement-oriented.
- Make clear to supervisors the return on investing in their entry-level employees and in developing a relationship with intermediaries. Negotiate a transition role with employers; help develop employment transition plans with trainees and employers that include offering additional graduates to replace those advancing from entry-level positions.
- Offer the employer appropriate on-site opportunities for skill building for their entry-level employees, with negotiated times that meet both employees' and supervisors' needs.
- Work with employers to help supervisors become better coaches and role models around the "hidden rules" of the workplace. Connect employers to other training resources as needed to help with supervisory training and workplace diversity issues.

## Working With Participants

### Assumptions

Much of the research and literature to date on employment retention and advancement assumes that trainees will adopt career goals through experience in the work environment and will be motivated to seize opportunities for job advancement. Two examples of assumptions often made include:

- The best way for individuals to advance in the labor force is to build work histories or participate in education and training activities while working; and
- Workers are seeking advancement opportunities – they just need skills and elimination of barriers to achieve their goals.

### Our Learnings – the “Culture” Issues

Findings from the PASS Project suggest that it’s not as simple as these assumptions would imply. Even with more financial resources, it takes much time for those rooted in a “culture of survival” to be able to operate with the more future-oriented mindset of the workplace, where a “culture of achievement” is the norm. In terms of the PASS outcome groups, Maintainers and Strugglers—who often have a longer history of public assistance and less prior work experience—were slower to focus and act on future goals.

#### LESSON 1

*Even after employment, the “survival” mode prevails – long-term “stepping stone” thinking does not come easily, especially when immediate demands are still huge. Advancement happens on the participant’s timeline, not the practitioner’s. It’s a long process that can be encouraged and coached – but not forced.*

It is very difficult—and takes longer than anticipated—for persons who have been living in a short-term “survival” mode to begin to make decisions from a long-term orientation. Participants aren’t necessarily ready or able to think seriously about long-term advancement goals during the pre-employment and early post-employment phases of their involvement, when survival and adjustment issues take precedence. Just because they have a new source of increased income, their personal and family challenges do not go away overnight. It takes time after becoming employed to adjust to a more crowded and demanding life style, expending energy at work and caring for their families at home. In some cases—those of the Struggler group—the demands of the more crowded schedule are too much to sustain employment. The YMCA Alliance’s Roseland site thought that their strategy of using a van to get participants to and from employment would also provide an opportunity for coaching—but as one staff person remarked, “people are just too tired to have those kinds of conversations.”

Graduates said that they appreciated the support they received from phone calls, cards, and visits—and they even asked for further training opportunities. But most did not respond to opportunities for further training or support events until at least six months on the job, and for

some it was a year later. As one graduate replied when offered the option of getting some additional training that could lead to a promotion, “It sounds nice, but my plate’s too full right now.”

## LESSON 2

*Success in personal relationships can be more important for participants than achieving success in work. The “value” of advancement depends on its cost in terms of how getting there will affect family and other relationships.*

Success on the job is often a factor of motivation as much as anything else, and trainees’ motivating images of “success” can differ greatly from those held by employers and practitioners. In spite of goals they may have for advancement in the future, maintaining strong relationships with family and friends remains a greater priority for many participants. As one graduate responded to an offer to have advanced computer training on Saturday—“I can’t do it; Saturday is my ‘family day.’ I’m already having trouble spending enough time with my kids.” Simply earning more money than public assistance offers may be what defines success for some participants in light of these relationship priorities—especially for those who are Maintainers.

