

Workforce Development During the Pandemic

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, state and local transportation organizations have continued to operate despite overwhelming uncertainty and an unprecedented interruption to millions of lives. State and local governments are tasked with reevaluating their priorities while providing services to their community despite budget cuts and workforce losses. The need for a comprehensive workforce development plan has never been greater, as these organizations are now faced with not only addressing normal workforce changes, but providing new virtual services that did not exist before. As reopenings slowly continue, proper workforce development strategies can be used to accelerate the recovery and ensure that they can create the workforce they need to efficiently compete once the pandemic is under control. This will require a multifaceted approach of efficiently managing current employees while simultaneously seeking and training new hires.

Finding and Hiring New Talent

Given unemployment rates many would assume that finding new employees would be relatively easy right now. However, the unique circumstances surrounding the pandemic make it clear that is not the case as COVID-19 restrictions have affected every job sector differently. While these changes may not be permanent once COVID-19 restrictions are loosened, your organization needs to plan ahead to keep its network ready to return to normal, pre-COVID-19, operations.

Organizations across the board have had to transition to a virtual recruiting and hiring process for most roles. And many jobs will likely require at least temporary remote work for the time being. For those jobs, in addition to the basic requirements it is important to screen candidates for skill sets that will make them successful at remote work. As a recruiter, you should attempt to ascertain a potential employees' autonomy, self-motivation, proactive collaboration during the interview process. While the pandemic is temporary, the demand for remote and flexible work-life balance opportunities is not and many of these skills can be useful in the long term.



Many resources are out there to help employees and job-seekers alike, such as the [New Jersey COVID-19 Jobs and Hiring Portal](#). Here companies can list jobs, particularly those in critical industries that have remained open. Candidates can also find information and job-seeking tips to help navigate this uncertain time. The [New Jersey Career Network](#) is also an excellent resource that can help you grow your skill set, link you with potential employers, or help you find educational and training opportunities to find the jobs you want.

Another options is for organizations to use their existing talent pool to meet new needs. Most organizations have internal candidates who have previously submitted applications and may be seeking a job, or candidates who are unhappy with their current type of work and looking for something different. If you want to avoid an active recruiting campaign, you can shift your focus to this existing pool of candidates and hire from there. Even if you are not extending offers, you can still leverage this opportunity to build an existing pipeline that can be tapped at a later date.

Training and Retraining

In February 2020, the unemployment rate stood at 3.5 percent, a 50-year low. A month later, more than 10 million people filed for unemployment with another 11 million filing in the first half of April. There is no telling when all the jobs will be recovered, but what's certain is that new skills will play a part. One of the benefits learned during this period is that high-quality adult education and training services can be delivered remotely, and that clients with a wide range of education, literacy, and skill levels can participate in online trainings. In New Jersey there are a multitude of Labor and Workforce Development Assistance programs available to employers and job-seekers alike to help pivot their skills during the pandemic. The [Business Assistance Programs](#) website has many options available with unique grants and opportunities:

- **NJ Incumbent Worker Training Grant** - NJ Incumbent Worker Training Grant funds are competitively awarded to New Jersey employers to provide cost reimbursement assistance to train incumbent frontline employees to meet the current and future occupational skill requirements of available high wage, middle-skill and high-skill jobs in New Jersey.
- **Registered Apprenticeship** - The registered apprenticeship model combines both classroom/related technical instruction (RTI) and on-the-job training. A sponsor, who can be an individual employer or an association of employers, operates the apprentice training programs on a voluntary basis.
- **Skills4Jersey** - These competitive grants are available to upgrade the skills of workers to ensure that New Jersey employers are more competitive in the global economy.
- **New Jersey Career Connections** - LWD launched the New Jersey Career Connections website to link New Jersey job-seekers and employers. The website helps connect the businesses that are creating these jobs to the New Jerseyans who want them.

Maintaining Organizational Excellence

While hiring new candidates and training existing employees to match new needs is important, it's also vital to streamline and protect your current workforce. During the pandemic and this time of limited face to face interaction, it has become all the more important to connect personally with coworkers. Regardless of how long the pandemic may last, providing factual, consistent messaging helps reinforce what employees need to know. Likewise, it is also important to "capture the wins" during the pandemic. Highlight your organization's successes during this period and make sure they are emphasized.

During a time of such immense change, there's no greater resource when trying to optimize your organization than seeking the input of employees into potential process improvements. When trying to figure out what isn't working well in this new environment, ask around for potential issues, solutions, or new innovations. This can help accelerate new ways of working through digital upskilling, especially as your company becomes more familiar with remote technologies. This period provides a great opportunity to find out from employees what they need to complete their jobs from outside the office, and what kind of support they will need in the future. At the time, policies and procedures for remote working should be formalized, as Remote work is a necessity now, but it may continue to be a permanent part of our workplaces.