



FUTURE-FOCUSED WORKFORCE BOARD BEHAVIORS

# Human-Centered

Putting People Before Procedures

## AT A GLANCE

Workforce boards that design and implement human-centered systems and processes ensure that all people, regardless of their situation, have equitable access to services and opportunities.

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**Future-focused workforce boards promote policies, programs, and products that are designed and delivered in ways that prioritize positive user experiences. They are intent on meeting the needs of customers and strive to eradicate system limitations that hinder responsiveness.**



Workforce boards and American Job Centers (AJCs) are uniquely positioned to serve as comprehensive support systems for the people in their communities. Many people enter the workforce system frustrated and overwhelmed by the challenges they face in trying to enter or re-enter the workforce with limited skills and experience. Others face a wide range of obstacles, including disabilities, prior incarceration, language barriers, or a lack of reliable transportation or child care. If workforce boards don't take a human-centered approach to service design and delivery, it can be difficult or impossible for these individuals to access basic services that are essential to finding gainful employment.

A human-centered approach to providing services is one of four future-focused behaviors identified by AWAKE. These behaviors were vetted by a diverse group of workforce professionals from across the country to ensure that they are reflective of the core characteristics, priorities, and commitments needed to prepare and transform America's workforce system to ensure that all workers and learners succeed.





# The Opportunity

Human-centered workforce organizations make it a priority to provide equitable access and opportunity for all people who walk through their doors. They are committed to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of socio-economic status, background, or situation are cared for with compassion, empathy, and kindness, and they are dedicated to building an organization with the knowledge, expertise, and partnerships to support that commitment.

*By focusing on ways to be more responsive to everyone seeking their services, they open themselves up to opportunities to increase their visibility and influence in the community in the following ways:*

- Tapping into previously untapped talents and skill sets
- Gaining a greater understanding of the unique challenges, needs, and strengths of people in the community
- Building resources and capacity through partnerships with community-based organizations and regional providers of supportive services
- Establishing a reputation as a caring, compassionate, and highly responsive community resource

*Human-centered organizations also typically do the following:*

- View themselves as part of a team in working to serve people in their communities
- Actively solicit feedback and suggestions on ways to improve customer service
- Prioritize human-centered professional development for all employees and reinforce a human-centered organizational culture in all aspects of their work

These organizations are driven, first and foremost, by local needs, and they are key stakeholders in their communities. They maintain close connections to their customers and focus on developing interventions that respond to current realities while adjusting for emerging trends.

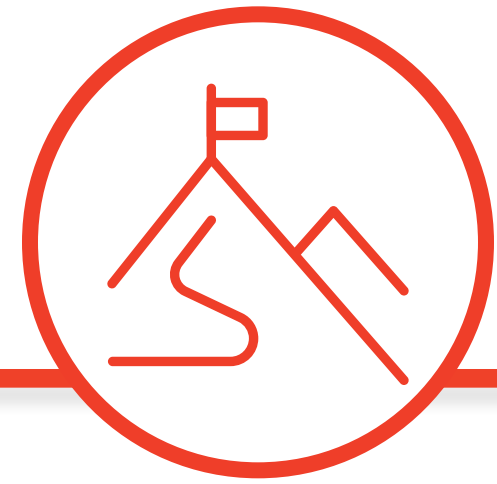
A photograph of two men in business suits standing in an office. The man on the right is wearing glasses and a red tie, looking towards the left. The man on the left is seen from the back, wearing a dark suit. In the background, there are colorful sticky notes on a wall and a window with blinds.

**“The workforce system is very employee- and employer-focused. Those lines become more and more skewed as people increasingly work independently. How does this impact the work we do? Current rules and definitions are so antiquated that we don’t have the vocabulary to talk about what we actually want to impact.”**

**- Patrick Combs**

Chief Workforce Development Officer, Office of the Mayor of the City of Nashville, Tennessee





# The Obstacles

Taking a human-centered approach to service design and delivery comes with a unique set of challenges that can be difficult to overcome. *AWAKE's interviews with workforce boards across the country revealed that many of the challenges stem from the following:*

- Vast differences among the people who make up their customer bases, including differences in demographics, skill levels, and types of support services needed
- The speed at which local skill needs and job trends are evolving (changes driven by factors such as the rise of the gig economy and ecommerce)
- The complexity of the eligibility criteria that govern many of the funding sources that support core services
- A lack of both the time and the professional development resources necessary to train frontline workers and managers to effectively triage and refer customers who visit their offices in need of immediate support

Despite the challenges facing workforce boards everywhere, AWAKE found several examples of workforce boards whose dedication to human-centered service is helping them advance equity and expand access for all members of their communities.





