ETA Sector Strategies Technical Assistance Initiative:

BEST PRACTICES:
WORKSYSTEMS, INC.
This case study was originally written as a part of the Workforce Systems Sector Strategies Guide, a document created through a partnership of Maher & Maher and the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, as a part of the USDOL Employment and Training Administration's multi-year Sector Strategies Technical Assistance Initiative.

The Guide focused on innovation employed in the design and implementation of sector strategies within workforce development over the last two decades. The programs included in the case study portion of the guide demonstrated advanced thinking in one or more of the five elements of ETA’s Sector Strategies Framework: Data-Based Decision Making, Industry Engagement, Organizational Capacity and Alignment, Sector-Based Service Delivery, and Sustainability and Continuous Improvement.

WORKSYSTEMS, INC. (PORTLAND, OREGON)

Interview with John Gardner, Director of Business Services

SECTOR STRATEGY OVERVIEW

The Workforce Investment Board is a public/private partnership representing the City of Portland, Multnomah and Washington counties. Among its many successes, this workforce board led development of a Community Workforce Agreement as part of Clean Energy Works Portland (CEWP) pilot (which provide the proof of concept for the statewide Clean Energy Works Oregon. CEWP had excellent outcomes due to the agreement, which required workforce development programs to provide the industry recognized credentials, and required energy efficiency contractors to meet standards for job quality and diverse hiring. The Board is also engaged in regional, manufacturing sector work in a cooperative effort with the adjoining Southwest Washington Workforce Investment Council.

The Portland Workforce Investment Board changed its approach to workforce development after determining that industry is the key for understanding skills needed by workers. To better serve the supply side of the labor market, they need to first understand the demand side. Portland started its close work with industry in 1998 - 1999 as part of its Career Pathways work. The initiative was rooted in trying to transmit skills more quickly than traditional
degree programs, which often required workers to remove themselves from the labor market for 2 - 4 years. The Career Pathways efforts were focused on strategic healthcare and manufacturing industries. The industries made sense for the initiative as they were significant in size and pay structure within the labor market. They also used credentials for hiring they worked well for Pathways. At about the same time, vocational ESL was evolving in cooperation with the two industries. The early work was useful, with participating education providers assuming more responsibility for the initiative over time.

The workforce board continued investing its funds for years in helping redesign and refine curriculum for the two industries. Over time (by 2003-2004), industry moved from guiding the work force discussion to becoming more advisory in nature. The Career Pathways were still relatively expensive and still required worker disengagement from the labor market, although for maybe only six months to a year. As the Pathways initiative became more institutionalized, the workforce board became more a funding mechanism than a driver. The board also wrestled with finding resources to impact the industry significantly. Eventually, the workforce board and its education partners came to the realization that, in spite of their good efforts, the connection to industry was not going to work unless the employers owned it. The solution the workforce board envisioned was not another employer advisory council.

DATA-INFORMED DECISION MAKING

In their work, the board determined employers appreciate metrics and outcomes at least as much as workforce system funders. It is especially important to the board to be as clear as possible about what the public workforce system can and cannot do. They want to propose a level of specificity for both outcomes and activities so employers clearly understand what will be done and can judge success. The discussion leads to a one or two-year plan known to all partners. Careful not to over promise, the board still largely relies on formula funding and commitments to industry are tempered to reflect the reality.

The board has brought in other resources to address skill needs, from the State and elsewhere, although still primarily grants. Board policy decisions helped align eligible provider training lists (reduced over time) and focus limited resources. Continuous feedback from the demand side about supply reinforces alignment and allocation. The board is also careful to align screening and recruitment to provide quality matches. In the selected industries, the board maintains oversight of recruitment. For the youth system, the board is attentive to lining up youth internships and summer jobs, insuring the pipeline conversation with the emerging labor force and further aligning the system.

The board has the advantage of four state funded labor market analysts in the board offices. The potential is for new tools, leveraged with the additional manpower, to better present labor market information to the community, well beyond program participants. The board is now beginning to produce career guides for adults and students.

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT
The Portland WIBs most recent industry engagement efforts begin with research. They look at 12 - 13 data elements, focused primarily on the number of jobs (both absolute and relative share), current and projected openings, growth rate, demographics of labor force, and, of course, wages. Working with friendly employers with which they already have a relationship, they review the data to determine if it looks reasonably accurate. Again, employers have to own it.

Another change in the approach to industry is invite employers to the table in a neutral environment, with no predisposed solutions. It is not about asking the employers to participate in a career pathways program or an OJT opportunity. While either may be part of the employer determined solution, the discussion does not begin with a program or provider. The employer champions (known friends of the system) help convene the larger group of employers. Invitations to the first meeting come from the workforce board and champion employers. The workforce board facilitates the conversation. The conversation is by employers. Other partners may be in the room but they are there to listen, not talk. The intent of the board is to build toward a critical mass talking to employers before others are invited.

**SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

The board's Executive Director says process does matter and continuous improvement is necessary. The board has started some of its most ambitious work by trying to get the public workforce system to respond as a regional entity. Currently, most work is done on a regional basis - three workforce boards (in two states) working on solutions. Coordination makes the work harder and slower and complicates the conversation. The three have a shared board committee overseeing industry work. Each assigns leadership to bring their respective staff to the solution. However more difficult, the three boards coordination allow the public workforce system to serve industry better. The Portland WIB is looking forward to addressing the WIOA regional collaboration requirements with the belief it will make the system stronger.

The Portland WIBs last suggestion to other boards doing this work is to play to strengths, whether single sector or multiple. It may sometimes be easier to do one at a time. Do the research, study both demand and supply to find the sweet spot. Play to the willing.