

THE CATAPULT PAPERS



ESSAYS ON THE FUTURE OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Catapult Revisited:
What Is Still Relevant for Next Generation Workforce
Development Organizations in the COVID Recession?



About the Boston Foundation

The Boston Foundation, Greater Boston's community foundation, brings people and resources together to solve Boston's big problems. Established in 1915, it is one of the largest community foundations in the nation—with net assets of \$1.3 billion. In 2018, the Foundation and its donors paid \$129 million in grants to nonprofit organizations. The Foundation works in close partnership with its donors, with more than 1,000 separate charitable funds established for the general benefit of the community or for special purposes. It also serves as a major civic leader, think tank and advocacy organization, commissioning research into the most critical issues of our time and helping to shape public policy designed to advance opportunity for everyone in Greater Boston. The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), a consulting unit of the Foundation, designs and implements customized philanthropic strategies for families, foundations and corporations around the globe.

About Skillworks

SkillWorks is a nationally recognized workforce development funder collaborative, launched by the Boston Foundation and City of Boston in 2003 to improve workforce development in Boston and statewide. It brings together philanthropy, government, community and employers to address the twin goals of helping low-income individuals attain good jobs and helping businesses find skilled workers.

About JVS

Jewish Vocational Service in Boston (JVS) was founded in 1938 during the Great Depression to assist Jewish immigrants struggling to enter the American workforce and support their families. Today, JVS is among the oldest and largest providers of adult education and workforce development services in Greater Boston, serving a diverse clientele representing over 90 nations and speaking 50 languages, and helping people secure financial independence through educational and employment services. With over 75 years of demonstrated excellence in workforce development, JVS has a reputation for continuous innovation, building person-centered and performance-based models to improve outcomes and increase programmatic effectiveness.

About Catapult

Catapult is a project of the Boston Foundation in partnership with SkillWorks. Catapult invests in the growth of Greater Boston's most effective, market-driven training and education organizations in partnership with the region's most savvy businesses. Its goal is to help build robust, "next generation" workforce development solutions that can launch our untapped talent into new opportunities at a faster, more sustained rate while also supporting and leveraging the long-term success of individuals and their employers via advancement, retention and strong employment practices.

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Workforce Development Organizations in the COVID Recession?

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FOREWORD

It was audacious for its time.

When Project Catapult was first conceived, it grew, at least in part, out of then Boston Foundation CEO Paul Grogan's statement that "a tight labor market is a terrible thing to waste." Finally, Greater Boston was primed to tackle systemic challenges for the regional workforce. Working with my predecessor at SkillWorks Marybeth Campbell, Jerry Rubin of Jewish Vocational Services, Rougui Diallo of Resilient Coders and some of the best workforce practitioners in the state shared their thoughts on how we could seize the moment and devise a workforce development system that benefited all workers as well as employers. The Catapult Papers were a stake in the ground we entered 2020 rightly proud of.

However, 2020 would quickly shift the ground we had so boldly claimed. As the pandemic flipped our job market from the hottest in the country to the coldest in the course of a COVID-stricken month, the vision of a scenario where employers in need of employees would work with us to make improvements changed into the reality of an economy where entire industries would be shut down for a year. As we worked with a cohort of nonprofits eager to put the Catapult Papers into action, the reality hit that the world that gave rise to those Papers no longer existed.

Yet the problems in the system the Catapult Papers wanted to address still very much existed. Indeed, it has already become trite to say that COVID only highlighted the existing inequities in our society, and that is as true for workforce development as anything else. It quickly became apparent that in a post-COVID world the challenges we thought we got to address before were problems we *had* to address now.

So, we are grateful to Jerry Rubin for revisiting his work with a critical eye. If it's true that no plan survives first contact, then Jerry took our plan and resurrected it. He wrestles with a year of experience in a world changed not only by COVID but by an awakening to America's unkept promise on racial equity. As the post-COVID era begins, he shares a conviction that going back to what we were doing before serves neither employers nor employees well, and that Project Catapult still has relevance as we begin our recovery. This draws on essential truths and the principles for a workforce development system that keeps the promise of Catapult: not just getting people into any placement but launching them into good careers and the prosperity that comes with them.

Thanks again to Jerry for jumpstarting this revisit, and to SkillWorks' own Kaitlyn Bean for shepherding this project to its successful completion. Their efforts on behalf of the workers of Greater Boston are truly appreciated.

Andre Green
Executive Director, SkillWorks

CATAPULT REVISITED

Re-Visiting the Catapult Papers: What Is Still Relevant in the COVID Recession?

