

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF RHODE ISLAND

# REAL JOBS RHODE ISLAND CASE STUDY:

## Real Jobs IT Partnership

Prepared for:

### Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training

Center General Complex  
1511 Pontiac Avenue,  
Cranston, RI 02920

APRIL 2018 REPORT

**Faculty:**

Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, *Principal Investigator*  
Skye Leedah  
Aaron Ley

**Student Researchers:**

Bridget Hall  
Kristin Sodhi  
Marissa DeOliveira

URI Social Science Institute for Research,  
Education, and Policy.

The University of Rhode Island  
Social Science Institute for  
Research, Education and Policy  
University of Rhode Island  
Kingston, RI 02881

[uri.edu/ssirep](http://uri.edu/ssirep)

## **Real Jobs IT Partnership**

### **Real Jobs Rhode Island (RJRI)**

In 2015, The Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT) awarded funding to workforce development collaborations throughout the state. Funding was provided through development grants to create sector-based partnerships and create a plan to provide workforce training aimed at sector needs. Implementation funding was then provided for these partnerships to develop training materials and train workers in Rhode Island in targeted industries including healthcare, technology, marine trades, and the arts. Sector partnerships were developed through public private partnerships that included industry, workforce intermediaries, and educational institutions to address the economic needs of the state.

#### **I. Sector Need**

The Real Jobs IT Partnership (RJITP) was designed to address skills gaps and to build a more comprehensive pipeline of education and training programs in the Internet Technology (IT) sector. The RJITP was formed by Tech Collective (TC), an IT and bioscience industry association that was established in 1997, along with partners from numerous industry employers and training providers as sector partners.

The IT sector is a core Rhode Island industry that is expected to experience continued growth. TC cited research from the 2015 Cyberstates report from CompTIA, a national IT industry organization, showing that Rhode Island supports over 20,000 tech occupation jobs and this number is projected to continue growing. In 2015, the DLT reported that the average collective wage of \$79,226 in IT jobs is nearly double the private sector average wage. TC maintains an Advisory Council where it learned, along with the results of an industry skills gap survey, that industry employers struggled to find talented applicants to fill positions. The skills gap study found that only 65 percent of employers considered their IT talent base to be adequate and that all IT positions were marginal or difficult to fill at least half the time (except for desktop support). Furthermore, 76 percent of employers expected to expand their businesses over the next three to five years and 70 percent reported that it was harder to fill mid-level positions than it was to fill entry-level positions. Companies wanting to fill these positions were interested in developing soft skills, project management skills, leadership skills, business skills, and the ability to see the “big picture” among their employees, but many of the small businesses that make up the IT industry did not have the capacity to institute the continuous learning opportunities that would be necessary for them to be successful in a rapidly changing ecosystem.

Further, because of the importance of the tech industry to Rhode Island’s economy and the skills gaps that currently prevent this industry from reaching its full potential, the DLT identified a need for a functioning workforce intermediary as a critical sector need. Workforce intermediaries provide training and create employment pipelines for entire sectors, not just single companies. These intermediaries are also essential to the creation and maintenance of industry-

wide talent pools and networks that can strengthen the sector as a whole. Through the intervention of a workforce intermediary, the tech industry would be able to effectively address all of its sector needs and skills gaps in a way that assists sector growth and stability. As such, the DLT recognized the importance of supporting workforce intermediaries like TC to enable them to perform this essential role.

## **II. Grant History**

TC was established in 1997. Its mission is to “inspire, engage, educate, and employ via two main focus areas of Workforce Development and Industry Building.”<sup>1</sup> Since 2004, TC had received more than \$12 million from federal, state, and private sources, including Governor’s Workforce Board grants, the Real Jobs Planning Grant, and the Ready to Work/Tech Force RI grant through the state’s Workforce Investment Boards.