# The Behavior in Action

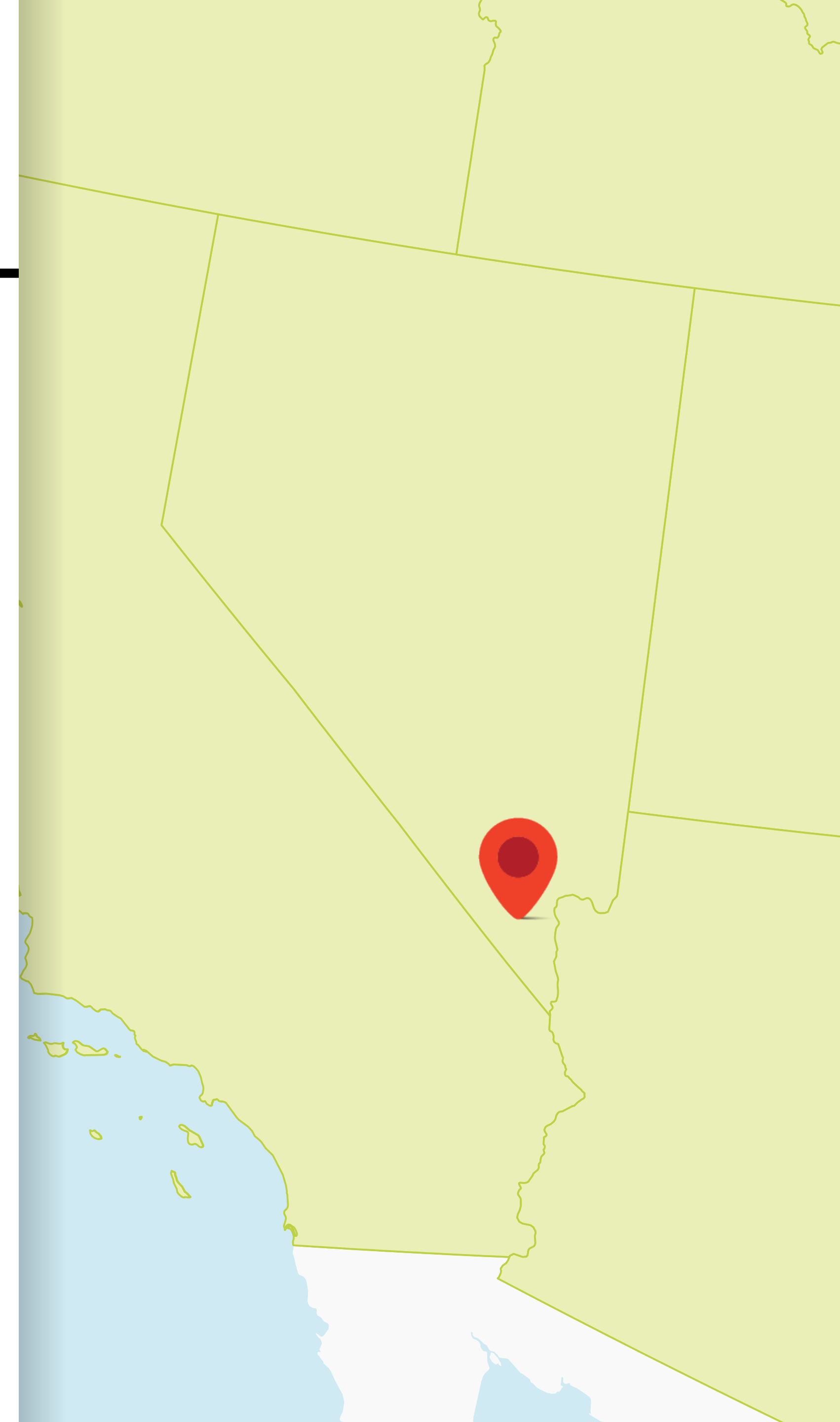


The Spokane Workforce Council seeks to offer a public workforce system that truly meets the needs of its customers. Toward that end, the organization uses technology for a variety of customer-facing supports. For example, it has deployed a platform called TablesReady to better manage customer intake and communication and assess wait times. It also engages in human-centered design thinking across all of its activities, including the functional, physical, and philosophical redesign of its American Job Center, WorkSource Spokane. Most recently the council responded to feedback from local employers and launched an online resource called the Internship Guide, which provides employers with information about all aspects of starting and managing an internship program.

