



**STRENGTH IN  
PARTNERSHIP**

BUILDING A NEW APPROACH  
TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT  
IN NEW YORK CITY

JUNE 2006

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This paper is a case study highlighting early career pathways work in New York City. Workforce Strategy Center is currently preparing a white paper describing career pathways, a career pathways guide for practitioners and state agencies and a paper on how state governments can rethink their current policies to support pathway development. All of these publications, as well as a web-based interactive resource, will be available to the public in summer 2006. For more information about Workforce Strategy Center, see our website at [www.workforcestrategy.org](http://www.workforcestrategy.org).

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## SECTION ONE

# INTRODUCTION

If one mantra dominates the field of workforce development, it is partnership and collaboration: the need to link disparate training providers and colleges, to better connect employers with training courses and to unite public and private-sector funding.

The need for partnership is clear, but all the rhetoric and legislative mandates supporting this goal have not added up to much.

Typically, stakeholders' long-established patterns of working in isolation are more powerful than incentives to move into alignment. There are few exceptions to this rule, but one has arisen in an unlikely locale—New York City. The Big Apple has given rise to some of the most innovative employment programs in the country. But its training environment is infinitely complex and crowded by a highly competitive set of providers—in short, not the ideal setting for collaboration.

Over the past five years, however, a groundbreaking collaborative, the New York Information Technology Career Ladders Consortium, has evolved around a philosophy of career progression and pooled services. Despite several notable setbacks, the IT Consortium has exceeded its planned enrollments and met all other placement and wage-gain targets.

The key to the Consortium's successes? Tackling all aspects of collaboration at once: nonprofits and colleges; public and private funding; entry- and intermediate-level training. When the Consortium began in 2000, that sort of collaboration was a radical notion. Today, as more and more workforce development programs are following a similar route, the experience and lessons from the New York

project serve as a guide for what works and how to overcome common hurdles.

This fire-all-engines-at-once approach led to a system that, to a large degree, worked both in theory and on-the-ground. This sector initiative sought to simplify and rationalize the processes for channeling funds, offering training and measuring outcomes, moving trainees into high-paying jobs that required computer-based knowledge and proficiency. The real legacy of the Consortium, however, was the creation of a workforce development model that focuses on a high-demand sector through an extensive collaboration of colleges, nonprofits, government agencies and private foundations, which offered its services at scale, serving hundreds of individuals with the system of services created.

What follows is discussion of this unique collaboration and a description of key lessons that inform how other regions can replicate this successful model. If it can be done in New York City, it surely can happen anywhere.

## CAREER PATHWAYS: AN INTRODUCTION

Unlike many employment programs, the IT Consortium grew out of a coherent, promising model, rather than a government response to an unemployment crisis or a training organization capitalizing on a strong political connection. Career Pathways, the model behind this sector-based initiative, is a system that focuses on creating educational “stepping stones” for advancement of workers and job seekers, including those with basic skills deficiencies, and provides a supply of qualified workers for employers in a specific economic sector.

Conventional approaches to educating for employment often suffer from disconnects among the different institutions that provide education and training, and between educational programs and the labor market.

Targeting jobs of importance to the local economy, a career pathways system is a series of connected educational programs with integrated work experience, on-the-job training and support services that enable adults to combine learning with work in order to advance over time. Career pathways typically include easy articulation of credits across educational institutions, clear connections among remedial, academic and occupational programs, curriculum focused on competencies required for jobs, and “wraparound” support services, including career assessment and counseling, case management, child care, financial aid and job placement.

To launch a career pathways initiative, partners choose a sector that is growing and has both good entry-level and mid-career positions available, such as health care or, in this case, information technology. Next, they

identify the workforce needs of that sector through an intensive research process. With these industry needs in mind, the next task is to identify the best community-based organizations and colleges, and to support their activities through an array of public and private funding streams. Finally, based on a firm understanding of the sector, the partners design pathways that will allow job-seekers to both enter the field and gain the skills necessary to advance. A successful career pathways project enjoys the support of all workforce training providers, government agencies, foundations and businesses working together with a wide range of partnerships and linked funding streams.