Through the Real Jobs Planning Grant, the RJITP learned about a number of challenges facing industry employers, including the challenges of finding talent with business skills to fill mid-level positions. The RJITP applied for a Real Jobs implementation grant to begin addressing these issues. The RJITP planned to offer five modules that would help incumbent workers gain increased technical, management, and soft skills and increase their employability in mid-level positions in the industry. These modules, which included learning how to Install, Configure, Manage VMware vSphere: v6.0, Application Development for Microsoft SharePoint 2010, an ITIL (Information Technology Infrastructure Library) Foundation Certification, Management for IT Professionals, and Project Management Certification, were to be taught by various education and employer partners, and would have been filled with recruits from a variety of industry partners. The RJITP hoped that funding for this training program would be sourced in part from a tuition paid by trainees and in part by funding from the DLT and the RJITP.

However, after awarding the initial approval for the Implementation grant, the DLT found that TC’s structural limitations and challenges were severe enough to prevent successful implementation of its proposal. Despite these challenges, the DLT recognized the importance of having a workforce intermediary in the tech industry. The core purpose of the RJRI grant is to provide sector economic development to the various sectors of Rhode Island’s economy, and the DLT viewed the stabilization of the tech industry’s workforce intermediary as key to the technology sector’s economic development. As a result, the DLT agreed to work with TC to stabilize its organization and to help it get to a place where it could support the tech industry as well as provide the services originally proposed in the RJITP grant application.

## **III. Goals and Objectives**

The RJITP established two general goals to address both the needs of the technology industry and the need for a strong workforce intermediary. These goals were as follows:

1. Develop a strategic plan for the organization that enables the organization to successfully

---

<sup>1</sup> Real Jobs RI July 2015 Solicitation for Implementation Grant Proposals, TC Appendix B, 5

work both independently and with other organizations to provide support and services to both new and incumbent employees.

- As part of this general goal, the RJITP planned to:
  1. Develop a strategic roadmap for TC's future development.
  2. Redesign and revitalize TC's Executive Board.
  3. Stabilize TC's finances.
- 2. Serve as the fiscal agent for the P-Tech (Pathways in Technology Early College High School) Employer Liaison.

#### **IV. Partnership**

TC, the lead applicant, was formed in 1997 to create an educational and workforce development program for Information Technology and Bioscience in Rhode Island. As part of the RJITP, TC planned to facilitate collaboration among employers, training providers, higher education, government, and economic development organizations. These various interests were expected to participate as part of an "Industry Advisory Council" to ensure that training programs were meeting the needs of employers.

**Table 1: Partnership Members and Responsibilities**

<p>Tech Collective</p>	<p>Lead Applicant: Responsible for maintaining fiscal responsibility; committing staff to programmatic activities; coordinating training and facilitating meetings of the Industry Advisory Council and subcommittees; tracking training participants through the online Training Management System; tracking the results of training through post-training surveys.</p>
<p>Bryant University, Executive Development Center; Community College of Rhode Island; New England Institute of Technology; Rhode Island College - Adult Education PDC; itSM Solutions; LaunchCode; New Horizons</p>	<p>Higher/Continuing Education and Training Providers: responsible for delivering modules relating to training.</p>
<p>AIPSO; Amica Insurance; Atrion Networking Corporation; Brave River Solutions; Computer Associates; Envision Technology Advisors, LLC; IGT; OSHEAN; Rhode Island Quality Institute; Secure Future Tech Solutions; United Natural Foods, Inc.; Worldways Social Marketing; Center for Women and Enterprise; MedMates; Start Up Community of Rhode Island</p>	<p>Industry Employers and Entrepreneurship Groups: Planned to be responsible for participating in surveys, interviews, and focus groups to provide information about current employer needs and ways to address them; suggesting, providing feedback on, and verifying that training programs are industry-recognized and will prepare participants with desired credentials, technical skills, business skills, and soft skills; committing staff to participate in initiative activities as part of the Industry Advisory Council.</p>
<p>Chariho Career and Technical Center; Coventry High School; Rhode Island Department of Education; Rhode Island STEM Center; Warwick Area Career and Tech; Junior Achievement of Rhode Island; pathidi; Providence After School Alliance (PASA); SkillsUSA Rhode Island.</p>	<p>K-12 Education and Youth Programs: Will work with the RJITP to streamline and strengthen the pathway for participants to attain IT education and employment.</p>
<p>Workforce Partnership of Greater Rhode Island; Opportunity@Work.</p>	<p>Workforce Investment Board and Workforce Partner: Responsible for helping to promote TC programs and helping connect TC with individuals seeking training and/or employment in IT; connecting RJITP to data and resources available through DLT, Labor Market Information, and the One-Stop Career Center System.</p>

