Tech-Enabled

Using New Tools to Build Better Organizations

AT A GLANCE

Workforce boards that embrace the use of new tools and technologies can improve service delivery and increase equity and access within their communities.

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Future-focused workforce boards continually identify and embrace new technologies. They adopt and adapt new tools and techniques to ensure that their operations are efficient and effective.

Technology drives many of the ways we interact with and interpret the world around us. It enables us to be more efficient, more connected, and more informed. Without technology, workforce boards are likely to find themselves struggling to connect with and effectively meet the needs of jobseekers and businesses that increasingly demand customized, responsive service. As integration of innovative new technologies into service delivery increases across the public workforce system, it's crucial that we learn more about what works, what doesn't, and how workforce boards are using these systems to improve not just operations, but the customer experience as well.

A tech-enabled approach to providing services is one of four future-focused behaviors identified by AWAKE, an initiative at JFFLabs that scans the workforce market and system to call attention to how workforce boards and professionals are evolving and adapting with advances in technology and data. These behaviors were vetted by a diverse group of workforce professionals from across the country to ensure they are reflective of the core characteristics, priorities, and commitments needed to prepare and transform America's workforce system to ensure all workers and learners succeed.

The Opportunity

Tech-enabled organizations are constantly finding new ways to integrate digital tools and solutions into their operations and service delivery processes in order to maximize efficiency and improve access to the services and learning opportunities they offer. They aren't intimidated by transformation and welcome the opportunity to modernize and expand service options and reinvent the way people access and interact with the workforce system.

By empowering their staffs to try new technologies that better meet the expectations of clients, workforce boards are opening themselves up to several opportunities to positively impact the customer experience and make it more efficient, user-friendly, and equitable in the following ways:

- Expanding system access for underserved subsectors of the workforce and industries that may never have had access previously

- Facilitating professional learning and development programs that more accurately reflect the niche needs of the region

- Harnessing the power of digital networks and networked learning to promote the sharing of resources and data and expanding professional growth opportunities across geographic boundaries

- Organizing and streamlining communication and collaboration, both internally and externally

- Sharing insights about which tools and technologies most effectively produce high returns on investment so that others may benefit from their experiences

Tech-enabled workforce organizations also typically do the following:

- Show an interest in learning all they can about the role predictive analytics can play in process improvement and service delivery

- Acknowledge the unique role technology can play in providing human-centered service

- Prioritize upskilling and retooling employees so they are able to use modern technologies effectively

Future-focused workforce boards typically either develop technologies in-house to meet a targeted need or procure tools as part of a set of virtual services that are provided by a larger state agency or a third-party vendor. The most effective workforce systems have begun to utilize comprehensive performance management systems to integrate all of the tools they use for core services such as referrals, case management, and career exploration.

"Technology is the accelerant for the change we're hoping to inspire not because technology is the transformation, but because it opens up an expanded conversation and appreciation for what's possible today and could be possible tomorrow."

— Reg Javier

Deputy Executive Officer of Workforce and Economic Development, San Bernardino County Economic Development Agency, San Bernardino, California
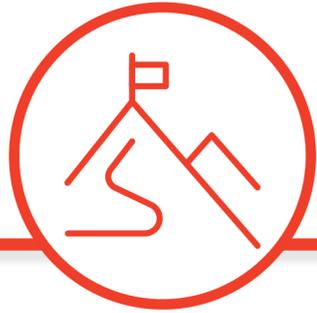
The Obstacles

Many workforce leaders across the country were quick to point out that while increased modernization and technology integration are important goals for their organizations, they face numerous challenges that are preventing or delaying them from advancing toward the goal. They cited issues such as these:

- The technology needs of workforce boards are extensive and can vary across regions, requiring most boards to contract with a variety of vendors across multiple platforms

- Currently, there are no market leaders with the ability to provide comprehensive technology solutions (with the exception of statewide data collection) to workforce boards across a common access point or platform

- The vast array of technology vendors and service agreements has led to fragmentation across states and regions, which can prevent economies of scale and alignment of services and data sharing

- The lack of comprehensive knowledge exchange across the workforce system is limiting the uptake of emerging tools and technologies that have been shown to work

- Workforce organizations tend to favor vendors with established track records within the state, which can narrow the field for vendors with promising products but limited presence in a region

- Data technologies and digital tools can require substantial upfront financial investments, and workforce boards find it difficult to secure the flexible funding required to adopt experimental technologies while remaining accountable to their public and philanthropic funders