This is straightforward sector-based workforce development, an approach that has gained credence in many policymaking circles. Notable think tanks as Public/Private Ventures, Jobs for the Future and the Aspen Institute have issued dozens of reports on successful examples of the model. But few regions have looked to implement the career pathways approach on any significant scale.

One place this happened was the Bay Area in California. The Bay Area Training and Education Collaborative (BayTEC) was established to create pathways to IT careers for disadvantaged adults, and provide ongoing training for incumbent and dislocated workers who are moving up the IT career ladder. Through BayTEC, community-based organizations, government agencies and community colleges jointly operated training programs offering pre-vocational, entry-level and advanced IT training. BayTEC utilized pre-vocational training to rapidly prepare adults to gain entry-level proficiency for IT training, because admission to vocational training requires 9th grade reading and math skills. Pre-vocational training required considerable development of contextualized curricula. Entry-level training combined classroom and lab instruction, delivered for college credit, with soft skills training and wraparound social support services included in the program. Advanced IT training generally involved incumbent and dislocated workers who already had IT skills. Arkansas, Missouri and Ohio have developed similar collaboratives for sector-based training.

### **Introducing a New Model to New York City**

The benefits of transforming best practice into reality were obvious to observers. One impressed observer was the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (NY Fed). While the NY Fed is typically taken up with regulating interest rates, during the late 1990s and the beginning of this decade it was also exploring ways in which it could broker more public/private partnerships in the area of workforce and economic development. The regional and community affairs officers at the NY Fed were impressed with the model's ability to leverage

both public and private funds and flexibly respond to a high-growth sector—an approach that appeared ripe for importation.

To acquaint New York with this sectoral model, the NY Fed sponsored a showcase presentation in late 2000, organized by Workforce Strategy Center (WSC), the initial facilitator of the Bay Area programs. The meeting brought together more than one hundred of New York City's top workforce stakeholders, including foundation officers, nonprofit executives, college administrators and business representatives. While there was some concern at the meeting that the model might not translate well to a city as large and complex as New York, the prevailing thought was that with a new mayor set to take office in January 2002, launching a large-scale career pathways initiative would be a perfect showcase of the approach's advantages.

WSC convened a subsequent meeting exclusively for interested private funders. The goal was to find a handful of committed grant makers to support the program. However, the idea resonated strongly with the assembled funders, and in addition to a core group of three philanthropies that dedicated funds to the planning phase, more than a half dozen additional foundations joined a year later.

### **The Planning Process**

The planning process to create the New York Information Technology Career Ladders Consortium had two key goals at the outset: identify the employee skills needed by businesses in the field of information technology and find the right partners for the initiative.

The survey of employer needs, a multi-pronged effort led by the NY Fed and the New York Software Industry Association (NYSIA), identified a need for more workers with entry- and intermediate-level computa-

tional skills in New York City. WSC in partnership with NYSIA and the NY Fed conducted a series of focus groups about IT needs among a broad range of area employers, including hospitals, schools and major corporations. At these meetings, the company's human resources officer would typically detail a need for basic office technology skills for administrative assistants. In addition, NYSIA surveyed its 200-plus membership via e-mail. These software industry firms indicated needs for hardware technicians, individuals with Microsoft certifications and programmers.

Whether it was a local hospital in the Bronx, a financial brokerage firm on Wall Street or a start-up software design company in Lower Manhattan, employers faced a shortage of reliable workers with the requisite technological knowledge. Specifically, there was a need for two entry-level skill sets: PC Technicians and support staff with strong Microsoft Office skills.

As the partners identified the needed business skills, WSC began an intensive outreach process with New York City's training providers, including nonprofits, colleges and proprietary schools. The field in New York is rich with experience and providers expert in every area of service, from assisting the disabled in finding employment to reintegrating prisoners into the workforce. Attempting to find the most adept and willing partners, WSC met with more than 30 college presidents, nonprofit executives and government officials.

