

TRANSFORMING U.S. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CONFERENCE

Panel Summary Report #9

What American Workers and Employers Need to Succeed

by Robb C. Sewell

American workers and employers are facing new realities and challenges that the current workforce development system is not designed to handle, including resource constraints, globalization, changing demographics, and a turbulent labor market. This session challenged a panel of experts to reimagine workforce development policies so that workers and employers are able to succeed in today's ever-changing economy.

The moderator, **Todd Greene**, Vice President and Community Affairs Officer at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, began the discussion by asking **John Engler**, President of the Business Roundtable and former Governor of the State of Michigan, about policy changes that are needed to help employers. Governor Engler stated that employers should better articulate the competencies that they need and that government workforce agencies should then implement policies that will help employers find workers with those qualifications. He also pointed out that the nation is currently facing three critical educational needs that affect employers. First, students must be prepared for college without requiring academic remediation once they're enrolled in college classes. Second, if high school students aren't going to pursue a college education — and not everyone should attend college — they should consider opportunities available through industry, such as apprenticeships or cooperative education programs. Third, it is essential that we lower the dropout rates of both high school and college students.

Next, Greene asked **Sara Horowitz**, Founder and Executive Director of the Freelancers Union, about the rise in freelance workers in the United States. Horowitz explained that a recent report by her organization estimated that there are as many as 53 million freelance workers in America. While there are many workers who do not hold a traditional nine-to-five job for a single employer, there is a lack of good quality information about these freelance workers and what they need to successfully navigate and succeed in today's labor market. She stressed that most current public workforce development policies are no longer relevant for a large share of the workforce because these programs were designed around the notion that everyone works in a company at a 40-hour a week job. Horowitz then discussed some of the positive aspects of freelance workers, including their ability to diversify their skill sets and meet an array of employers' needs. She pointed out that freelance workers did well during the Great Recession because employers turned to them rather than hiring full-time employees. Some negatives include the fact that freelancers aren't able to engage in collective bargaining and that they must provide their own health insurance. Her organization, the Freelancers Union, is attempting to generate more training opportunities for the freelance workforce.

Greene then asked **Carl Van Horn**, Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Rutgers University and Director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, about what workers want from government and the public workforce develop-

ment system. Van Horn pointed out that during the Great Recession, there were no fundamental changes in federal workforce development policies even though there was a large, temporary increase in funding. He stressed that American workers want and need new public policies to help them succeed in a rapidly changing economy. As research for Van Horn's book *Working Scared (Or Not at All): The Lost Decade, Great Recession, and Restoring the Shattered American Dream* showed, American workers understand the struggles that they and their families and friends are coping with and are frustrated with the government's inability to respond with new policies and more contemporary, productive interventions. Van Horn said that workers and job seekers need better information and independent advice about their careers, better ways to navigate the labor market and handle career transitions, and more robust, flexible, and affordable educational and training opportunities. He also discussed the need for government agencies to regulate the performance of postsecondary education and workforce training programs to ensure that workers are getting quality education and training services.

Governor Engler recommended that workforce investment boards play a more prominent role in sharing analyses about the labor market with community colleges so that curricula are more relevant to students. Van Horn added that labor market information also needs to be shared with high school and college students throughout their educational careers. At present, there is little to no support in high schools to provide quality advice to students about their critical career decisions, the skills employers require, and the educational programs available to provide the necessary training to successfully enter the labor market.

Greene asked Governor Engler what K-12 schools can do to help students find their niche in life and succeed. Governor Engler said that schools need to ensure that students are proficient in reading and writing so that they are prepared for secondary education, training programs, and the workplace. He said all of our nation's students need something similar to the Individualized Education Programs for students with disabilities. Students need help figuring out what they want to do and how education can help them achieve their goals.

The audience asked questions about several topics, including monetary policy and career pathways for freelance workers. Governor Engler discussed cross-industry/foundational skills that are important for every worker, including personal skills (professionalism, adaptability, reliability), people skills (teamwork, communication, respect), workplace skills (problem solving, decision making, working with tools and technology), and applied knowledge (writing, reading, critical thinking).

Governor Engler and Van Horn agreed that the keys to building stronger U.S. workforce policies and programs involve doing a much better job at understanding the available data, helping public policymakers and practitioners to identify effective workforce development policies and programs, and then putting in place policies and resources to help local communities build on those effective identified successes.

About the Author

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About this Series

In October 2014, the Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and Kansas City and the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University hosted a national conference titled, *Transforming U.S. Workforce Development Policies for the 21st Century*. The goal of the conference was to provide a forum for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to share perspectives on transformative education and workforce development policies.

Over 250 people, including business and labor leaders, scholars, educators, policy advocates, researchers, and workforce development professionals, attended the conference. More than 60 national and international experts shared recommendations for developing policies and programs that will meet the nation's needs for talented workers.

This publication, the last in a series of nine reports, highlights the discussions and recommendations that were offered during the panel, "What American Workers and Employers Need to Succeed."

Previous reports in the series can be downloaded at the links below:

Reforming Workforce Development Policies for American Workers

Strategies for Helping Long-term Unemployed Job Seekers Return to Work

Aligning Employers and Workforce Development Strategies

Emerging Trends in Education and Training Programs: Credentials, Competencies, and Curriculum

Workforce Policies for Disadvantaged Populations

Building a Foundation for Transformative Change through Data and Research

European Workforce Development Policies: Lessons for the United States

Intelligent Workforce Development Systems

Conference Videos

View interviews with some of the members of this panel at the links below:

John Engler

Todd Greene

Carl Van Horn

Photo Gallery



Todd Greene



John Engler



Sara Horowitz



Carl Van Horn

What American Workers and Employers Need to Succeed



Sara Horowitz, Todd Greene, John Engler, and Carl Van Horn (l-r)



Audience members listen to the discussions