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# Transforming apprenticeships: strategies for success



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In my capacity as the Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I had the privilege of witnessing the profound benefits that job seekers experienced upon completing a Registered Apprenticeship (RA) program. This transformative effect was evident across various sectors, including trades, manufacturing, health care, IT and beyond. The completion of such programs offers mutual benefits: Workers acquire essential skills while earning an income, and employers maintain a workforce trained to meet their specific needs. Moreover, the investment in employee development often results in higher retention rates.

Yet, despite their potential as a key workforce development strategy, RA programs aren't as widely recognized and adopted as they could be. Agency leaders need a playbook to help them build impactful apprenticeship programs that turn skills shortages into talent surpluses.

## Perception and process stifle apprenticeship success

Workforce agencies are realizing that today's RA programs aren't positioned for success. The availability of sponsored programs may be limited, apprentice participation and completion rates may underperform, and the cost and effort of administering the programs may be too high for agencies that are themselves stretched to the limit because of staffing and budget shortfalls.

In many ways, this low perceived ROI is a self-fulfilling prophecy. RA programs suffer from low awareness and high complexity, often rooted in outdated processes that discourage participation and slow program growth.

**Employers and sponsors** bear a high burden when registering and launching a program. New employers may be unfamiliar with RA programs and need support, while experienced employers may perceive them as intimidating, burdensome and mired in red tape. Programs that take months to launch delay their access to talent and discourage ongoing participation or future sponsorship.

**Job seekers** experience friction at several points in their apprenticeship journey, with disconnected online and offline interactions that can make finding opportunities and connecting with employers a challenge. Meanwhile, apprentices and employers often find that administrative overhead and paperwork can disrupt learning and contribute to early exits.

**Agency staff** who administer the programs experience many familiar modernization challenges, as well as those that are unique to apprenticeships. Outdated processes are difficult to manage efficiently; staff find themselves forced to prioritize paperwork administration and intensive customer support over program performance management, expansion and growth.

## A playbook for impactful apprenticeship programs

A holistic human-centered approach is key to overcoming these challenges and helping agencies develop RA programs that align to their North Star:

- Discover opportunities for on-the-job learning in a variety of in-demand industries.
- Create avenues for job seekers to embark on fulfilling and prosperous careers, including the integration of nontraditional workers into new professional fields.
- Build a pipeline of talent for the employers who power the economy.
- Develop and nurture enduring connections between workforce agencies and constituents.

In service of this North Star, we propose a playbook built on three pillars: **agency empowerment**, **employer enablement** and **worker opportunity**. By following this playbook, agencies can make progress toward their program's tactical goals while increasing awareness and creating the positive perceptions that are key to success.

### Agency empowerment

Today's workforce agencies have finite resources. Technology, often implemented as part of a digital transformation strategy, can help agencies redirect energy from rote and manual tasks, like managing paperwork and providing basic customer support, into more valuable work like providing strategic guidance to employers, developing effective messaging for job seekers, and discovering opportunities for expansion and growth.

For example, converting paper forms to user-friendly digital journeys and managing them via centralized "command centers" can reduce or eliminate aspects of the process that negatively impact the customer experience and consume agency resources.

Intuitive workflows and appropriate automation empower agency staff to manage their time and capacity more effectively, offer better customer service to employers and job seekers, and pivot their attention from paperwork to program performance. Agencies that want to modernize their apprenticeship programs often benefit from reviewing their current processes and identifying opportunities to leverage technology to achieve the results they want.

Once processes have been optimized, technology and data can help shift the focus from administration to growth and expansion. Analytics can help agencies identify the unique strengths, challenges and opportunities within their workforce and understand market trends to predict what industries will be indispensable in the 22nd-century economy. Findings can be used to recruit employers and sponsors not just in the traditional trades, but also in high-demand "future-proof" fields.





## Employer enablement

RA programs are most successful when many employers offer a variety of valuable opportunities. However, the complexity and lead time associated with setting up and registering their programs can delay (and in some cases, even decrease) the value of the program to employers. Agencies can help build trust and confidence in this cohort through a blend of technology and process improvement.

The same technology that can empower agencies can also enable employers to be more agile and self-sufficient. For example, program registrations can take months to cycle through reviews, corrections and approvals, often with extensive offline interactions. Employers are forced to invest time in paperwork and “red tape” that would be better spent on recruiting and training apprentices.

Agencies can enable employers with simpler processes and convenient online experiences that allow them to navigate the process with less reliance on agency staff. By reducing the effort and time needed to launch programs and put new apprentices to work, employers and sponsors may feel more confident creating new programs, expanding existing ones and taking on more apprentices.

## Worker opportunity

As agencies expand apprenticeships to include a larger pool of employers, job seeker recruitment becomes all the more important. Increasing awareness of these programs and removing barriers to access is crucial to building the apprenticeship pipeline.

In addition to promoting the traditional benefits of an apprenticeship, such as skill acquisition, career advancement, credentialing and networking, agencies need to respond to current in-demand occupations, therefore they must be creative and forward-thinking in terms of the types of opportunities available. By offering and promoting opportunities in a diverse set of industries, aspiring apprentices may discover new pathways to careers and gain more trust in workforce agencies along the way.



Technology can also help agencies attract job seekers. Today's constituents expect consumer-grade online experiences for most transactions; mobile-first one-stop shops can help aspiring apprentices discover opportunities and connect with employers, as well as reduce the paperwork needed to enroll in and complete a program.

By clearly communicating the benefits of apprenticeship and making program participation more approachable, agencies and employers can create positive perceptions and boost engagement.

## A longer-term workforce investment

Faced with historical skills shortages, agencies need to be strategic about workforce development. Increasing public awareness about the benefits of Registered Apprenticeship programs will open doors for more workers, helping them acquire in-demand skills as they earn a wage, while employers will benefit from a pipeline of skilled labor tailored to their specific needs, fostering innovation and healthy competition.

By following a playbook that blends strategy, technology and process, agencies can create robust apprenticeship programs that clear the way for aspiring apprentices and program sponsors to easily **connect** and **build relationships** while empowering staff to redirect energy from paperwork to **program improvement** and **expansion** – resulting in a more resilient and productive workforce over time.

The views reflected in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ernst & Young LLP or other members of the global EY organization.

## Continuing the conversation



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