After this four-month process, the group reached two conclusions. First, there were many strong training providers in New York City, but no one organization possessed all of the experience and expertise needed for the IT Consortium's purposes. Second, an intermediary would be helpful in New York, given the

density of providers and various program issues.

### **The Structure**

Considering both the industry needs and the training opportunities, WSC determined that a number of interlocking partnerships were necessary between community groups, colleges and business representatives, all backed by a strong nonprofit intermediary.

In the Fall of 2001, Seedco (the Structured Employment Economic Development Corporation), a Manhattan-based nonprofit that serves as an intermediary for community-based organizations, was chosen to serve as the primary contact working with local nonprofits in the IT Consortium and to navigate program issues. Three community groups within Seedco's Non-Profit Assistance Corporation (N-PAC) network would focus on intake of job-seekers and provide initial training in two geographic clusters around the city.

Three in-class training providers, Lehman College (through CUNY on the Concourse in the Bronx) and LaGuardia Community College in Queens, would develop and deliver entry-level training programs. The City University of New York Institute for Software Design and Development would develop curricula and provide the classroom instruction for intermediate- and advanced-level training. When students were ready, NYSIA (and later EarnFair LLC, a social mission staffing agency founded by Seedco) would handle job placement and follow up with graduates at their workplace.



## THE IT CONSORTIUM IS DEFINED BY ITS PARTNERS

### CORE PARTNERS

- Workforce Strategy Center (WSC) provided overall strategic consulting and technical assistance, developed a resource strategy and played an intermediary role in strengthening program linkages amongst members.
- The Federal Reserve Bank of New York (NY Fed) served as a convener of meetings and assisted with consortium marketing and dissemination.
- New York Software Industry Association (NYSIA) reached out to software, information technology and financial services employers to participate. Additionally, NYSIA provided some job placement and administered the intermediate and advanced training tracks in conjunction with City University Institute for Software Design and Development.
- Seedco served as an intermediary providing overall project coordination, partnership management and information systems management duties.
- EarnFair LLC provided job development and placement services.

### ENTRY-LEVEL PROGRAM CLUSTERS

#### NORTHERN MANHATTAN AND THE BRONX:

- Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation and Citizens Advice Bureau provided outreach, recruitment, assessment and overall case management, including wraparound social support services, placement and retention.
- Lehman College developed curricula and delivered entry-level training.

#### BROOKLYN AND QUEENS:

- St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation provided outreach, recruitment, assessment and overall case management, including wraparound support services, placement and retention.
- LaGuardia Community College developed curricula and delivered entry-level training.

### INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL TRAINING

- City University of New York Institute for Software Design and Development developed curricula and provided the classroom instruction.

### **Funding the Initiative**

With fundraising, the IT Consortium established a new approach to program development. Rather than seeing the process of raising money purely in terms of ensuring support for the program, the Consortium also strategically used its revenue sources to align services from government agencies, service providers, grantmakers and the members themselves.

There was a practical need to mix public and private funding because each allowed the Consortium to do different things. Private funding was necessary to experiment with a new program model and begin initial planning. Government funding was necessary to ensure that the program had access to the traditional workforce system and could reach scale.

Tapping public, foundation and corporate dollars served other purposes as well. Among private funders, for example, there was a desire to unite grantmakers around a common set of program principles and system reforms. Private funders that support workforce development in New York City are collegial and often meet to exchange ideas, but they did not have much of a track record in terms of pooling funds to support new program models. The IT Consortium presented a set of best practices to which virtually all of the private funders subscribed.

Grantmakers also saw funding the IT Consortium as an opportunity to leverage their dollars to influence the public sector's policies. Historically, New York City has not made workforce development a priority, but with Mayor Giuliani leaving office due to term limits at the end of 2001, hopes were high that a new mayor would see the value of employment programming focused on career progressions if the right model were developed.

