

**Charting a New Economic Future:
Building a Public Constituency for Workforce Issues**

**Prepared by Jobs for the Future
for
the Aspen Institute and the Ford Foundation**

Introduction

A key to a strong American economy is public support for workforce issues. At present, there is little demonstrated public awareness of, or interest in topics such as high performance work, incumbent worker training, school-to-work transition and lifelong learning. And yet these are some of the key issues shaping the nation's economic future.

Bringing the public into the policy debate on workforce issues is a two-pronged challenge. First, workforce issues are woven into the complexity of economic development and education reform efforts, making it difficult for the public to delineate trends and articulate priorities. Second, the American public is generally distrustful of the nation's policy makers and thus disengaged from the policy process as a whole. As a result, over the last ten years, policy makers have emerged as the primary leadership for workforce issues. But an informed leadership is only half of what is needed for sustainable economic change.

Jobs for the Future identified the importance of raising workforce issues on to the public agenda as the result of its work with strategic development organizations—state-level, non-governmental organizations engaged in shaping the economic and human resource agenda for the 1990s. For strategic development organizations (SDOs) "change" is not merely a matter of enacting new laws or achieving consensus among the policy elite, it is a process that enlists the input of the state's civic culture. Our work with the SDOs has underscored the importance of engaging "bottom up" efforts to rebuild state and national economies.

The purpose of this document is two-fold—to explore *why* there is an urgent need for policy makers to involve the public in the debate about the economy and the labor market, and to suggest *how* policy makers can go about increasing public awareness around these issues. To accomplish these objectives, we have organized this document in the following manner:

- An overview of why we need public involvement to affect lasting economic change;
- A discussion of barriers and opportunities associated with building a public constituency;
- A framework for helping move the public from a state of awareness about relevant issues to informed action; and

- A set of strategies and tactics to work within the suggested framework.

While reading this guide it is important to keep in mind two points related to its scope of purpose. First, this document is targeted to a broad audience of policy makers, which includes the diversity of individuals who influence the policy process—representatives of the executive and legislative branches of government, university think tanks, foundations, business groups, strategic development organizations, to name only a few. Given the range of readership, this document is limited to general suggestions for policy direction. It is intended to help convince policy leaders that reaching the public is a necessary means of defining and achieving their goals. Second, throughout the document we refer to the "public" and the "people." We do so realizing that the nation's citizenry is not monolithic and that few individuals hold the same opinion on any issues; however, we have drawn our conclusions based on research that identifies general trends in public opinion.

It should also be noted that this document is a work in progress that is intended to be more provocative than definitive. We at Jobs for the Future look forward to refining the framework we are advancing, and welcome any comments or suggestions the reader may have which would help further our work in this area. We are indebted to the Aspen Institute and the Ford Foundation without whose support we would have been unable to carry out our work. Both the Aspen Institute and the Ford Foundation have generously funded two projects with Jobs for the Future, both of which were designed to explore new strategies for economic and human resource development.

A Time for Change: Why We Need the Public

Times of rapid economic realignment challenge familiar ways of thinking and doing. Once economically isolated by two oceans and insulated by a domestic market of scale, America is now forced to compete in a global marketplace. In order to ensure a prosperous future, we will have to invest in new sources of sustainable competitive advantage. Current cost-reduction strategies will have to yield to greater emphasis on production of higher quality goods and services, flexible response to shifting consumer tastes, innovation in product lines, and discovery of niche markets. To accomplish this, U.S. employers will have to utilize high performance work and employ front-line workers who can analyze data, communicate clearly, and work in teams.

Changing how we conceptualize and implement American business practice is not something that can be legislated into being. Governments cannot mandate firms to adopt new work structures, force employers to provide training, or require workers to upgrade their skills. These types of changes happen through consent, not control. The individuals that run, and work in American firms must choose to encourage and pursue high-skill paths to high-skill jobs.

Consider, for example, the efforts of several state governments to make the education system more responsive to the needs of adults interested in skills up-grading. With increasing numbers of people in their late twenties "dropping in" school, state leaders have lobbied for: easier credit transfer, financial aid for part-time study, and on-campus child care facilities. The difficulty in implementing such changes, however, has been the absence of organized pressure from the public to support and demand such services, making it easier for special interest groups to defeat such initiatives.

As the world economy continues to change, civic consciousness will have greater potential influence over whether the United States becomes a high- or low-wage nation. From voting on training tax incentives, voicing opinion on life-long learning, or enrolling in courses to expand their skills—the public plays a vital role in how the country thinks about and confronts workforce challenges of the next century.

