

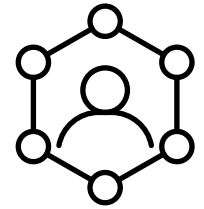
WE LEARN



Who owns frontline skilling?

In the education-to-employment system, who is ultimately responsible for giving someone the skills to be successful in the workforce?

AUTHORS: SEAN STOWERS AND KENNA OSE



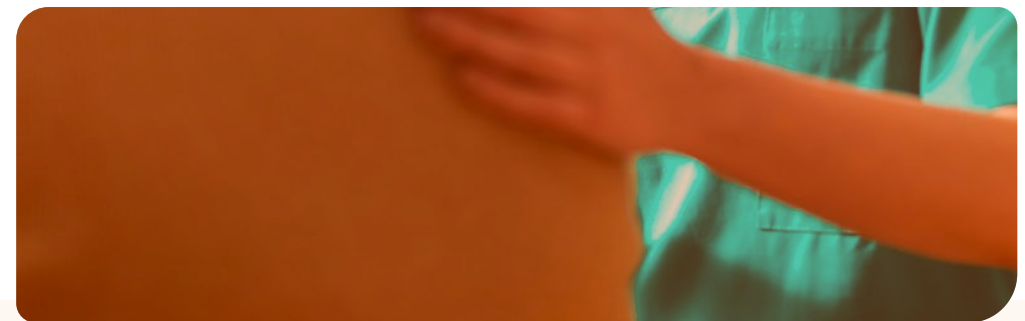
INTRODUCTION

Holding accountability for job readiness

Most of the American workforce is frontline. Nurses and medical assistants, diesel mechanics, welders, machine operators, patient care technicians, the people who keep water treatment plants running. These are specialized occupations that cannot be performed by anyone who has not been trained for them. They are also the roles employers report the most difficulty filling, and the roles almost nothing in the education-to-employment system was built to serve, because for the most part, both education and corporate learning were designed around the knowledge worker.

That mismatch produces what employers describe as a talent shortage. Employers respond to that shortage by hiring whoever comes closest to the requirement and absorbing the cost of finishing the training themselves, or by leaving the role vacant and running short on headcount.

When you ask an academic institution how a person becomes qualified for one of these roles, the answer describes a handoff. The institution educates a student and awards a credential, and from that point the employer takes over and develops the person into the new job.



For corporate employers, on the other hand, hiring proceeds on the assumption that the person is ready for the role. When a new hire cannot yet perform, the employer reads that as an education problem: the curriculum was misaligned to the role, or the institution spent two years producing competence the employer needed much quicker. What the employer does not conclude is that developing this person has now become its own responsibility.

The failure in this scenario sits between holding a credential and performing the work. Education is accountable for graduating students. Employers are accountable for filling positions. Neither is accountable for whether the person graduating can do the job being filled.

What sits in between is practical training. A college has no reason to teach beyond the point where the credential is awarded, and an employer does not budget for it either (since recruiting budget is spent on finding candidates rather than on training people hired).

So nobody pays for the training, and roles remain hard to fill. Employers work around it by hiring below their requirements, and the talent shortage is treated as a fact of the market rather than the outcome of decisions each party has made.



SECTION 1

The problem: every function in the system reports on something other than job readiness

The previous section leaves an open question: if nobody pays for practical training, why has no institution been forced to confront the fact? Organizations are held accountable for what they measure, but nobody measures job readiness.

Colleges report enrollment and completion, and both funding and accreditation depend on those figures. College certifying bodies set standards for what a program must contain rather than for what a graduate can do once they graduate. State workforce agencies report programs funded and people served.

Inside the employer, talent acquisition reports time to fill and cost per hire, and L&D reports on the programs it runs and who participated in them. Tuition assistance, meanwhile, is administered by the benefits team as an employee benefit, and reported on like one: how many people used it and what it cost.



Each of those measures is legitimate. What none of them captures is whether the person ended up able to perform on the job. A new hire can fail and leave within the year while every organization that trained and placed them still reports a good result. Nothing in that chain of reporting registers what actually happened.

One exception is worth examining. Gainful employment rules are a federal requirement that ties a program's access to student aid funding to what happens to its graduates, and they were written to protect students from programs that leave them with debt and no earnings. Non-degree programs have to report the jobs graduates take and the salaries they earn, which means a college

can be held to whether its graduates were hired and what they were paid. Neither of these figures was ever meant to describe whether those graduates could do the work once hired.