On the public side, the Consortium knew government dollars were necessary to legitimize the collaboration. Often, private foundations provide seed funding for an initiative, but are unable to provide sufficient resources to bring a career pathways system to scale. Working with City government, the Consortium won a \$2.97 million H1B grant from the federal government—and demonstrated that this was a model that could credibly place individuals in competitive and highly skilled computer oriented jobs. Next, the state Department of Labor and the local Workforce Investment Board allocated \$1 million to ensure that the Consortium would accept job-seekers attempting to interface with the City's traditional workforce system.

## **BROAD FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

### **PRIVATE FOUNDATION SOURCES**

- Corporate—Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, Greenpoint Savings Bank, Mizuho U.S.A. Foundation, J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation, Independence Bank Community Foundation, Verizon Foundation
- Local—Bernard F. and Alva B. Gimbel Foundation, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, New York Community Trust, September 11th Fund

Total Revenue—\$1.2 million

### **PUBLIC SECTOR SOURCES**

- City—New York City Workforce Investment Board
- State—New York State Department of Labor
- Federal—United States Department of Labor

Total Revenue—\$3.97 million

# PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOME

The IT Consortium was forging a new path in New York City. In a complicated market and with an economy in deep recession after the September 11th terrorist attacks, an entirely new and collaborative approach to job training emerged. This new system performed very well.

- **Met or Exceeded Program Benchmarks:** The Consortium reached or exceeded its goals in enrollment, completion and wage rates, and it was close to attaining placement rates.
- **Established a Sectoral Strategy to Employment Programming:** This approach, previously untested on a citywide scale in New York, has since been incorporated into recent workforce reforms in the City.
- **Created a New Collaborative Partnership:** The IT Consortium established a groundbreaking partnership that united private sector, nonprofit and college program actors.
- **Integrated Services:** College faculty, community-based organization case workers and job developers worked hand-in-hand to coordinate individualized services.
- **Linked Entry- and Intermediate-Level Training:** The Consortium linked typically bifurcated funding streams for new workers and more established employees looking to advance—making a crucial connection needed to develop a career pathway.

### The Process

Parts of the IT Consortium are still operational, but the primary pilot project operated from

2001 until 2004; it is this period that is described in the next section. The Consortium established two geographic clusters: one in Manhattan and the Bronx and the other in Brooklyn and Queens. This project required the creation of a system to attract appropriate candidates, move them through the necessary training in IT and find them a job. The IT Consortium was very clear about the roles of partners and protocols at the outset.

Each cluster's community based organization (CBO) identified appropriate candidates for training and employment. The CBOs contacted local residents they viewed as potential candidates, and counselors and information sessions further helped spread the word. The nonprofit partners screened potential candidates, using an assessment created in partnership by the CBOs, employers and community colleges that looked at attributes such as educational attainment, technical background and employment history. Applicants' performance on standard tests for aptitude in reading, writing and math and a customized questionnaire for technical skills determined who was admitted for training.

Participants took a 12-week class in either Advanced Office Skills or A+, PC Technician at the cluster's community college partner, which had designed the courses. In 2003-2004, the colleges offered seven sessions of the Office Skills course and four ses-

<sup>1</sup> An additional 59 people are enrolled in intermediate training.

sions of the PC Tech course. Once a client was referred for training, he or she was assigned a case manager at the CBO. Because case managers attended IT Consortium classes, they quickly became aware of attendance problems and followed up with those clients who were missing classes. Where necessary, they intervened to assist the client with appropriate services.

Once clients graduated from their respective coursework, they were referred to EarnFair for placement. At first, EarnFair staff found that some participants were not following through with scheduled job interviews. EarnFair reached out to the CBOs, and the case managers continued to work with the participants—whom they had gotten to know very well—to help ensure that clients were prepared for and arrived at job interviews.

### MICHAEL RIVERA

Despite an associate's degree in Industrial Electronics and Networking Technologies earned in 2002, Michael Rivera had been searching for employment unsuccessfully. However, two weeks after the A+ Certification program course ended, Rivera accepted a position as a Computer Technician at a well-recognized electronic retailer, becoming the first student in the group to become employed. Rivera says that the fact that the program believed in him enough to give him the opportunity helped him believe in himself and apply for the kinds of jobs that he always wanted to have.

