



Research Brief #9

Best Practice for Workforce Training: A Dual-Customer Approach

February 2026

This is the 9th brief in a series produced by Goodwill of Western New York, in partnership with the University at Buffalo Regional Institute (UBRI). The research is intended to promote data-driven decision-making in workforce development that benefits individuals from economically distressed communities in the Western New York region. In support of Goodskills Career Builder, this brief is part of a collaborative effort to expand access to higher-paying careers for all individuals. This brief provides an overview of the development and implementation of a dual-customer approach to workforce training, highlighting the benefits of this model for individuals, employers and the broader region. Funding for the brief is from a Build Back Better Regional Challenge grant from the US Economic Development Administration.

Building a Dual-Customer Model

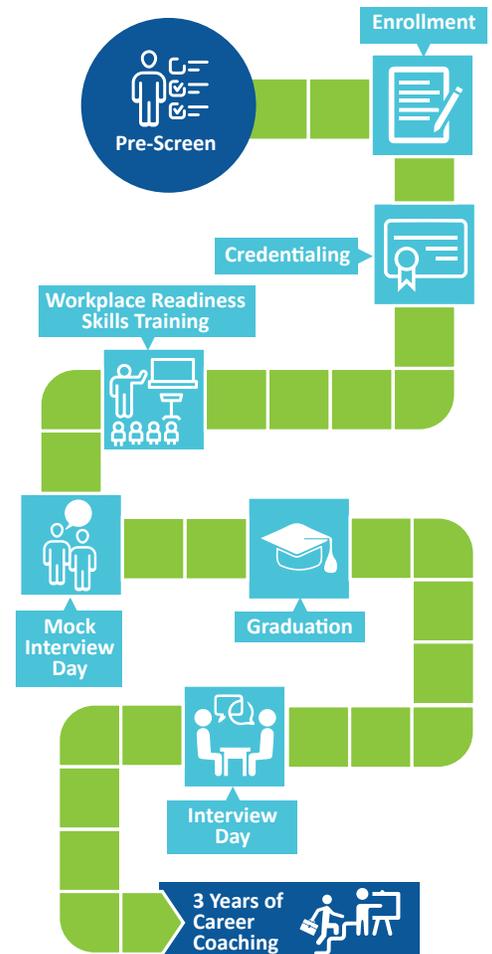
To have a successful workforce training program, it's essential to meet the needs of two equally important customer groups: the participants and the employers who hire them. Goodskills Career Builder (Goodskills) is not a one-size-fits-all program, but a responsive solution tailored to WNY's economy. Drawing on best practices from national models like Towards Employment in Cleveland, Ohio, Goodskills was customized for WNY through deep analysis of job postings, labor market data, and employer interviews.

The dual-customer approach was built around three pillars:

- **Responsiveness to industry demand:** Training is designed around roles and skills identified by employers as critical, prioritizing higher-paying entry-level roles that offer career pathways in manufacturing and tech/tech-aligned occupations. Goodwill's role in the WNY Manufacturing and Tech Workforce Coalition also ensures training remains industry driven.
- **Participant-centered supportive services:** Career coaches work one-on-one with participants for up to three years, supporting job retention and career progression. Support services help participants overcome barriers like transportation, childcare, benefit cliffs and life emergencies without jeopardizing their employment.
- **Continuous adaptation:** Surveys and feedback from both participants and employers allow Goodskills to evolve in real time, staying relevant as industries and technologies change. Goodwill also partners with UBRI to support outreach, recruitment, and program design through research and best practices, ensuring strategies remain data driven.

The results extend beyond individual graduates. By bridging the gap between un/underemployment and higher-paying jobs, Goodskills strengthens families, reduces public spending on assistance programs, and increases regional economic activity. Over a 20-year career, \$3.27 million represents the estimated regional economic impact of transitioning a participant from un/underemployment into a Goodskills job.

Roadmap to higher-paying careers.



Insights from Implementation

Since launching in 2021, 837 individuals have graduated from Goodskills—a diverse group, many facing barriers such as transportation and childcare needs. The dual-customer model is visible throughout Goodskills' design and implementation. For instance:

Employer engagement: Goodskills has built relationships with more than 150 companies in WNY, which have hired program graduates. Approximately 54% of all placements are with employers who have previously hired from Goodskills. Ongoing feedback loops ensure that curriculum, policies, and expectations stay aligned with evolving business needs.

Dedicated business relationship role: Goodskills has learned the importance of having a staff member who understands the private sector perspective and serves as a conduit between employers and the program. This role is essential even when workforce data exists since datasets often lag behind current market realities.

Workplace mirroring: Training follows an 8:30 am to 4 pm schedule, five days a week, mirroring a typical workday. The extra hour added in recent cohorts provides time for career coaching, tutoring, resume and interview fine tuning and credential preparation.

Professional readiness: Before graduating, each participant must successfully complete a mock interview conducted by a staff member with whom they haven't had much interaction, an employer or community partner. This unbiased 20-item evaluation ensures participants meet workplace expectations.

“I have one-on-one meetings with every employer that we're partnered with, so I learn a lot about them.”