### Recommendations

Participants are at different places in their lives in terms of readiness to adopt career goals, gain more skills, and advance on the job. At any given time, some are Advancers, some are Maintainers, some are Strugglers. Both practitioners and policy makers need to better understand how trainees relate to work, careers, and success - rather than assume that they share what may be unrealistic middle-class goals and timelines for employment retention and advancement. Additional career-focused activities need to be phased in at a time when surviving and “getting into a new routine” are no longer at the forefront of participants’ concerns—which could be a much longer time than service providers and policy makers expect. Specific strategies for practitioners include:

- During the time available in a pre-employment setting, find as many ways as possible to frame the relationship between program staff and participants as a “long-term/life-long learning and support” relationship, a relationship that will help them accomplish the goals they have for their families. Provide opportunities for sharing progress and concerns, both job-related and personal.
- Tailor support activities to the timing needs of diverse participants – it’s their timeline, not yours. Provide an ongoing cycle of support opportunities, but be prepared for the fact that not many people may take advantage of them at any one time. It’s making them available that matters in terms of maintaining the relationship.
- Continuously model and practice goal-setting, problem-solving, and short-term action planning with the participants – around both personal and career issues. Build on short-term plans at first, then longer-term. Find ways to help them understand and demonstrate the “personal initiative” that is one of the hidden rules of the workplace.

Practical ways that Training, Inc. staff have begun to apply these recommendations include:

- Coaching trainees to take more initiative, through giving tours for visitors, speaking in front of the group, solving group issues, etc.;
- Intensifying efforts to re-establish a mentoring program that will provide additional support relationships;
- Building into the training curriculum more presentations from employer volunteers and graduates about the expectation of personal initiative to get further training;
- Establishing a trainee newsletter that highlights graduate retention and advancement accomplishments, as well as the steps required to achieve those; and
- Scheduling family-oriented events on a regular basis.

## Working As A Practitioner Organization

### Assumptions

Much of the research and literature to date on employment retention and advancement suggests that practitioners need to become career counselors oriented toward the ultimate outcome of self-sufficiency, need to relate more to employers as equally-important customers and need to re-direct organizational resources to that goal. Examples of changes that research suggests practitioners should make include:

- Turn case managers/job developers into career counselors (even though these are different jobs requiring different skills and motivations);
- Get trainees attached to a job as early as possible, since work skills and better attitudes will be acquired through working;
- Help persons coming from poverty backgrounds to develop the “work ethic” they need to meet workplace expectations; and
- Develop mentoring programs to ensure that entry-level workers have the support they need.

### Our Experience—the “Culture” Issues

Even though practitioners may have a genuine commitment to a mission of helping participants become self-sufficient, years of working in a funding and contract-driven mode create a culture that encourages the allocation of resources based on a “train, place, and verify employment” model. Given this history, it is not easy to modify existing models and to transform the organization to support a “train, place, and coach toward advancement” model – especially when resources are tight.

**LESSON 1***Staff vision is not always clear: just how far does “our role” extend?*

Even though the goal of self-sufficiency for trainees was clear, there was less of a consensus by staff in the PASS Project about just how far the role of the practitioner should go. Is the practitioner’s primary role one of “stabilization” for the first year, helping participants develop a foundation of skills for taking the next step? Or is there an additional role of brokering activities such as mentoring, coaching, and training, some of it at the employer site, in subsequent months? There were similar conversations among staff about the strategic and ethical issues around deciding where to focus limited staff resources – how should they be allocated among the Strugglers, the Maintainers, and the Advancers?

*“When dealing with graduates, we need to start at the ‘survival’ end of Maslow’s hierarchy – and sometimes that’s as far as we get. We can spend all of our energy just helping grads hold it together.”*

-PASS Staff Interview

**LESSON 2***Allocation of limited resources is very difficult – it’s sometimes easiest to focus on short-term funder requirements and the “most visible need.”*

Ironically, as PASS Project staff discussed ways to help participants develop long-range career plans, one person pointed out that after her own initial educational and employment goals were attained, she had stopped “planning” her career. How can we ask our participants to engage in career planning, she said, when she herself was focused only on the short-term future?

*“It’s hard to do long-term follow-up when my day is completely taken up with the participants who are right there at my door, in my face.”*

-PASS Staff Interview

Successful retention and advancement strategies require first of all an “image shift” on the part of staff to think in terms of much longer time frames concerning their participants. This is particularly hard to do when public funding benchmarks are still focused on short-term outcomes like three- or six-month retention. In both Chicago and Indianapolis sites, funding contracts at the time (TANF, JTPA, Welfare-to-Work) had payable performance points at no later than 90 days post-employment, and retention reporting requirements of no longer than six months. Other funding streams such as TANF vouchers had no retention reporting requirements at all (and no funds to help support long term activity).