### The Results

The results of this initiative approached or exceeded goals developed during the planning phase.

**TABLE 1. FINAL OUTCOME MEASURES OF NYITCLC ENTRY-LEVEL<sup>1</sup> TRAINING**

	GOAL	ACTUAL
Number Enrolled	200	248
Percent Completed	75%	73%
Placement Rate	65%	56%
Average Wage at Placement	\$12.00	\$11.75

**Enrollment** rates exceeded the original goal due to several factors: A wide network of providers allowed the Consortium to market the training through local and citywide nonprofits and colleges. The Consortium's strong set of partners gave it instant credibility that allowed it to work directly with the newly created September 11th Fund. And the Consortium was able to access many different placement opportunities for clients.

**Completion** rates were about as high as predicted because the partnerships between the colleges and the local nonprofits were so strong. College faculty taught applicable skills in the classroom and nonprofit caseworkers were available during and outside of class hours to address any personal barriers to employment.

**Placement** rates were lower than expected largely because of the slumping economy in the city (although they were higher than similar programs in San Francisco, a city that experienced a comparable drop in IT employment). Other notable factors include time lost in the transition from NYSIA to EarnFair LLC as the placement partner (discussed in more detail in the "Overcoming Obstacles" section below) and the discovery in the middle of the training period that one of the original occupation targets—PC Technician—was no longer in high demand. The IT Consortium was able to switch its skills focus to office technology and increase placements in that job title.

**Wages** were about as high as expected. The IT sector is an area that demands higher-order skills and yields higher wages than typical entry-level jobs. The Consortium participants earned an average hourly wage of \$11.75, compared to job-seekers with similar skills and

employment histories who attain an average hourly wage of \$8.63 in other industries. In one year, this is nearly a \$6,500 difference in earnings. Despite the faltering economy during the period when the Consortium was active, the high incomes associated with IT still held, proving that the additional effort needed to maintain a commitment to the sector was well worth it for participants.

#### JOAN STEWART

After 17 years as a records clerk at a Manhattan law firm, Joan Stewart was ready for a career change. But after a year searching for a job, Stewart realized that her outdated computer skills left her ineligible for the kinds of jobs she wanted. So Stewart enrolled in the ten-week Office Technology training in Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook. A month after completing the training, Joan was hired by a Manhattan nonprofit as an Administrative Coordinator, making \$30,000 a year. "Diane at LaGuardia Community College provided training that really upgraded my skills and improved my confidence," she says. "This program helped me start a new chapter in my life."

#### Beyond the Numbers

The above section documents the Consortium's relative success at reaching all of its original numerical milestones, always a crucial assessment of any training program. However, the Consortium also had a number of additional, less tangible goals, including establishing a sectoral initiative brought to scale; increasing the capacity of all Consortium partners; and leaving a legacy of best practices that could be emulated by local workforce actors from the private and public sectors.

**INTEGRATED SERVICES.** All of the IT Consortium partners possessed tremendous strengths, but each had key “blind spots” due to their institutional perspectives. For example, community colleges are not staffed to provide individualized case management for students, as academic counselors have huge caseloads. Conversely, nonprofits excel at case management, but generally lack the academic standing to provide needed IT credentials.

The establishment of an integrated service model allowed participants to seamlessly engage with the different roles of college, nonprofit, private sector and public partners. Such integration entailed a willingness among partners to focus on what they did best, while learning new skills and sometimes relinquishing responsibilities for which they were not suited. The holistic approach was the reason that this initiative had a high completion and placement rate

**CONSORTIUM BUILDING.** New York City has one of the richest workforce development environments in the world, with 18 public college campuses and more than 60 nonprofits offering a wide variety of innovative training programs. And there are many different robust industries, from health care to technology, each with its own strong set of employer institutions. But never before had the full range of players in any of these various workforce sectors been brought together.

