



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT *Who is ready, willing, and able?*

by

Workforce Development Immersion Team 2020

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Introduction

Richmond boasts many organizations across government, nonprofit, and private sectors who work tirelessly to improve workforce development. Many train workers on the technical skills needed for job placement, and others provide the tools needed to find jobs, prepare resumes, and practice interview skills. Lacking, however, is consensus on how to develop the most important skill set of all: **soft skills**.

Scope of Immersion: Our Journey & Findings

As we conducted our site visits, we quickly learned that employers are willing to train workers on hard skills needed to perform their work, but they want to hire people who already have soft skills.¹ We found no need to recreate the existing efforts to serve many different populations of workers and employers, but saw great inconsistency in how local workforce development efforts addressed soft skills.

"Hard skills" are traditionally regarded as technical skills acquired in the pursuit of a certificate, license, or degree, theoretically unlocking a successful career. "Soft skills" have been seen as intuitive and assumed to warrant no formal training. These beliefs, however, are myths.

In fact, "hard skills" can become obsolete with technology, and employers can outsource them, while "soft skills" are complex, critical to career success regardless of industry or credentials, and both can and should be taught. They have powerful benefits for employers and employees alike:

- Soft skills training can improve work productivity with a 250% return on investment in behavioral training on problem-solving, communication, and decision making in just eight months.²

¹ Soft skills include a "broad set of [...] competencies [...] that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, [...] perform well, and achieve their goals." [See Child Trends, Inc., *Workforce Connection* \(2015\).](#)

² See [Walsh, Dylan, *Soft skills training brings substantial returns on investment* \(Dec. 11, 2017\).](#)

- Soft skills can predict earnings, with the fastest acceleration of earnings found among those with high technical skills and high soft skills.³
- Employers who use competency-based interviewing see higher retention rates and employee satisfaction.⁴

Indeed, soft skills provide the armor for workers to be resilient in any work environment, even in a global pandemic. To reflect their importance, we rebranded them to: **Power Skills**.

Challenges

- a. Employers Disagree About the Most Important Power Skills. Employers across sectors and industries disagree on the power skills worthy of attention.
- b. Inconsistent Collaborations. While efforts are underfoot to encourage collaboration among the existing workforce development efforts in Richmond, these collaborations are not yet at the large-scale needed for widespread change.
- c. Varying Perceptions of Responsibility. Not all employers feel responsible for teaching power skills. Some insist responsibility falls on parents, others focus on schools. Myths about power skills persist.
- d. Without Responsibility, There Can Be No Resources. Without a central, high-level authority leading the study and development power skills, no incentive or funding structure exists.

Key Learning Points

Everyone needs Power Skills. Whether someone is seeking an entry level job, cultivating a trade, or preparing for a promotion, power skills are essential. But they need reframing:

- a. The Lack of Power Skills Negatively Impacts the Global Economy: Without power skills, the labor pool is limited, development stagnates, the growth potential shrinks, and everyone has less wealth.
- b. K-12 Education Should Embrace Power Skills for All Students: Students and parents should understand that power skills prepare all students, college-bound or not.
- c. Those Without Power Skills Lack the Armor of Resilience: Particularly acute in this time of COVID-19, those without Power Skills—especially the skills of

³ See [Deming, David J., *The Growing Importance of Soft Skills in the Labor Market*, National Bureau of Economic Research.](#)

⁴ See ["How to Run Competency Based Interviews: Measuring Skills for Specific Roles"](#)

adaptability—are more susceptible to job loss.

Recommendations / Calls to Action

With the current lack of coordinated, cross-sector collaboration focused on the development of power skills, no one in Virginia has embraced power skills as their specific charge. Small silos of efforts have emerged, but not to the large-scale needed for equitable progress. We recommend the two approaches:

- A. Establish coordinated, cross-sector collaboration from a high-level platform akin to the [Indiana Governor's Workforce Cabinet](#). There, the Governor established a dedicated state agency and a measurable pathway for attaining power skills through collaboration with multiple stakeholders across government, business, and nonprofit sectors.
- B. Communications/awareness campaign to promote the importance of power skills among key audiences (employers, parents, educators, government) to create demand to which government and key institutions must respond.

What does this all mean in a global pandemic?

In this unprecedented time, the need for Power Skills has become more acute as employers have cut jobs at all levels. COVID-19 has, in many ways, exposed the inequities of many systems, and power skills are no exception. **Now** is the time for our leaders to promote power skills and provide equal access to their development. State-wide high-level leadership and collaboration on power skills as people return to work could make the difference between just surviving and truly thriving in the Commonwealth.

Sources & Interviews

- *Community College Workforce Alliance* – Natalie Meredith and Wes Smith
- *Communities at Work* - Dan Humphrey, Co-Founder & Director; Bill Weber, Co-Founder
- *Virginia Department of Education* – David Eshelman - Director of Workforce Development and Initiatives; Anthony Williams – Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator
- *United Way Workforce Partnership Team* – Anna Danese, Director of Workforce Partnership
- *Virginia Career Works* – Brian Davis - Executive Director
- *Goodwill of Central & Coastal Virginia* – Shawn Smith, Director of Job Readiness and Vocational Services
- *Community Foundation and Workforce Development Coalition* – Scott Blackwell, Chief Community Engagement Officer
- *Henrico County Public Schools – Workforce & Career Development Center* – Mac Beaton, Director
- *Richmond Office of Community Wealth Building* – Valayree Mitchell, Director of Center for Workforce Innovation