Finally, long-term follow-up services tended to take a back seat for staff whose job descriptions had them also attending to the needs of new job seekers or newly employed participants.

**LESSON 3***Individualized strategies are more of a challenge than structured group activities.*

Both the Chicago and Indianapolis programs had a history of well-structured pre-employment group activities that produced successful outcomes for graduates. But the PASS experience early on made it clear that group activities would not reach nearly enough people – at best 25% of targeted graduates. It was clear that more flexibility was required – including evening and weekend contacts and more visits to individual employer sites. This presented new time management challenges for staff used to a “culture” of Monday to Friday daytime efforts. The related dilemma became how to make more individualized services – or services in very small groups – cost effective when funding resources were becoming more limited.

*“New tasks—like entering data into our database—fall more easily off my crowded plate than established routines.”*

-PASS staff interview

#### **LESSON 4**

*Changes in personnel – and in relationships – make it harder for participants to stay engaged.*

Participants in PASS graduate focus groups reiterated over and over that the support and frequent follow-up contacts by staff were helpful and motivating for them. They felt comforted knowing that Training, Inc. was there to help them if they needed help in the future. Clearly positive relationships were a key ingredient to graduates’ staying in touch.

This fact was underscored when personnel changes occurred in three of the four initial project sites. The Indianapolis Training, Inc. experienced a change in Executive Directors during the PASS project period, and in the transition four different persons filled the Job Developer/Job Coach position. Each time it was hard for a new staff person to pick up the relationship continuity with earlier graduates they had not known. This certainly contributed to the number of persons who finally ended up “Missing,” and may have had an effect on who remained a Struggler or a Maintainer. It also meant that relationships with employers had to be renewed each time.

In the two Chicago welfare-to-work programs, there was also turnover in the lead PASS job coach positions. It was again very difficult for the new staff people to establish relationships with those participants who had been there prior to their tenures. In addition, because these programs were shorter in length to begin with, participants usually were not “bonded” enough with other staff for them to stay connected to the programs. Hence, many of them became “missing.”

#### **LESSON 5**

*Longer-term follow-up creates demands on information systems as well as increased requirements on staff use of those systems.*

The PASS Project and its advancement goals challenged staff to know when someone changed jobs, why they did so, what issues and progress they were experiencing, how their current goals compared to ones they had originally identified, how their employers saw their potential for advancement, etc. In addition to the need for more anecdotal information, it also pushed staff to look at trends and patterns that could be discovered by comparing objective information about participants and their outcomes—like the analysis that resulted in the identification of the Strugglers, Maintainers, and Advancers outcome groups.

Such requirements certainly placed demands on the Training, Inc. database. But the more difficult challenge was that of asking staff to invest time in entering PASS data and then using it as a management tool. Staff who focus most of the day on personal relationships with participants tended to have an “anti-data” “there’s more to this than the numbers” attitude. It took a long time for staff to begin to see the value of using some of the data compiled as part of the PASS project as a tool that could help them prepare people to enter the workplace better prepared for retention and advancement.

## Recommendations

For practitioner organizations to internalize a culture that is more oriented to advancement and long-term coaching, the following need to occur:

- Administrators must provide strong, sustained leadership in clearly articulating the organization’s post-employment strategies for helping participants reach self-sufficiency and in committing the resources to make those strategies feasible.
- Secure funds to be able to allocate consistent, skilled staff resources to the role of long-term career coaching – for at least a year after placement, and preferably 18 months or longer. Allow plenty of time for the trust relationship to be built pre-employment between participants and those who will be doing follow-up. Hire staff who have the skills needed for ongoing career counseling and for coaching of supervisors.
- Commit to flexible service strategies to respond to participants with different personal and coaching needs. Provide options for both group and individual coaching, with availability during the workday or in non-traditional hours. Staff recruited to fill these roles should be clear that theirs is not a “9 to 5” job.
- Increase the use of data systems to monitor retention and advancement outcomes, as well as to provide data on participant characteristics and issues that can be used to increase the amount of support they get. Focus on identifying key behaviors that will help participants move from a potential Struggler status to Maintainer or Advancer, and use data systems to track progress and needs in those areas.
- To counteract the natural tendency of practitioners to focus more on participant needs than those of employers, create a position in which the primary focus is making sure the employers needs are met and working with the employer to help advance entry-level employees. Organizations should look at how this position is developed and funded in relation to the role and responsibilities for the job developer position. Some organizations may simply shift the focus of job developer to involve making quality referrals to employers and preparing participants for future employer needs. In addition, organizations must be able to allocate resources to provide retention and advancement services directly to employers.

## The Public Funding System

### Assumptions

With initial research and evaluation information now available about the impact of recent TANF policies, policy makers are looking at the reality of caseload reductions against relatively low wage and retention levels of employed TANF participants. However, when the PASS Project began many policy makers were operating under the assumptions that early work attachment to low-wage jobs and transitional benefits, sanctions, case management, and further training will result in retention and advancement. It has been assumed that transitional benefits will “smooth the way” for career advancement; sanctions for not working will ensure that workers will stay with their jobs; “career counselors” can serve multiple customers—employers who need the best workers they can find and job seekers who need the best employers they can find; and financial incentives for workers to “go to college” are more effective than incentives for colleges to “go to the workplace.”

*“We would like to spend more money per client, but the pressure is on spending less....at a time when the clients we now have are in greater need....”*

-Public Funder Interview

### Our Experience – the “Culture” Issue

Findings from this project suggest that the current public policy culture that has historically defined and rewarded success as “placement, short-term retention and case load reduction” – instead of “family poverty reduction” – does not provide adequate resources to encourage long-term job coaching and further skills training.

**LESSON 1** *There is little incentive / accountability by public funding sources for intermediaries to provide coaching assistance beyond six months.*

Current government policy provides little reward or incentive to intermediaries for helping persons advance in their employment and earnings. PASS Project programs in Indianapolis and Chicago received little or no funding to support graduate outcomes beyond six months post-employment. This means that public policy is more likely to support those in “situational” or temporary poverty– the Advancers who need less intensive services for less time– far more than it supports those in “generational” poverty– the Maintainers or the Strugglers who may take an entire year just to stabilize in their employment or be ready for additional services. The larger issue is that there is not enough total funding supplied in the system to support the length of pre-placement activity needed for bonding with the participant as well as long-term assistance leading to skill and wage advancement.

**LESSON 2** *Public incentive structures are not driven by employer needs.*

Public monies for skills training under TANF or WIA remain focused on the individual client’s development prior to hiring, and not on the employer’s skills needs after hiring. While PASS Project programs in Indianapolis and Chicago encourage clients to make training choices that fit

their needs and interests as well as meet the needs of employers, there is little incentive for the employer to become a “partner” in the development of individual clients. Traditionally, the primary role of the employer has been a purchaser of labor talent and sometimes an advisor to training programs on the types of skills that are needed. Rarely have public funding structures encouraged more explicit partnerships between businesses and training intermediaries.

Three elements combine to make it difficult for intermediaries and employers to work together to meet employer hiring and training needs and to increase the retention and advancement of program participants, especially those struggling to stay connected to the labor market. First, almost all program staff who contact employers do so on behalf of the individual trainee. These “job developers” work to place trainees and nurture the relationship with the employers during early, fragile stages of employment. There are few “account representatives” that work to better understand the needs of employers and to establish partnerships. Second, very little skill training money is placed under the direct control of employers that would provide some incentive for working more closely with training intermediaries. While WIA allows for on-the-job training (OJT) and customized training, the emphasis in usage of training funds is on individual training accounts (ITAs), or vouchers, as a primary vehicle. Training funds in the TANF system are mostly directed to pre-employment, class-size programs, not on post-employment advancement efforts that are tied directly to employer needs.