Building a Public Constituency on Workforce Issues: Barriers and Opportunities

In 1991, the Public Agenda Foundation (PAF) conducted a landmark study illustrating the gap between the public and the policy elite on issues of American competitiveness. The research was in response to the reluctance of the American people to support the economic and education reforms recommended by policy leaders. The results of the study, *Crosstalk: the Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness*, revealed that there is a gap between what the public and policy leaders think, making it difficult to build consensus around certain workforce issues. Specifically, the PAF found that:

- Most leaders consider productivity and growth as the foundation of a healthy economy. The public, on the other hand, thinks a good economy is one in which every person has a job—any kind of job;
- In contrast to policy leaders, the public believes that attitudes and motivation, not skills or training, are the cause and the cure of workforce problems;
- The public believes that basic skills are enough; however, policy leaders foresee that the 21st-century workplace will require new, advanced skills; and
- Most people see technology as a threat to jobs, whereas policy leaders, consider it as a key to a competitive economy.

Building a public constituency around workforce issues depends heavily on the ability of policy leaders to help bridge these gaps. This is essential because the public and policy leaders make interdependent contributions toward sustainable change. Consider, for example, the efforts of the State of Arkansas to increase spending on education and training. Like many states, Arkansas identified a need to invest more dollars to help its citizens meet the skill requirements of the future. State policy makers were, however, unsuccessful in passing the appropriate legislation because there was no public constituency to support it.

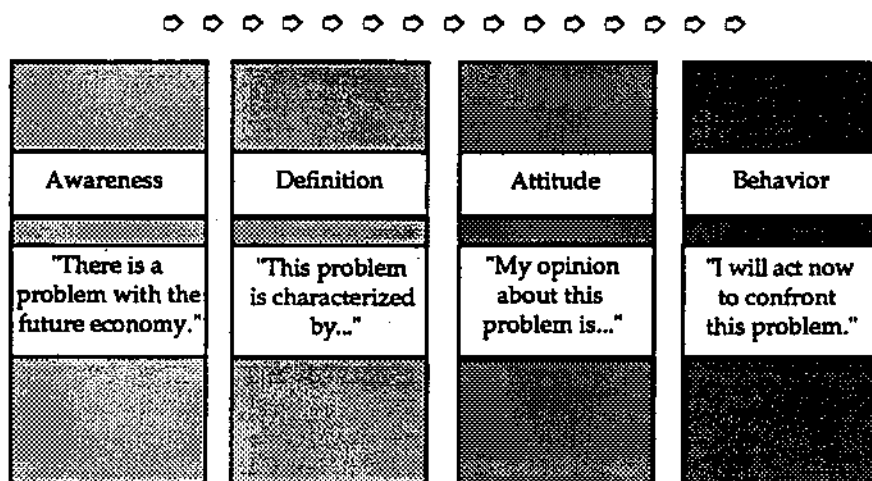
A clue to understanding the attitudes of Arkansans was revealed in a Jobs for the Future survey entitled, "Your Economic IQ." The survey was disseminated through local telephone companies as part of a monthly bill. The questions focused on both regional and national workforce issues such

as, "What are the nation's biggest economic trends?" and "What industry is the biggest source of jobs in Arkansas?"

Analysis of the results revealed that the majority of respondents thought agriculture was the biggest employer in the state. Contrary to this widely held belief, only 4 percent (which was forecast to drop to 2 percent) of Arkansans are directly involved with agriculture. This public misconception went a long way toward explaining the lack of interest in putting money into education and training, which people believed would benefit only the minority of those not already involved in working the land. Although they were correct in identifying job loss as a serious trend in Arkansas and nationwide, respondents were ill-aware that their specific attitudes and behavior as voters were helping to perpetuate that situation.

The State of Arkansas is a good example of how if states are to build high-skill, high-wage economies, they will have to close gaps in perception between the leadership and the public. Closing those gaps will be an essential step in building a public constituency on workforce issues.

Framework for Building a Public Constituency: A Four-Stage Program



Building a public constituency to articulate, support and consent to new workforce priorities involves more than gathering and disseminating information. It necessitates moving the public through a process that begins with increasing their understanding of an issue to the point where they are motivated to take action. These stages are laid out in the diagram above.