Kristine Bieniek, Business Relationship Manager at Goodwill of WNY

“We're trying to reflect our employer partners' policies around time, attendance, and dependability.”

Randi Murphy, Vice President, Workforce Development, Goodwill of WNY

Targeted skill development: In partnership with Jamestown Community College, Goodskills integrates shop math—a graduation requirement— with modules designed to meet manufacturing employer needs. Participants complete an initial Northstar assessment to gauge skills in computer literacy. Based on this assessment, they are enrolled in an additional training resource that offers training aligned to their individual needs.

Program updates: Goodwill continually adapts Goodskills curriculum to stay aligned with employer demand and emerging industry trends. In 2026, for instance, the Goodskills tech/tech-aligned track will expand to include AI fundamentals, a component designed in partnership with an expert AI trainer to help participants understand and apply AI in the workplace. On the manufacturing side, Goodwill will introduce blueprint reading and precision and measurements, addressing a persistent skill gap cited by manufacturing employers.

Attendance: Goodskills prioritizes time and attendance as it's a common employer pain-point. Goodskills emphasizes communication and accountability, instead of a rigid “one misstep and you are out” rule. Participants learn that failure to communicate is grounds for termination, directly reflecting real-world employer policies.

Incentives for success: Incentives are tied to milestones like completing interviews, job attainment, and maintaining contact with career coaches.

These elements combine to produce meaningful outcomes—trained workers, satisfied employers, and stronger links between the talent pool and key industries.

Why a Dual-Customer Approach Matters

The benefits of short-term, employer-driven training go beyond skills acquisition. Research shows that education and training significantly increase workforce participation. Workers with vocational training are nearly 10 percentage points more likely to be in the labor force than those with a high school diploma and they are nearly as likely as to be in the labor force as an individual with a four-year degree. This underscores why employer-responsive training programs matter for participants and the vitality of the regional economy.

Across WNY, more than 50 eligible training providers offer postsecondary programs that prepare individuals for work in sectors like manufacturing, technology and the trades. The distinguishing feature of these programs is their nimbleness. Unlike degree-based pathways that may take years to complete, employer-driven short-term training is designed to respond to changing skill needs. Short-term training programs can adapt quickly to employer feedback, provide participants with both technical and soft skills, and establish direct pipelines from unemployment into work.

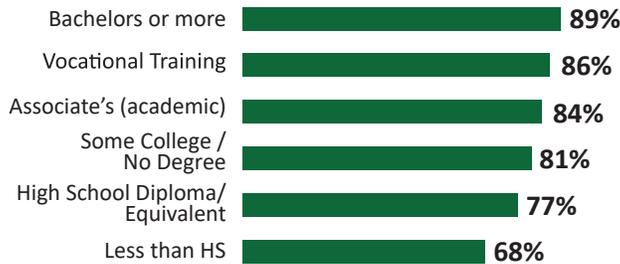
Job posting data confirms a shift in employer preferences. Employers increasingly favor candidates with a combination of specialized technical skills and prior work experience. Among Goodskills-related occupations, postings requiring no prior experience have declined, while postings requiring at least one year of experience have risen. This suggests that entry-level roles are harder to access for workers without experience, making employer-informed training that focuses on skills training and certification a crucial on-ramp.

Well-trained employees are more likely to stay in their jobs. Turnover is costly. Recruitment, training, and lost productivity can weigh heavily on employers. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) estimates that it costs employers \$5,300 to fill a single vacancy.

In 2024, turnover among Goodskills-related jobs was 53%—lower than the 57% turnover rate across all occupations in the region, though higher than the 42% rate in all production occupations and 44% in computer and mathematical roles. Reducing turnover, even by a small percentage, translates into significant cost savings and productivity gains.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING DRIVES LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

% in Labor Force by Educational Attainment, Individuals ages 25-54, US, 2024-2025



Vocational training can boost labor force participation even more than a two-year academic degree

Source: March Current Population Survey (CPS), 2024-25, available via IPUMS, USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Vocational training reflects a vocational associate's degree.

Employers often prefer skills and experience over four-year degrees. Most manufacturing and tech job postings in WNY over the past 12 months did not require a bachelor's degree.

Source: Lightcast Job Posting Analytics September 2024 to August 2025. Analysis includes occupations where no education is listed. Manufacturing reflects NAICS 31-33. Tech includes tech-aligned roles.

TURNOVER IS COSTLY FOR EMPLOYERS.

Turnover rates and separations in selected Goodskills Occupations

	Role	2024 Turnover Rate	Estimated Separations in 2025	Estimated Cost to Regional Employers (in millions)
Manufacturing	Machinist	26%	463	\$2.5
	Assemblers	30%	748	\$4.0
	Maintenance and Repair Workers	50%	3,876	\$20.5
	Packaging and Filling Machine Operators	52%	1,277	\$6.8
	Laborers	98%	8,254	\$43.7
All Goodskills Manufacturing		57%	20,117	\$106.6
Tech/Tech Aligned	First-line Supervisor of Retail Sales Workers	41%	1,558	\$8.3
	Computer User Support Specialist	44%	1,077	\$5.7
	Office Clerks	55%	4,418	\$23.4
	Sales Representative, Services	67%	2,430	\$12.9
	Customer Service Rep	73%	7,912	\$41.9
All Goodskills Tech/Tech-Aligned		51%	33,286	\$176.4
WNY Region (all occupations)		61%	379,000	\$2,011.6

Source: Lightcast, Occupations, WNY, 2024-25. Estimated separations are calculated by applying to the 2024 turnover rate to 2025 job numbers.