“This economic moment, with historically low unemployment and greater leverage for low-wage workers, will not last forever.” In March 2019, I wrote those words in a series of papers published by the Boston Foundation entitled *The Catapult Papers*. Exactly one year later they came true with a vengeance. Massachusetts went from having the lowest unemployment rate in the country to the highest in a matter of weeks. And while an economic downturn was inevitable whether or not we experienced a pandemic, the speed and severity of the downturn and the health-related implications of the pandemic for the workforce were certainly unexpected. Given the dramatic changes we’ve experienced since the *Catapult Papers* were published, and the obvious and dramatic need for quality workforce development services in this moment of high unemployment, it seems appropriate to re-examine their core ideas and consider what is still relevant, what is not and what new ideas should be considered.

This essay looks at the four core ideas of the paper that define what I believe are “Next Generation” workforce development organizations, and reconsiders them based on what we’ve learned at JVS over the past 12 months of the COVID pandemic:

1. Being market responsive
2. Understanding that all jobs are not the same
3. Knowing your own backyard
4. Going bold and going big

It also re-examines ideas outlined in the fourth *Catapult Paper*, “Tapping the Untapped Workforce.”

BEING MARKET RESPONSIVE

The thinking behind the market responsive idea wasn’t that highly effective or “next generation” workforce development organizations should be active in strong labor markets and pull back in weaker labor markets, but rather that they should always use the dynamics of market demand to drive quality services for workers and employers. The current recession has clearly changed the labor market. Entire sectors, many with a disproportionate reliance on lower-wage workers and workers of color, have been brought to their knees. In Boston, the hospitality and food services industries are in collapse; Logan Airport, one of the largest employers in the region, has yet to recover; and many related industries are struggling. Unemployment remains high after several years of hovering between 2 and 4 percent.

Yet, at the same time, many of Boston’s key sectors are growing. Healthcare, though it struggled in the early months of the pandemic, overwhelmed by emergency demands, continues to add significant hires and experience worker shortages in key areas, even though hiring in some areas remains frozen. The life sciences have grown significantly in the past year, and other sectors like financial services have recovered substantially from early pandemic losses, though front-line hiring is still lagging. Finally, some newer sectors like those associated with online consumer fulfillment, including logistics, driving, distribution, etc. have been growing steadily throughout this period and should be targets of opportunity for workforce development partnerships.

While it is difficult to predict the trajectory of the economic recovery, it is likely to be slow and uneven across sectors. Some sectors like hospitality and air travel may never recover to pre-pandemic

IN A TIME OF UNEVEN SECTORAL RECOVERY, BEING FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE IS KEY.

levels, as business and leisure travel and spending habits change. Others—such as life sciences, distribution and logistics, and manufacturing—will likely grow more rapidly.

Being market-responsive will allow Next Generation workforce development organizations to effectively serve both their clients and the employer partners that need their services in this time. In a time of uneven sectoral recovery, flexibility and adaptability is key. Organizations that are tied to one sector that is struggling may be challenged to broaden their scope to include sectors that hire similar workers with transferable or rapidly attainable skills. Multi-sector organizations like JVS must be willing to shift resources to those sectors that have real talent demands, including quickly creating new programming and quickly learning the ins and outs of other industries. We will also need to do a better job working with national companies where decision making can be distant, slower and more difficult to penetrate. This is what it means to be market responsive.

Being market responsive also means taking care of your customers during tough times and good times. JVS's healthcare partners have had acute needs for Patient Care Technicians, Pharmacy Technicians and other technical positions during this period. The pandemic created major challenges for required clinical experiences, testing and certification, not to mention the requirement to do nearly all instruction remotely. My colleagues worked day and night with our employer partners to creatively construct work-arounds that allowed us to recruit, train and place the talented staff that they needed. They also needed to quickly establish new training vendor partnerships,

as not all providers were willing or able to operate remotely. Not only were long-time business relationships maintained, but important cash flow was maintained, helping JVS to avoid layoffs or reduction in capabilities. That is what it means to be market responsive.

Understanding That Not All Jobs Are the Same

The growing focus on job quality in the workforce development field and at JVS was driven by two factors. One was that in a tight job market, getting a job was no longer the primary concern, but rather, what kind of job was more important. A tight job market meant that workers had more leverage and were well positioned to play catch-up. A second factor was the extreme level of economic inequality that continued to persist in spite of a tight job market and a growing economy. In the last several years of the economic boom that ended 12 months ago, low-wage workers were in fact seeing rising wages, but the increases were stubbornly slow, and income inequality continued to rise.