The third element is the performance measurement system, which is primarily imposed by the federal government. With the exception of the Employment Service System (Wagner-Peyser funds), the system measures and rewards success based on outcomes of individual trainees in obtaining and retaining jobs, not on success in meeting the employment and skill development needs of employers. By not tying outcomes to employer needs, this system doesn’t encourage partnerships between businesses and training intermediaries that are critical to the advancement success of individuals struggling to stay attached to the labor market.

### LESSON 3

*Unclear transitional benefit provisions at the state level make it hard to do strategic coaching of participants in terms of their employment decisions. In addition, the transitional benefit system itself may act as a disincentive for job advancement.*

The experience of staff during the PASS Project was that participants often do not understand how their public assistance benefits will be phased out upon employment – and need more information early on. Training, Inc. Indianapolis staff had great difficulty getting clear information from case managers in order to include it in their training and do strategic coaching. Because of turnover in the TANF system case managers, often they weren’t clear themselves about available benefits and policies, making it hard for TI staff to work with them as a team during the post-placement transition period.

At least in Indiana and perhaps in Illinois, trainee incentive to earn more may also be thwarted by major cuts in benefits at wage levels that still aren’t family-supporting. There is substantial evidence in Indiana that welfare participants have an incentive to move off welfare and into low-wage jobs (less than \$9/hr), in large part because of relatively low welfare payments in Indiana.

However, in Indiana there appears to be little incentive for welfare trainees to move from low-wage jobs to \$9-10 an hour jobs—the net financial gain for the worker is small because of loss of Food Stamps, tax and public assistance subsidies (Earned Income Tax Credit, child care, transportation, housing). Further research needs to be done to determine the incentive structure in Illinois. But again, under these policies those who are Maintainers or Strugglers—who often have less access to other resources—may get stuck at a “wage plateau.”

### Recommendations

- Provide financial incentives to service providers by rewarding longer-term retention and advancement outcomes – at least at the one year benchmark and preferably 18 months.
- Provide direct incentives to employers for skills training leading to advancement, especially on-site training during work hours. Each newly hired employee should still be considered a “trainee” with the second phase of subsidized training funding to be directed to the employer.
- As employers are sometimes reluctant to pull workers off production to participate in training, thought needs to be given to ways that welfare and WIA funds can provide incentives to employers to make this feasible. Both TANF and WIA allow increased flexibility for providing training to “incumbent workers” leading to advancement of skills and wages. Funds need to be used more creatively for employer-sponsored initiatives tied to specific wage rewards for successful completion of training. Employee interviews would lead us to believe that a primary barrier for obtaining more skills via classroom training is time, not money – thus, we need more creativity in using welfare and WIA funds to provide training as part of the regular work day.
- Skills training has been severely diminished in the TANF system, but state and local policies could be changed to establish post-placement training as a priority activity consistent with a “work first” philosophy. WIA allows for targeted use of money for incumbent workers and for creative on-the-job and customized training strategies – all of these areas have been underutilized as emphasis has been placed on the unemployed and on Individual Training Accounts (ITAs).

# SUMMARY: PASS Assumptions, Learnings and Recommendations

	Assumptions	Learnings: "Culture Conflicts"	Recommendations
PARTICIPANTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Participants will adopt life and career goals and will be motivated to gain more skills and advance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Even after employment, the “survival” mode prevails – long-term “stepping stone” thinking does not come easily. Advancement happens on the participant’s timeline, not the practitioner’s.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Frame the relationship between program staff and participants as long-term.</li> <li>■ Tailor support activities to the timing needs of the participant.</li> <li>■ Continuously model and practice goal-setting, problem-solving, and short-term action planning.</li> <li>■ Help participants understand the “hidden rules” of the workplace.</li> </ul>
PRACTITIONERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Practitioners will focus on long-term self-sufficiency goals and will provide new “career coach” support for participants and employers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Staff vision of their role is not always clear: just how far does the relationship extend?</li> <li>■ It’s easiest to focus limited resources on the short-term and the “most visible need.”</li> <li>■ Individualized follow-up strategies require more resources than structured group activities.</li> <li>■ Personnel changes make it hard to maintain relationships.</li> <li>■ Longer-term follow-up creates new requirements for information systems and for staff to utilize systems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide strong sustained leadership in clearly articulating the organization’s vision and strategies for participant advancement.</li> <li>■ Allocate consistent, skilled staff resources to long-term career coaching – for at least a year after placement, preferably 18 months.</li> <li>■ Create multiple, flexible service strategies to respond to participants with different needs.</li> <li>■ Change the relationship with employers by creating “employer account representatives” whose primary focus is meeting the needs of their employers.</li> <li>■ Expand data collection to link long-term outcomes with participant characteristics and program services.</li> </ul>