Looking to the Future and Keeping Pace with Rapidly Changing Skills

The skills that hiring employers seek are changing rapidly. On average, nearly one-third (32%) of the skills employers seek for a job opening changed from 2021 to 2024, according to a recent study by Lightcast. Change is driven by a mix of factors, most notably the adoption of AI, the rise of green skills focused on environmental sustainability and clean technology, and continued growth of cybersecurity across industries.

The pace of change varies by occupation and industry. Manufacturing and tech/tech-aligned, the focused sectors of Goodskills Career Builder, are among those that have faced higher levels of disruption. This means that employers need a workforce that can pivot quickly, while workers need training programs that equip them with in-demand skills and prepare them for future roles.

Meeting this challenge requires nimble training solutions that address the needs of two customers at once: employers looking for qualified talent with specific skills, and individuals seeking meaningful, higher-paying career pathways. Goodwill of WNY's Goodskills Career Builder (Goodskills) is built on this dual-customer approach. Training is driven by employer demand and delivered in ways that respond to the barriers and realities faced by participants. The goal is not just to rapidly train workers, but to ensure graduates are job-ready and competitive for roles that offer family-sustaining wages and economic mobility.

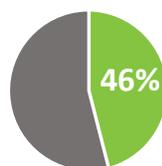
"...every job is changing, and in a labor market where everything is in flux, being future-ready means being flexible and anticipating that change will come."

From the Speed of Skill Change, Lightcast, 2024

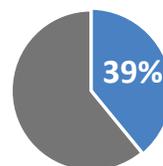
THE COMPARATIVELY RAPID SKILL CHANGE OF GOODSKILLS ROLES REINFORCES THE NEED FOR A DUAL-CUSTOMER APPROACH.

Percentage of in-demand skills that changed in job postings, 2021 to 2024: Goodskills Career Builder Roles Relative to All Jobs in the US.

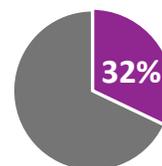
Tech/Tech Aligned



Manufacturing



All Jobs in US



Data Sources and Notes

PAGE 1 Program description ("Building a Dual-Customer Model"): UBRI and Goodwill of WNY program development documentation (2020-2021). National model reference: Toward Employment (Cleveland, Ohio), <https://www.towardemployment.org/> Regional economic impact statements: UBRI analysis of prior Goodskills Career Builder outcome evaluations. See Goodwill of Western New York and University at Buffalo Regional Institute, State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning. January 2023. "Training for a Diverse Workforce in Western New York: The True Costs and Benefits."

PAGE 2 Goodskills Career Builder program outcomes: Goodwill of WNY internal tracking data through August 2025 (enrollments, graduates, participant barriers, employer partners, etc.); Email correspondence from Kelly Zaky, December 18, 2025 (repeat placements); Email correspondence from Randi Murphy, November 7, 2025 (graduates to date, all locations); Email correspondence from Kristine Bieniek, September 18, 2025 (employer partners). Implementation of Goodskills Career Builder: Team meetings on July 17, 2025, September 17, 2025 and November 12, 2025. Quotes from staff at Goodwill of WNY: Team meeting and interview with staff on July 17, 2025.

PAGE 3 Education and labor-force participation: Estimates are based on the Current Population Survey, March 2024-25 available through IPUMS, USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. The analysis includes individuals across the US ages 25 to 54. Vocational training reflects vocational associate's degrees. Call out on employer preference and experience requirements: UBRI analysis of Lightcast Job Posting Analytics, September 2024-August 2025, for Goodskill-related manufacturing, tech and tech-aligned occupations. Turnover rates and cost estimates: Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2023 Human Capital Benchmarking Report; Lightcast (Occupational Employment and Turnover Data, WNY, 2024-25). Estimated separations were calculated by applying 2024 turnover rates to 2025 job counts for each occupation. Regional estimates are based on turnover data for more than 700 occupations. Cost-to-fill estimates: SHRM (2023) with average cost per hire of \$5,300.

PAGE 4 Skills Change (2021-2024): Lightcast, The Speed of Skill Change (2024). Underlying data reflect national job-posting analytics from 2021-2024. Skill disruption index for Goodskills roles adapted from Lightcast analysis. Regional context and job disruption metrics: UBRI analysis of Lightcast Job Posting Analytics, February 2021-August 2025, for occupations aligned with Goodskills roles in the manufacturing and tech/tech-aligned sectors (NAICS 31-33 and tech-aligned roles).

Learn More About Goodskills Career Builder

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