Obviously, the first factor driving the focus on job quality has, at least for the time being, changed dramatically and we are likely to be experiencing a softer job market for months if not years to come, which will likely negatively impact job quality in some sectors. The second factor driving the focus on job quality, income inequality, has if anything worsened since the pandemic recession. With massive layoffs in the service economy, low-income workers and workers of color have been disproportionately hurt by the recession. For many, all of the “catch-up” of the last several years of the economic boom disappeared overnight. And, it is important to remember, even at the height of the economic boom and tight job market, low-income workers and workers of color were struggling with low wages and poor quality jobs. With this

reality in mind, even with the challenges of a dramatically weaker job market, the need to maintain our focus on job quality is paramount. So, what might a job quality strategy look like in the midst of a recession? There are three specific elements that can comprise that strategy.

First and foremost, an effective job quality strategy in this time will require an even greater focus on partnerships with employers that embrace job quality as part of their business strategy. If employers don't see a real return from focusing on better quality jobs, they will not prioritize job quality, or if they do, it won't be sustainable. JVS has spent more than a decade building deep relationships with important regional employers that embrace the idea of job quality to attract and retain top talent as part of their strategy to deliver market-leading goods and services. In many cases, we have worked closely with these employers on specific workforce development strategies to strengthen their job quality strategy, and these relationships and our credibility with employer partners will be more important now than ever.

Second, we need to further refine and more strongly emphasize our definition of job quality in our employer engagements. JVS has continued to improve and strengthen our "Job Quality Index" tool, which has now been used by more than 50 Boston-area companies. With the experience of the COVID pandemic and the disproportionate health risks facing front-line and low-income workers, along with increasing focus on racial inequities, we have added two important elements to the Job Quality Index. A set of health and safety questions as well as a set of diversity and inclusion questions have been added to the other elements of the tool, which include wages, benefits, schedules, advancement opportunities and other aspects of a supportive work environment. We also engaged a software company to re-build the

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Index to be a more robust and user-friendly tool so that we can expand its use in Boston and beyond. We are committed to using the Index even more consistently now to help us focus our work on good jobs, and to help our employer partners seeking to fill those good jobs attract and retain the talent that they need to survive and thrive in these tough times.

Third, the COVID pandemic recession will require us to increase our focus on policy and advocacy work in order to bolster job quality and address income, wealth and racial inequities. The COVID pandemic has even further revealed the income and racial inequities in our economy that will only be addressed through bold changes in public policies. Three possible areas of state and federal policy advocacy come to mind: increased investments in effective re-employment and re-skilling services particularly targeted at lower-wage workers, expanded income supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage, and criminal justice reform that can help remove employment barriers faced disproportionately by communities of color. While JVS is and will continue to be primarily a direct service organization, we have taken steps to increase our policy and advocacy work, and will continue to expand this effort in the coming months and years.

KNOW YOUR OWN BACKYARD

The *Catapult Papers* argued that Next Generation workforce development organizations need to be a genuine force in their regional economies. I would argue that given the current economic challenges, “knowing your own backyard” is equally if not more important than ever. Economic regions will need to engage all of the resources at their disposal in order to climb back into economic recovery, and it is critically important that workforce development be part of that effort. If organizations like JVS, which focus on lower-wage workers and workers of color, are not part of regional recovery efforts, those communities will continue to fall further behind.

The economic recovery is likely to be slow, sporadic and differ widely by sector. Next Generation workforce development organizations will only be effective if they are close to the ground and understand which sectors, employers and occupations are growing, and what are their skill and talent requirements. This kind of fine-grained labor market intelligence does not come from BLS data, or even from real-time sources like Burning Glass, but requires close relationships with employer organizations, employers and even hiring managers. Next Generation workforce development organizations should double down on these relationships as they deploy their resources and adjust their strategies and programming.

As an example, JVS is working closely with a consortium of childcare companies that have been hit hard by the pandemic and struggled prior to the pandemic to attract and retain talent in a very tightly constrained reimbursement environment. This project is considering job quality improvements and innovative employee pipeline models that can only come from very close working relationships.

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GOING BOLD AND GOING BIG

Big problems require big solutions, and a severe recession is certainly a big problem. While it may be easier in a boom time to be ambitious and emphasize growth, the COVID recession calls out for Next Generation workforce development organizations and their supporters to step up as energetically as they possibly can. I would argue that there are three strategies that Next Generation workforce development organizations and their supporters can take to boldly address the recession.

First, there should be a focus on significantly scaling up proven training and employment programs. JVS’s Pay For Success program, along with a half-dozen other training and employment programs around the country, have shown impressive, statistically significant impacts through gold-standard random control trials. JVS’s Pay For Success model, English For Advancement (EFA), is an ideal program for an economic recovery period, since clients can stay in classes for up to a year, improving their English and job skills, and leave the class when a good job is available. JVS’s Talent Pipeline model, by which employers “order” and pay JVS to recruit and train for specific openings in specific job titles is another

scalable model as the recovery begins to expand. EFA, Talent Pipelines and other proven models are waiting at the ready for an infusion of capital to expand and address record joblessness in multiple regions.