**EMPLOYERS**

**Assumptions**

Employers will provide skills training and career coaching, and will work with practitioners on advancement goals.

**Learnings: "Culture Conflicts"**

- Most entry-level employees are expected to take responsibility for their own development—few companies provide systematic job coaching.
- Front-line productivity demands compete with staff training.
- Many employers don't see the need for practitioner help with advancement.

**Recommendations**

- Screen and target employers for their "advancement culture and practices."
- Make clear to supervisors the return on investing in their entry-level employees.
- Provide on-site skills training during the work day that will meet supervisor and employee needs.
- Work with employers to help supervisors become better coaches and role models to help employees learn the "hidden rules" of the workplace.

**PUBLIC ASSISTANCE SYSTEM**

Early work attachment plus case management, transitional benefits and training will result in retention and advancement.

- Incentives are limited for practitioners to provide coaching assistance beyond six months.
- There are insufficient financial incentives for employees and employers to engage in additional skill building after hiring. In addition, incentives may need to be directly tied to employer satisfaction with the quality of a referral or with the level of ongoing training that's required to adequately meet the employer's need.
- An unclear transitional benefit system makes it hard to do strategic coaching, plus benefit systems may discourage wage advancement.

- Reward practitioners for long-term retention and advancement outcomes.
- Establish post-placement skills training as a policy priority within the "work first" framework.
- Provide direct funding to employers for skills training leading to advancement, especially on-site training during work hours.
- Consistently communicate the TANF transitional benefits system to case managers, practitioners and participants.

## Implications & Next Steps

This project illustrates for policy makers the need to examine in greater detail the impact of policies and strategies to help low-wage workers maintain steady employment and increase wages. Although the current policy environment allows states some latitude to support the working poor, the political, economic and social issues that must be addressed are numerous and complex. While this project was focused on the experiences of two organizations working hard to apply approaches that have the potential to boost individuals' chances of retaining jobs and advancing in the labor market, many of the barriers experienced throughout this project are also revealed through the results of other studies focused on retention and advancement.

While much is known about retention strategies that providers are trying, very little has been studied about the partnerships needed between the public and private sector to support advancement. Building on their success in targeting specific industries and providing training strategies that benefit low-income individuals, a number of non-profit organizations are implementing sectoral programs to help low-income or disadvantaged individuals retain jobs and advance to better jobs. However there are not enough programs and studies that focus on the role of the public and private sector to provide states with definitive, reliable information about what works and doesn't work.

Questions for further study include:

- What is required for successful employer involvement in advancement?
- In what specific ways does the TANF transitional benefit system provide a barrier to job advancement?
- How far should the “intermediary role” go in terms of working with employers and employed individuals?
- How can we ensure that the tax and benefits structures provide incentive for advancement?

As Congress considers the reauthorization of TANF, the Workforce Investment Act, and the Higher Education Act, lawmakers should keep in mind that flexibility within the current system has allowed state and local officials to design and test programs to address the retention and advancement needs of individuals entering the workforce. Policymakers will need to continue to support flexibility and funding in its welfare and workforce development programs if state and local agencies and the research community are to develop and test new approaches to job retention and advancement. The current experiences of this project team with providing post-placement job retention and advancement is not sufficient to recommend sweeping policy changes. Rather, the federal government should continue to provide funds and flexibility to states so that better methods for increasing job retention and advancement can be created.

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