Collaboration was not always easy, and there were miscommunications along the way. But over the five year duration, the Consortium has established working protocols and communications systems, jointly designed the training, and collectively worked to overcome a series of obstacles. It may seem obvious to external workforce observers that the assembled partners should convene for such an ini-

tiative, but within the field this is new territory and required moving past the go-it-alone culture that has always dominated the workforce field in New York.

#### **CONCRETELY, COLLABORATION AROUND THE IT SECTOR HAS LED TO NUMEROUS IMPROVEMENTS**

- Organizations expanded their capacity. For NYSIA, membership in the Consortium opened doors and relationships with community-based organizations and the workforce community that it is still using in its approach to intermediate and upgrade skill training. EarnFair LLC learned about placing workers into IT positions and made connections in the IT field.
- Partners accessed more funding . The Consortium coordinated and pooled generous but disparate funding from private, state, city and federal sources
- A career ladder emerged. For the first time, providers forged a link between entry-level training and funding and intermediate-level training and skill upgrades for individuals currently employed. While only three participants have moved from entry-level training to intermediate in the initial phase, this accomplishment is significant because without a link to mid-level employment it is not possible to establish wage progression for workers.

**TABLE 2. EVOLVING ROLE OF CONSORTIUM PARTNERS AND NEWFOUND CAPACITY**

PARTNER	ROLES TO START	ROLES TO END	CAPACITY GAINED
Seedco	Intermediary with local NYC service providers	Through EarnFair also responsible for job placement	Experience working with IT employers
NYSIA	Trade association for local software companies	Responsible for all intermediate-level placement and administering federal grant in large-scale training consortium	Experience in job placement and commitment to intermediate training
WSC	National workforce intermediary	Established first major sectoral workforce program in New York	Enhanced understanding of sectoral planning that is now incorporated across the country
Community-Based Nonprofits	Local organizations that serve residents and address their barriers to employment	Critical service provider and link to entry-level job-seeker	Experience working with IT industry, local colleges and local employers
CUNY Colleges	Training provider	Integrate training with case management and placement partners	Experience working directly with both employer and community partners

A SECTORAL APPROACH TO EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMING. One of the most telling signs of success for the IT Consortium is the subsequent incorporation of its key practices into recent New York City workforce reforms.

At its core, the IT Consortium is a regional, sector-based career pathways system, one of the most discussed innovations in job training. The strategy for career pathways is straightforward: unite key stakeholders and providers around a single high-growth industry. But as cities and states begin to implement this model, they are finding that it takes time and effort to bring the disparate partners together. The challenge lies in building trust among collaborating players and developing a new way to do business.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the IT Consortium in New York was helping to bring about city workforce reforms focused on similar career pathways approaches. In 2004, the city's lead workforce agency, the Department of Small Business Services, and the same private funders that supported the Consortium came together around a new sectoral initiative, pooling public and private funds to establish two new demonstration models: a program focused on preparing a biotechnology workforce for New York City that is a collaboration with SUNY Downstate Medical Center, Hunter College and the New York Biotechnology Association.



# OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

No initiative is implemented free of obstacles. And this one had its share. There were the issues understood at the outset, such as the complexity of the workforce system in New York and the large number of providers. Beyond these issues at the starting line, however, a number of substantive challenges arose as the IT initiative took shape. Some were external to the partners (emanating from structural economic changes); others were internal issues. Taken together, the obstacles truly tested the mettle of the Consortium members to both work together and to adapt to new dynamics and situations.

## **An Unanticipated Economic Decline**

### **Affects Industry Planning**

The IT collaboration had its genesis during the economic and information technology booms experienced during the late 1990s and the early part of this decade. The bursting of the technology bubble had long been predicted by many economists, but it was virtually impossible to anticipate and plan for in terms of job development. The drop in IT jobs and ensuing economic shocks in New York after the September 11 attacks immediately increased unemployment and disrupted months of job market research. Not only was the field facing an economic downturn, systemic changes in the field helped push many technology job out of the city and even offshore.

Consequently, many Consortium IT job categories dried up just as the initiative began training its first round of workers in late 2001. This tightening of the IT job market put downward pressure on the Consortium placement numbers and forced the employer community

to scramble to cut costs. This in turn put tremendous strain on our employer partner, the New York Software Industry Association, and its member organizations.