In order to launch an effective campaign to engage and activate the public, the first step is to establish where the public is located. No matter what technique is used to measure the public mood—polling, existing data, intuitive judgment—the important thing is that policy leaders have a clear sense of how the public sees, feels about, and responds to a given workforce issue. Based on surveys and focus group research, Americans appear to be in the awareness stage of workforce issues—they are conscious of the fact that issues such as worker dislocation and global competition have an effect on jobs and the economy. This would indicate that policy makers should assume it necessary to engage the public in all four stages—from awareness to action.

The first stage of the process is to build *awareness* of the fact that there is a problem with the future economy. Once familiarity with the issue has been established, the second stage is to help the public build an accurate *definition* of what the issue really means within the context of their lives and regional/national economic trends. Once the public has at its disposal the information and support necessary to perceive and assess alternatives, they will be quick to develop an *attitude* on the matter. Whether they are have

strong positive, negative, or mixed feelings, the development of an emotional commitment to an issue is the precursor to taking action. It is one thing to understand, contemplate, and have an opinion on an issue, and quite another for people to alter their *behavior* to reflect their convictions. However, if the public has traversed the first three stages of the process, then it is much more likely that it will be able and willing to participate in the policy process.

The following is an overview of some of the strategies that can facilitate the process of building a public constituency for workforce issues. For each stage we have listed basic strategies and provided examples of their possible applications. Because few policy leaders are actively working to raise workforce issues on to the public agenda there are a limited examples illustrating the strategies we have identified. Thus, the reader will find that examples are taken from areas other than those dealing exclusively with workforce issues. Neither the strategies nor the tactics are intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive. Instead, they set a framework for confronting the task of building a knowledgeable and responsive public.

Stage One—Awareness

- **Declare a crisis**

Nothing gets people's attention like the declaration of a crisis situation. Although stating that an emergency is pending is not sufficient to mobilize most people, it alerts people to the need for future action.

On January 5, 1991 the New York Times reported that in 1987 New York Telephone had to interview 57,000 people to find 2,100 capable of becoming operators and repair technicians. Such facts help underscore the training gap.

- **Dramatize events**

Nothing advances consciousness-raising as forcefully as an event which dramatizes the issues.

Broad claims based on national statistics make it easy for people to dismiss problems as "not happening here." Thus backing up your points with local or regional data reminds people how their lives are being affected by workforce issues. For example, compare your state's investment in training to neighboring states as opposed to national averages.

- **Personalize the issue**

Failing a dramatic event, make the issue personal by showing people how it applies to them.

- **Develop a media strategy**

Establish relationships with those in the media who regularly cover your issue; a hit or miss approach does not make the best use of resources. Call media contacts to offer a local spin on a national story.

Jobs for the Future designed Game Plan, a board game that explores future job trends and options. The goal was to have the game reproduced as trayliners in fast food chains and banks.

- **Go to where the people are**

Just because you have gotten media coverage, don't assume that everyone is familiar with your message. Consider taking your issue more directly to the people.

- **Remain stoutly non-partisan**

Credibility depends on a fair representation of the issue.

Obstacles to Increasing Awareness:

The greatest challenge of this stage is to divide the issue into its key components without trivializing it. The object then becomes to help the public build a comprehensive awareness by grasping the implications of the issue's many aspects.

Stage Two—Definition

- **Eliminate jargon**

Words like "high performance work," "life long learning," and "human investment" are familiar terms in policy circles but need to be clearly defined for the public.

- **Be consistent in explaining issues**

Workforce issues are a complicated combination of education, training, and economics. Consistency in how these elements are discussed can help the public develop clear definition of the issues.

- **Involve the people affected by the issue in the debate**

Often the people most knowledgeable about an issue are those who are directly involved in it. Policies are valuable only if they reflects the real needs of the people they are intended to serve.

- **Do as much listening as talking**

It is important to recognize that there are lessons to be learned from the public that have striking implications for policy making.

- **Use compelling pictures**

It can be difficult to imagine the implications abstract issues. Charts, graphs, or any other sort of visual aid can help people "see" how workforce issues affect thier lives.

Students contributing to "Making Sense of Federal Job Training Policy," a collection of commentaries on Workforce 2000 published by the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship stated that: "The legislation doesn't really talk much about youth. It says that it is designed to serve the needs of 'new labor force entrants,' but it never says young people and it seems like the people who made these recommendations didn't really think about us or what our lives are like at all."

The U.S. Department of Labor conducted focus groups with employers and workers—both employed and unemployed—in preparation of legislative initiatives for unemployed workers. Respondents generally liked the idea of a "one-stop shop" that would house current and new employment services in one location, but they rejected the notion of government being the provider.