# The Behavior in Action



Workforce Connections, Southern Nevada's local workforce development board, has entered into partnerships with four local library districts to expand access to employment and training services for residents of Clark, Nye, Lincoln, and Esmeralda counties. One-Stop Career Centers are now embedded within local libraries, enabling Workforce Connections to offer support services, such as one-on-one career coaching and training programs, in locations that are now closer to where people live and work. Several of the library-based centers are open outside of normal business hours, giving residents flexibility as to when to access the services they need. In addition to expanding access, the partnerships maximize taxpayer dollars by reducing overhead costs and allowing more funding to go toward direct services. In many cases, the employment services complement existing library programs, such as classes for English language learners or adults who need to finish high school. By working together, the libraries and Workforce Connections are able to provide convenient one-stop experiences to any Southern Nevadans seeking employment help.



# The Behavior in Action



Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network, which serves the Long Beach region of Southern California, is looking to use its data and information systems to more efficiently and effectively determine what types of services and supports work best for customers, and to assess how providing those services will impact case management. With a goal of becoming a changemaker in advancing more equitable hiring and economic development opportunities, the organization is focused on closing the digital divide through intensive inclusion efforts. These efforts include increasing digital capacity, connectivity, and technology for low-income households.





## Taking the Next Step

Leaders and organizations committed to a human-centered approach to providing workforce services are working to ensure that workforce boards and AJCs are seen as people-focused, responsive, community-driven, and representative of those they serve. They recognize that they have a responsibility to meet people wherever they happen to be in their lives, regardless of the struggles or barriers they face, and to provide them with customized, caring support that is affordable and easy to access. They are eager to try new approaches, expand community partnerships, and find innovative ways to tap into talent and resources that have been overlooked in the past.

JFF encourages you to share this brief with your colleagues, board members, stakeholders and others as a way to take the next step toward designing or adopting human-centered processes. Only through expanded awareness of the behaviors profiled here, and with a commitment to viewing people as whole humans rather than customers, will our nation's workforce system be able to effectively anticipate and respond to the complex needs of workers and employers.

Be sure to check out AWAKE's briefs about the three other future-focused behaviors—opportunity-oriented, data-obsessed, and tech-enabled—to learn more about the nature of these behaviors and how workforce organizations are practicing them nationwide.





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AWAKE (the Advanced Workforce Analytics and Knowledge Exchange) partners with workforce boards, AJCs, and innovative entrepreneurs and investors to offer a responsive, comprehensive, and effective source of support for workers as they navigate complex career challenges. Through research sponsored by Google.org, this effort has identified key behaviors and characteristics of workforce organizations that are future-focused, innovative, and dedicated to transforming the way they can meet the changing needs of the workers and learners they serve.

The AWAKE initiative at JFFLabs aims to call attention to how workforce boards are evolving and examine how technology and data have shaped those adaptations. Through research conducted over the last 12 months, we have identified four behaviors and accompanying characteristics shared by workforce organizations that we believe are future-focused, innovative, and dedicated to transforming the way they work in order to better meet the needs of workers and learners in their regions.

AWAKE conducted structured interviews with workforce professionals from all across the country representing a diverse set of workforce boards and American Job Centers in rural, suburban, and urban locations. Interviews were held with 35 leaders from 26 unique workforce organizations in 16 states. These interviews yielded a clear set of characteristics shared by organizations committed to finding new and innovative ways of doing the following:

- Expanding their reach and influence through diversified funding and partnerships
- Building data literacy, capability, and capacity to make information more accessible
- Transforming cultures and operations to be more people-focused and locally-driven
- Integrating new technologies into both internal and external operations to increase effectiveness and efficiency





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