Capability could not be measured this way even if a rule required it — it shows up once on the job, or in a performance conversation between a manager and a new hire.

Even when an employer knows precisely which graduates could not perform, no feedback loop carries that back to the institution that initially trained them. So the college never learns which parts of its program failed, and just keeps on teaching them.



SECTION 2

The linear pathway from education to employment

Colleges carry on teaching programs without knowing which parts of them failed. Underneath those programs is an assumption about how a person qualifies for a job: finish high school, enroll, complete, get hired.

For most frontline occupations there is more than one way in. A medical assistant, for example, can qualify through a two-year associate degree or through a twelve-week certificate, and both graduates are hired into the same role at the same starting wage. The certificate costs a fraction of the degree and takes a fraction of the time. (About half of an associate degree is general education, which is not generally used on the job post-graduation.)





If one route is faster and cheaper and leads to the same starting wage, the obvious question is why anyone takes the other. The professional bodies that certify these occupations set different requirements, and several of them require a degree. Employers apply their own standards on top. So the short route is quicker and cheaper, but the student choosing it cannot know which standard the employer they eventually apply to will use.

Experience does not shorten the route either. A certified nursing assistant who wants to become an RN gets no credit for the work they do under a nurse's license every day. So they are required to complete the full nursing degree, from the start.

Several routes lead into these occupations, and they vary widely in length and cost. Most students are steered toward the longest and most expensive one, where more of them drop out.

SECTION 3

The untapped opportunity for frontline: tuition assistance

While the education system steers students toward the longest route, employers make choices of their own, starting with how they spend the money they already have.

Many large employers fund education through tuition assistance, a benefit that pays toward an employee's study, capped in most policies at the annual limit the IRS allows before it becomes taxable income. In most organizations a portion of that budget goes unclaimed every year.

That money could pay for the practical training that would qualify a frontline worker for a higher-paid role. Three things in how the policies are designed prevent it:

- 1 What they cover.** These policies pay for degrees. Certificates, GED programs and English language instruction sit outside them, and those are the qualifications most frontline employees need.
- 2 Who qualifies.** Some policies require a year of service, and some exclude hourly or part-time staff, which removes much of the frontline workforce from the outset.
- 3 Reimbursement.** The employee pays the institution and claims the money back afterwards. Few people on an hourly wage can front a semester of fees and wait.

Three functions, one budget, and no shared view of the problem

Policy design explains part of why the money goes unused. The rest is organizational.

Tuition assistance is typically classified as an employee benefit, so it sits with the benefits team rather than with L&D. L&D owns the development programs, and talent acquisition owns recruitment for the roles that cannot be filled.

Where those functions operate independently, nobody is positioned to point the education budget at the talent shortage.



SECTION 4

Employers undercut their own investment

Tuition policy is not the only place employers work against themselves. The decisions made around hiring do the same thing, and they cost more.

Job descriptions frequently fail to state what the job requires. The criteria that actually determine who gets hired often go unwritten, so candidates are assessed against standards recruiters cannot articulate. A person can meet every published requirement and still be turned down.

At the same time, roles with thousands of vacancies stay open while hiring managers hold out for a candidate who needs no development. At that volume the only workable approach is to hire someone capable of learning the job, which is the approach employers apply readily to graduate hires and rarely to frontline ones.



A man with a beard and long hair, wearing a white hard hat and a blue work shirt with reflective stripes, is holding a handheld electronic device. The background is blurred, suggesting an industrial or warehouse setting.

Pay creates a harder problem. Some large employers pay for frontline staff to train for healthcare and skilled trades roles at other companies, on the reasoning that warehouse or retail work should be a step toward something better rather than a destination.

In one example, a program ran into its own sponsor's wages: warehouse pay rose past the starting rate of the roles people were training for, so anyone who finished the training had to take a pay cut to use it. Most stayed where they were.

The company funded the training and then priced its own employees out of using it, which is a compensation decision rather than an education one.

No part of the organization was looking at both.

SECTION 5

What changes if the employer pays at the point of hire

Employers can redesign a tuition policy, and they can align pay with the roles they are training people into. Both would help, but neither changes who pays for the training or when. A more interesting question is what happens if the funding model reverses altogether.