Despite the challenges facing workforce boards everywhere, AWAKE found several examples of organizations that are becoming more tech-enabled through a variety of strategic approaches.
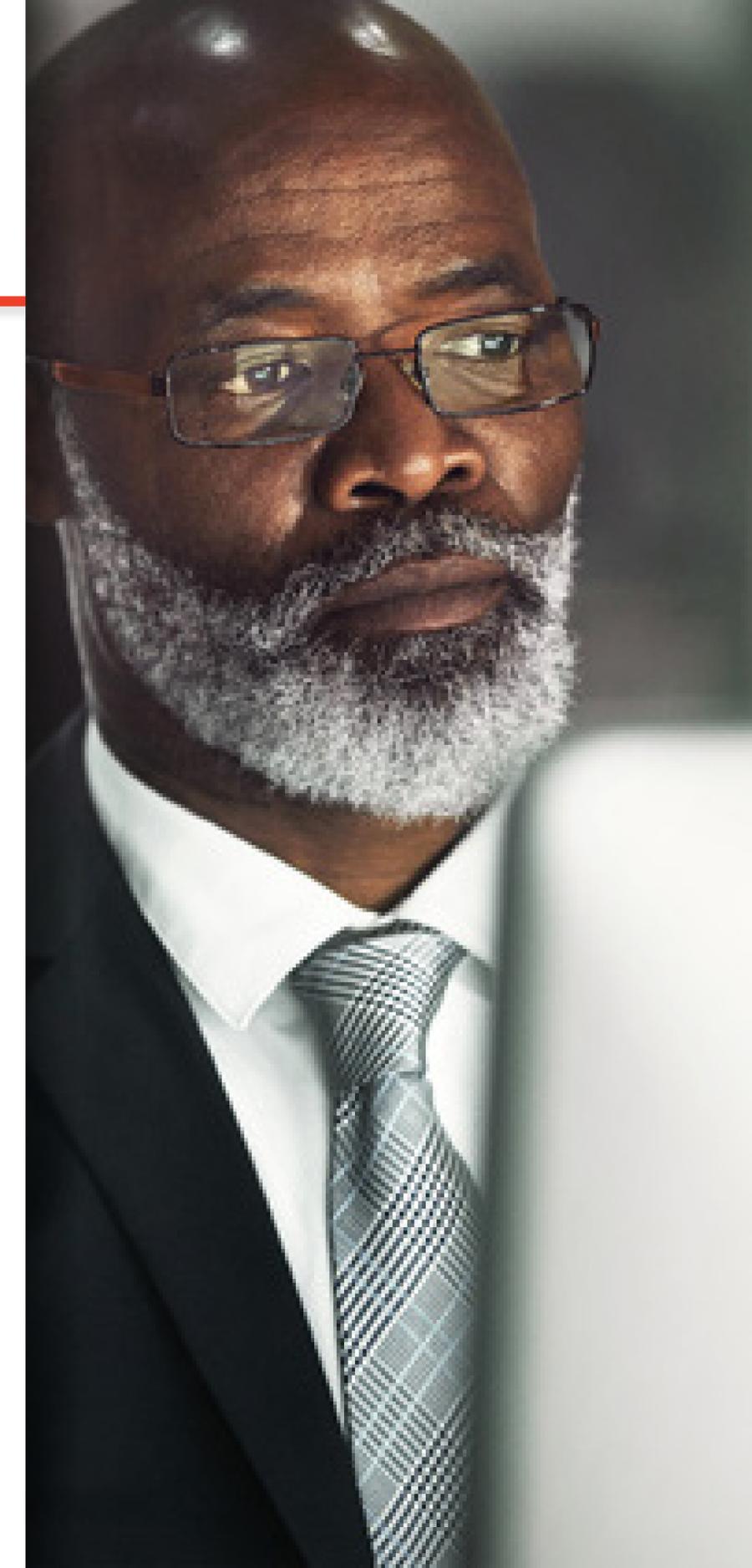
The Behavior in Action

Through a comprehensive IT strategy that emphasizes enhancement of service delivery strategies and business processes, CareerSource Central Florida is committed to driving best-in-class technology solutions and upgrading current systems and solutions. Efforts include developing and enhancing cloud-based and mobile technologies, upgrading network infrastructure to meet new security standards, and expanding tools that enable more efficient analysis of workforce intelligence and attributes of jobseekers.

The Behavior in Action

Kinexus Group, a family of organizations serving the state of Michigan, is committed to inspiring positive economic change one person, one business, one community at a time. One of the organization's priorities is to connect with and offer excellent support services to top-notch training providers. Using a variety of technologies that help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, Kinexus aims to ensure that barriers to completion and employment are minimized, and that learning opportunities are accessible to all. The organization uses more than a dozen technologies for everything from project and task management to communication, conferencing, customer relations management, grant management, and labor market data collection and analysis.

The Behavior in Action

West Michigan Works! has forged partnerships with multiple tech companies to ensure that jobseekers throughout its service area are able to easily access job listings and receive training for the skills they need to land those jobs. Using a virtual platform called WEDGE, which is available at many Michigan Works! job centers, people seeking employment can hone their interview skills by video-recording their responses to commonly asked interview questions specific to certain jobs or industries. They can then view their recorded responses and work with the centers' career coaches to identify areas for improvement. West Michigan Works! also identifies common talent needs of employers through industry talent councils, and then reaches out to education and training providers to ensure that they offer jobseekers cutting-edge training to help them develop the skills that are essential in the region's high-growth industries—health care, construction, manufacturing, and IT. Initiatives such as those, supported by insights gleaned from robust labor market data, are helping the workforce board and its job centers provide jobseekers with the technology skills they need not just to find jobs, but to find jobs that pay well and offer opportunities for growth and advancement.
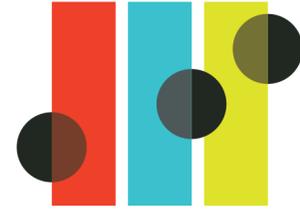
Taking the Next Step

Organizations that are tech-enabled, or are striving to become so, continually try to improve the way they do business. By testing and integrating tools and solutions that streamline operations and services and making it easier for everyone to access the workforce system, they are redefining success for their organizations, their communities, and the people they interact with every day. Adopting and integrating new technologies are complex and iterative processes, but future-focused workforce boards welcome the opportunity to experiment, fail forward, and engage in disruptive conversations about how and why the system must adapt.

JFF encourages you to share this brief with your colleagues, board members, stakeholders and others in order to take the next step toward becoming an organization that embraces new technologies as a means of providing more efficient and effective services. Only through expanded awareness of the need to identify, pilot, and integrate cutting-edge tech tools will we be able to expand offerings and access in a way that results in a more equitable workforce system.

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

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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