Second, as I addressed earlier in this essay, Next Generation workforce development organizations should increase their focus on policy, advocacy and related systems change work. Of course, our primary work will be services for individuals, but given the scope of the crisis and the depth of unemployment and income inequality, we won't achieve the impact we desire one client at a time.

Third, Next Generation organizations need to seize the innovation opportunities that have been presented during the past months. The COVID crisis, like crises throughout history, has spurred remarkable innovation and change across all types of organizations. Though JVS had begun to undertake a major technology investment plan prior to the pandemic, the need to immediately implement social distancing dramatically accelerated the plan. In the process, we discovered that our clients and our staff could use and deliver remote learning far better than we anticipated. In seven short months we have transformed our delivery model to be fully remote, and while we will certainly deliver in-person services when we are able, we will absolutely continue to deliver remote and hybrid services in the future. In the process, we've learned that we can effectively reach and serve clients who for reasons of geography, schedule or other responsibilities would not be able to take advantage of our services under a traditional in-person model. This discovery, and the accelerated learning and investment in technology will enable us to scale our impact significantly in the future, to go "bigger and bolder," beyond what we had imagined. I expect others in the field have reached the same conclusion.

NEXT GENERATION ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO SEIZE THE INNOVATION OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE BEEN PRESENTED DURING THE PAST MONTHS.

All that said, the COVID crisis and the necessity of providing remote services has shone a bright light on the "digital divide." At the same time JVS has dramatically expanded its remote offerings and technology capabilities, many of our clients, particularly English language learners and very low-income clients, struggle with accessing remote services. Some combination of not having a computer or poor or no internet access and little to no experience with computers and related online tools has been a serious challenge for close to a third of our clients. To address this, we have created a laptop and wifi hot spot lending library, and a "digital navigator" program through which volunteers provide individualized technology coaching. However, as we scale services using remote tools, the "digital divide" challenge will grow as well.

TAPPING THE UNTAPPED WORKFORCE

The *Catapult Papers* argued that a very tight job market presented an important opportunity to tap the "untapped workforce," which includes individuals who face greater barriers to employment and have been largely left out of quality jobs—or, too often, any jobs at all. According to the papers, the untapped workforce includes English language learners, young adults, individuals with disabilities, and long-term unemployed adults. While issues of race were implicit in this analysis, they were not explicit. They should be.

All available data make clear that workers of color benefitted less from the economic boom and were hurt more by the COVID recession than their White

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counterparts. And the evidence is very clear that both systemic racism and structural barriers to education and quality employment continue to perpetuate income and racial inequities. While these issues have been addressed in detail by others, the ways in which the workforce development field does not adequately address them, and in some cases perpetuates them, has received less attention. I would argue that Next Generation workforce development organizations and the entire workforce development field are obligated to honestly and openly examine these issues and commit to addressing them.

As a contribution to this long-overdue conversation, I would suggest that five factors be more closely examined and responded to.

1. Too many workforce development programs exclude individuals with significant structural barriers to employment by design. Prior education requirements, prior employment history, required literacy levels and limited wraparound supports are just some of the program design issues that limit participation by Black and Brown candidates with the most barriers and greatest need.
2. Success measures utilized by workforce development funders, both private and public, drive program designs that limit participation by participants with the most barriers.

3. Too many organizations that work most closely with Black and Brown individuals with the greatest barriers to employment lack the resources and support to effectively serve their constituency at a significant scale.
4. Important public and employer policies, such as the treatment of prior criminal involvement, have an enormously negative effect on Black and Brown employment and economic equity.
5. Major structural barriers like the lack of affordable childcare, and the “cliff effects” of public benefits that disincentivize work, shut out too many individuals who seek better job opportunities and economic advancement.

As we begin to recover from the COVID recession, sharpening our analysis of and action on these and other factors that perpetuate racial and economic inequities should be a major priority for Next Generation workforce development organizations and the workforce development field. To that end, JVS, which has long provided services to communities of color, is examining and adjusting its own practices, models and partnerships, and we look forward to sharing our experiences and learning from others.

The economy and job market will eventually recover from the COVID recession, though it will likely be a long and painful road, with many casualties along the way. However, as we achieve recovery, we should not aspire to an economy and job market identical to the one we just lost with the recession. We should strive for a far more inclusive and equitable economy and job market that truly rewards work with livable wages and economic opportunity. Next Generation workforce development organizations will have a major role to play in achieving this goal.