It is important to remember that New York was not the only city hit hard by the falling tech economy at the beginning of the new century. Many Northwest, Southern and West Coast cities experienced even sharper declines, and IT sector projects in those areas faced tremendous difficulty placing job-seekers in IT positions. Similar collaboratives in California's Bay Area funded by the James Irvine Foundation from 2001 to 2004 saw a decline in placement levels to 25% after their participants completed training.

## PETER ORENGO

Five years after a corporate restructuring ended Peter Orengo's stable career in the IT sector, he was working the night shift as a security guard, a job that barely covered his living expenses and left him unable to pursue any training programs. With his skills and knowledge rapidly becoming out of date, he was pleased to find out about the IT Consortium's A+ training program. Today, Orengo has been accepted to attend a CCNA Certification program and is hoping that his training will make him a more marketable IT professional.

### **Debate over Business Skill Needs Leads to Internal Shifts in the Consortium**

Among the Consortium members, an issue arose concerning which skills businesses needed and how those skills figured into the placement of participants. This is a common issue: When creating collaborations between businesses and workforce systems, there is often a tension between meeting the needs of the employers—who desire the most well-trained employees—and the needs of the agencies, which are seeking to place the largest possible number of clients in jobs. The goal is to identify common ground where employers set standards that meet their needs and providers are able to supply qualified candidates.

Because Workforce Strategy Center has encountered this issue in many other states, the Consortium undertook considerable effort at the front end of the project to understand employer skill needs. Between January and December of 2001, with assistance from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the collaboration organized focus groups with 12 large financial and health care institutions and six

software companies to determine what skills were in high demand for both large and small businesses in New York. Based on these initial discussions with employers, the Consortium designed the program, including the recruitment protocols and assessment tools.

Although the focus groups were fairly intensive, NYSIA, the consortium partner responsible for all job placement activity, did not fully support the decision to create two course tracks, one based upon A+ certification and the other for advanced office workers. Facing a severe economic contraction that hit directly at the prospects of its membership, NYSIA decided to focus their efforts on higher-order training and more advanced job-seekers. Luckily, the Consortium had a strong and nimble set of partners and Seedco's EarnFair LLC was able to take over all of the placement functions for the Consortium. EarnFair LLC did not have much prior experience in the field of IT, but it quickly made business contacts and began to place the majority of students graduating from the IT Consortium classes.

### **Shifting Government Arrangements**

In many cases, engaging with the public sector adds time to the implementation of new workforce initiatives. In this case, government restructuring and miscommunications led to a number of delays.

Twice during the creation of the IT Consortium's programs, for example, the City of New York switched responsibility for workforce oversight to a different city agency, each time derailing the process of procuring funding that had been promised. In addition, the Consortium's original plan—to access Workforce Investment Act training vouchers—was rendered impossible as the city's supply

of vouchers rapidly dwindled in 2002. The ensuing delay in contracting associated with this complex funder relationship meant that new reporting and other programmatic requirements had to be established midway through the initiative, leading to both an initial underreporting of outcomes and delays in final reporting.

Of the partners responding to this loss in funding, the colleges in the Consortium had perhaps the hardest time. Community colleges typically offer training and education during traditional semesters, and they plan for that training up to one year in advance. For the entry-level training segment of the IT Consortium, LaGuardia Community College and Lehman College were forced to plan and implement training on a much shorter time frame. The schools hired faculty and scheduled courses, which involved committing computer labs that would otherwise have been used for other college courses. When the delays in government funding jeopardized all this advance planning, the schools struggled to keep their faculty and to hold on to their classrooms while they awaited a green light. This demanded not only a continued commitment to the Consortium, but a level of flexibility not often found at academic institutions. When funding finally became available, the colleges redoubled their efforts and offered the IT courses.