At present the person seeking a job pays for the training. They pay first, in advance of any job existing, with no assurance the credential will be accepted by whoever they eventually apply to. The demand for these workers sits with employers, and the cost of producing them sits with the students and the colleges teaching them. Colleges were never in a position to mount every program a regional economy needs and carry the cost of doing it.

So what if the cost moved to the other end? The student takes the program without paying fees. The employer pays the tuition at the point it hires them.



Several things follow from that. The barrier that stops people entering these occupations disappears, because nobody has to find the money or take on debt before a job even exists.

The employer pays only for people it actually hires, which is a cleaner proposition than funding a pipeline in the hope of a return. And an employer gets to specify what the training should contain, how long it should take, and what skill the graduate should be able to apply on the first day at work. Today those decisions belong to the college and the certifying bodies, and neither is aligned with what employers actually need.

There is an obvious objection to paying at the point of hire. An employer who pays for someone's training has no guarantee that person stays. But the truth is, employers already carry this cost.

They carry it when they hire below the requirement and finish the training themselves, and they carry it when the role stays open and the work goes undone. The choice is not between paying and not paying. It is between paying for training the employer specified, and paying for the consequences of not having it.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sean Stowers

Sean is the Founder, CLO, and CEO of WeLearn, a learning solutions company dedicated to elevating individuals and organizations through human-centered workforce education.

Sean's career spans corporate learning, workforce development, and strategic consulting. He started at IBM Learning Services, then moved into leadership at a global education consulting firm, where he led award-winning training programs. He has worked with global organizations to design impactful learning strategies that drive business results.

Driven by a passion for connection and engagement, he launched WeLearn to redefine corporate learning with modern solutions. A trusted thought partner, Sean helps organizations implement learning strategies that support business transformation. He collaborates with clients on content development standards, AI adoption, and L&D governance.

[Connect with Sean on LinkedIn](#)



Kenna Ose

Kenna is VP of Market Development at Unicon, Inc. She has spent equal parts of her career in educational technology (changing how we approach learning, skills development, and credentialing) and in corporate learning and development (training, re-skilling, and overall workforce solutions).

Kenna continues to connect the needed changes between academia and industry across skilled trades pathways, two- and four-year degree pathways, and non-degreed credential-based pathways. Industry and academia remain too disconnected, and the edtech market as a whole is too quick to provide technology solutions based on assumptions rather than the validated needs of the employer. True collaboration is needed to improve outcomes for both sectors and, most importantly, the learner/employee experience.

Kenna started in Student Affairs and evolved through leadership roles with two-year, four-year, and credentialing programs, large content providers, technology firms, and consulting. A collaborator, innovator, and doer, she is focused on moving from aspiration to action.

[Connect with Kenna on LinkedIn](#)

WE LEARN

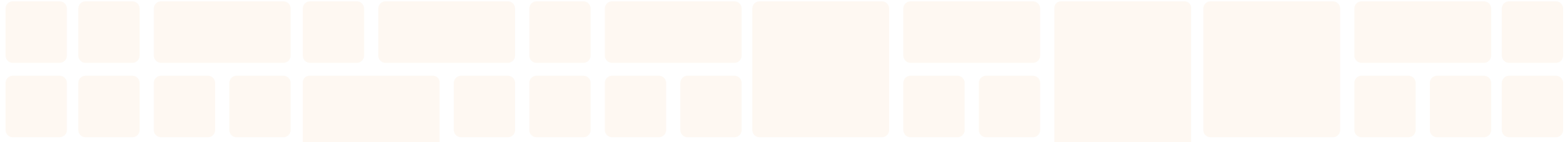
WeLearn is a learning services, consulting, and custom content provider that creates behavior-changing solutions alongside you.

Our commitment?

Exceptional partnerships and exceptional learning experiences. No matter what.

Based in Chicago,
WeLearn serves global corporations including Fortune 500 companies.

Learn more at: welearnls.com





Unicon is a leading provider of technology solutions and services that connect learning, skills, and data across the K-12, higher education, workforce, and employer ecosystem. Its work helps organizations understand and use data about learners, skills, credentials, experiences, and career pathways, linking what people learn to the opportunities available to them.

Unicon brings expertise in skills-based approaches, data interoperability, and the technologies that make complex information actionable. By connecting learning and workforce data across traditionally fragmented systems, Unicon helps the learning market, workforce organizations, employers, and technology providers build more seamless pathways from learning to skills to employment. The result is better-informed decisions and more responsive talent and learning ecosystems.

Learn more at: unicon.net