Obstacles to creating better public definition of issues:

The greatest obstacles to enhancing the public's definition of issues are cognitive and emotional ones. First, clear and accessible language and images are essential to helping the public not only understand, but internalize an accurate definition of workforce issues. Second, policy makers must recognize that in tough economic times people are less willing to take risks regarding their livelihood and may resist redefining their notion of jobs and training if they are apprehensive about the future.

Stage Three—Attitude

- **Tackle the public's greatest negative first**

Understanding what the public dislikes most about an issue is essential to understanding how to overcome barriers that could prevent people and policy makers from reaching consensus.

Jobs for the Future surveys in Indiana revealed that the word "retraining" is a disincentive to improve skills because of its connotation of remediation. People respond better when words like "career development" are used.

- **Accentuate the positive**

While declaring a crisis is a valuable tool for getting people's initial attention, it is important to highlight pockets of excellence to demonstrate that change is possible. Publicize the schools and firms that have implemented innovative education and training programs.

Environmentalists and business were at odds when the Boston "Big Dig" was perceived as a choice between either the submersion of the Central Artery or the construction of a third Harbor Tunnel. When the issue was cast as "both/and" opposition ceased.

- **Recast "either/or" issues as "both/and" issues**

There is never one "right" solution to an issue; disagreement between parties can sometimes be resolved if they combine their positions which at first seemed antithetical.

New Haven parents, teachers, school administrators union leaders, and local politicians were divided on the details of establishing a youth apprenticeship program. When the project was on the brink of collapse because of disagreements, the actors refocused their discussion on their common moral commitment to the education of the city's youth.

- **Find common values with those who disagree with you**

If a specific issue is too divisive, try to build agreement regarding its importance. This can facilitate the process of establishing common ground and getting people to focus on a problem that can be solved.

Obstacles to influencing attitudes:

A primary challenge to influencing the public's attitude regarding workforce issues is a cultural one. The United States was founded on a Puritan ethic emphasizing individualism and self-initiative. Given this code, it is not surprising that individuals who have fallen out of the labor market and have become dependents of the state are stigmatized. To be an eligible participant in the public system is in some ways to be branded a failure.

Stage Four—Behavior

- **Do not underestimate the complexity of realizing change**

Eventhough the public may be aware of the importance of workforce issues in their lives and interested in taking action, it is important to recognize that systemic obstacles still have to be overcome.

At both the federal and state levels the U.S. system of education and training is characterized by institutional fragmentation and incoherence. For example, the U.S. General Accounting Office reports that fourteen federal agencies run 125 programs that provide similar services to disadvantaged groups.

- **Give the public a way to have its voice heard**

People often want to express their views in ways other than voting, but are not given the opportunity to do so.

The Oregon Progress Board has coordinated teleconferencing meetings with hundreds of citizens in multiple locations and the governor. The purpose of the meetings was to open a two-way exchange directly between the public and state leadership.

- **Create a behavior checklist**

Laying out a complicated process step by step helps people take action; often the public knows what it should do, but does not know how to go about it.

The State of Colorado sponsored a workbook on developing a competitive workforce, which contained concise tips on how to help individuals assess the economic needs of their community and devise an action plan. The workbook was userfriendly with personable graphics and easy-to-follow instructions.

- **Provide easy access to information for concrete ways to take action**

Some people may not be willing or able to take on an entire change process—even if it is laid out in clear steps; providing support for single, doable tasks can help the public become actively invested in an issue.

If, for example, a bill is pending to create job training programs make the name, address and phone number of the sponsoring legislators easily available. Suggest language that people might use in a letter or phone call to support the bill.

Obstacles to changing behavior:

The obstacles to changing the public's behavior are rooted in the fragmentation of institutions and systems. Unless the public is provided with clear options on how to address workforce issues they will become frustrated by the process of trying to interpret the intricacies of government and industry. They may ultimately drop out of the labor force.

Conclusion

People are alert to the changes of the world economy, and eager to reassert a national position of economic leadership but they are reluctant to act. Increasing numbers of people note the shadow of anxieties that often hinder the human progress—fear of the unknown, fear of the future, and fear of failure. The undercurrent to the public's fears is their lack of understanding of why the American economy is declining, what kinds of solutions will work, and how they can play a role in affecting change.

It must not be taken for granted that policy makers and the public are two sides of the same political coin. Without the consent and participation of American citizens around workforce issues, we are a nation poised for indecision.