#### JAMES TONG

James Tong majored in Computer Information Systems at Baruch College and graduated with a goal of pursuing a career in information technology. He was able to secure a job as an office manager at a communications company, where he was able to do some desktop support and troubleshooting. After a few years, however, he was looking for an opportunity to take the next step in his IT career. James enrolled in the Consortium's PC Technician training class in the fall of 2003 and successfully graduated from the class in late December. Through EarnFair, James got a job as a Network Support Specialist with an Internet service provider in Lower Manhattan at a starting wage of \$14.90 an hour.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

In the face of a downsizing economy, shifting government structures and significant funding delays, the New York Information Technology Career Ladders Consortium experienced a high degree of success. Despite the initial dip in technology jobs, the Consortium proved that with sustained commitment and flexibility amongst partners, entry-level workers in New York City can find quality IT employment opportunities.

Beyond these measurable accomplishments, it is important to assess the lessons learned from this effort for future career pathways systems and sectoral initiatives in New York and elsewhere.

- Identify a single intermediary to oversee the management and day-to-day operations of the Consortium. Career pathways collaboratives typically involve a number of operational partners leveraging disparate funding streams. Each partner is engaging in career pathways activities—recruiting clients and providing case management, delivering training, engaging employers, placing clients in jobs—but no one particular group oversees all day-to-day activities. The New York experience highlights the need for one intermediary to take on the role that is nobody’s day job: to manage and oversee the activities of every partner to ensure consortia goals are being met. In the case of the IT Consortium, three different organizations managed three different aspects of the intermediary role: Workforce Strategy Center managed the fundraising and was the liaison with the private funders; Seedco managed the day-to-day operations of the entry-level training and the relationships with New York City; and NYSIA led the efforts for the intermediate and advanced training and managed the H1B grant. The lack of a single intermediary hampered the smooth operations of the Consortium as different partners managed the communications at different times. As a result of this experience Workforce Strategy Center promotes the need for one intermediary as a best practice for effective career pathways collaborations.
- Continuous improvement efforts must be built into the system’s design and budget. The diversity of partners in the Consortium allowed the group to overcome unforeseen challenges such as a slumping economy, changing job needs in the sector and the difficulty of placing women in technician-oriented positions. However, because the work plan did not emphasize an active evaluation effort, partners had to address these issues on a case-by-case basis instead of as a part of a larger programmatic response. The lesson is to build time and

funding into planning to adapt to shifting economic trends and unanticipated changes you may encounter during the implementation of a career pathways initiative.

- Multiple funding streams allow for flexibility. In the midst of the government funding delays that slowed getting the initiative off the ground, as a short-term measure, the Consortium accessed training funds available to Seedco under its workforce contract with the September 11th Fund as well as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds to support two initial classes. Fortunately, the Consortium also was able to draw upon generous contributions from private philanthropy, which allowed it to continue its work during this period despite the delay.
- In-depth knowledge of a sector is an important asset. The advantage of a sectoral strategy and a career pathways approach lies in the partners' depth of knowledge and set of relationships in one area. The disadvantage is in locking into an industry that may experience a dip in employment. The Consortium experienced both, but it was precisely the depth of experience that allowed it to stay the course and improve training and employment options for participants as the program progressed. When the tech bubble burst during the economic downturn of 2001, the IT sector underwent tremendous changes. However, because the Consortium had made a deep environmental scan of the field—and because the collaborative had chosen to work in a field with employment opportunities at many different types of companies—members were able to identify alternative skills and employers to help pick up the slack.

- Trust and communication pay dividends in many ways. The time and effort it takes for collaborative partners to become familiar with each other and form common goals can be crucial for weathering any problems. For example, the willingness of the community college partners to wait for government funding to become available, despite inconveniences to their scheduling, was possible in large part because the decision makers at those institutions supported the ideas of the IT Consortium and trusted their partners.

The Consortium was an unprecedented collaboration of nonprofits, colleges, an employer association and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The accomplishments included high levels of enrollment and graduation for participants; testing a new collaborative culture in the New York workforce development field; and the creation of a career pathways model with sector-based training that has since been incorporated into more recent local programs and system reforms.