But as the next century draws near, there is no time for indecision. If the United States is to keep pace with its international competitors it is imperative that we think and act together as an informed nation. While the leadership may recognize the immediacy for new policies and programs the hardest, and most critical, job is still ahead—bringing the American public on board.

Next Steps...First Steps

In order to begin to apply the four stage process outlined in this guide, it is essential to first assess the level of the public's awareness of, attitude toward and commitment to workforce issues. In raising issues—workforce or otherwise—on to the public agenda it is important to recognize and begin from where the public is and not where you think they *ought to be*.

The primary means of measuring awareness (Stage 1) is through surveys. Full surveys can be commissioned by research organizations (see list below). This, however, is a costly endeavor. If funding limitations preclude a tailored-made survey, it is possible to access information gathered through polling organizations (see list below) that can at least provide an indication of how conscious the public is of a particular issues. In some instances it is even possible to have these polling organizations add key questions that you have identified to their surveys. Other valuable sources of existing data and possible partnerships include local universities and the local media, both of which conduct both formal and informal research around a variety of issues related to public opinion.

Focus groups are a useful means of measuring the public's definition of and attitude toward workforce issues (Stages 2 and 3). Through the personal interaction with sample groups it is possible to gain a qualitative evaluation of where the public stands. Focus groups also provide a forum through which people can inform the change process by expressing their ideas about a particular policy approach.

It is a somewhat more difficult process to achieve and measure behavioral changes. The public may be ready to take action on a particular workforce issue—such as upgrading skills in a training program or committing to a high performance work structure—but actually taking the matter to task is a big step. To facilitate this process a plan should be developed with the input of each target group—students, parents, teachers, workers, supervisors. The plan should consist of a vision for change, specific goals, a strategy to realize the articulated goals, tactics to carry out the strategy and benchmarks to measure and track progress. Working together policy makers and the public must share the responsibility for action and feedback.

Resources: Organizations and Publications

The following is a sample list of organizations and resources to facilitate your efforts to work through the four stage process we have outlined. We have organized these resources into two categories: Polling Organizations and Publications. These lists are not comprehensive; however, they do provide the reader with an initial set of contacts and ideas for measuring where the public stands on workforce issues and how to move it along the continuum from awareness to action.

Polling Organizations

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), Post Office Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 Tel.: (313) 764-1555 Fax: (313) 764-3341

The AAPOR is a professional society of individuals engaged in public opinion, market research, and social research. Membership includes academic institutions, government agencies, and non-profit organizations.

The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut
341 Mansfield Road, Room 421, Storrs, CT 06269. Contact: John M. Barry, Associate Director. Tel.: (203) 486-4440 Fax: (203) 486-2123.

The Roper Center is a non-profit research facility in the field of public opinion. It maintains the largest and most comprehensive collection of survey data in existence.

The Survey Center, University of New Hampshire, Hood House, Durham,
NH 03824. Contact: David W. Moore, Director, or R. Kelly Myers, Associate Director. Tel.: (603) 862-2226 Fax: (603) 862-1488

Public opinion and market research for government, media and corporate organizations.

Talmey Drake Research & Strategy, Inc., Post Office Box 1070, Boulder, CO 80306. Contact: Paul A. Talmey President. Tel.: (303) 443-5300 Fax: (303) 447-9386.

Public opinion, marketing research, consulting that includes quantitative/qualitative research and telephone field service.

Publications

Strategic Communication for Nonprofits, a series of nine guides published by the Benton Foundation on strategies to design a public interest campaign. The guides provide a comprehensive look at a variety of public communication approaches including media advocacy, talk radio, cable access, op-eds, and computer networking. The Benton Foundation series distinguishes between high- and low-cost approaches to communication campaigns that meet the wide range of needs and resources of nonprofit organizations.

Crosstalk: the Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness, The Public Agenda Foundation, 1991.

A landmark study investigating the gap between the public and the policy elite on issues of American competitiveness.

Citizens and Politics: a View from Mains Street America, prepared for the Kettering Foundation by the Harwood Group, 1991.

A look at the public's disquiet with politics. A focus of the publication is the tension between the public's desire to be civically active and its feelings of powerlessness in the face of a complex political system.

The Blue Book, published annually by the American and World Associations for Public Opinion Research.

A resource guide that includes over two hundred listings of survey organizations world-wide.

Elements of a Successful Public Interest Advocacy Campaign, Advocacy Institute, 1990.

An analysis of the constituent parts of an advocacy campaign, that explains how a successful campaign knits these parts together into an effective, integrated whole.