## **V. Implementation Activities and Processes**

### **Goal #1: Develop a Strategic Plan**

The goal of developing a strategic plan for TC was at the heart of the Real Jobs IT Partnership. The RJITP hoped to use the process of developing a plan, as well as the strategic plan itself, to strengthen TC and enable it to increase the capacity to successfully function as a workforce intermediary for the tech industry. In order to achieve this larger goal, the RJITP established a series of smaller goals that focused on multiple aspects of the organization.

The first goal of the RJITP was to create a strategic roadmap for the future development of TC. This roadmap would establish the vision of TC, how it planned to cooperate with other industry and workforce development organizations, how it planned to assist in the formation of a pipeline for the tech industry, and described the services it would offer to most effectively serve the industry while avoiding a duplication of services with other, existing workforce development organizations. The creation of a roadmap was also meant to establish concrete goals for TC to assist in its effort to build greater capacity. Essentially, the RJITP hoped this process would allow TC to determine what it wanted to be and how it would achieve that goal.

As part of this goal, TC identified the services it would provide to the tech industry. These services were as follows:

- Coordinate and promote private sector involvement in the workforce-investment system.
- Provide industry and labor market intelligence to the workforce development system.
- Work within the industry to encourage partners to engage in professional development.
- Advance the marketing of TC's mission and the value of its mission.
- Inform and advise RI's educational and grant organizations about the current and projected workforce needs in the sector.
- Coordinate data analytics efforts between providers and recipients of the data.
- Assist the DLT with the development of RI's workforce development systems by utilizing new methods and funding sources to support and improve TC's initiatives.
- Provide advice on the design and implementation of new training programs.

To achieve these goals, TC adopted several specific steps. Under the leadership of a new executive director and a revamped executive board, the organization hired a full time director of development. This director would be responsible for recruiting partner companies and working with program staff to develop programs that would serve the needs of the industry while also attracting and retaining members. TC also worked to re-evaluate its membership structures. As part of this process, TC changed from a previous focus on employer memberships to a focus on acting as a hub for both companies and employees in all stages of career development and all areas within the tech industry. By switching to a people-focused membership structure, TC hoped to help new employees, incumbent employees, and companies receive the training and services needed to be successful in the tech industry.

The RJITP's second goal was the revitalization and restructuring of TC's board. The

RJITP hoped that the restructuring would draw new companies to the board and that the new members would only include those who were actively working to further TC's goals and, thus, make the overall organization accountable. One industry leader joined as Chairman of the Board to oversee and lead this process. Under his leadership, TC's existing board was dissolved and industry members wishing to join the new board, whether formerly a part of the old board or not, were interviewed. A new board of twelve industry members was formed as part of this process.

The RJITP's third goal was to restructure and stabilize the finances of TC. When TC applied for an implementation grant, it lacked the financial stability and solvency to support successful training programs. The DLT worked directly with the chairman of TC's board and its executive director to develop lines of credit with local financial institutions, hire a full-time accountant to handle accounting and billing, consolidate TC's debt, and establish a repayment plan to resolve its debt. These efforts were directly aimed to support the financial structures of TC so that it could achieve enough stability to begin offering workforce development programs. As part of this work, the DLT also worked with TC to establish future sources of funding for the organization. TC identified membership dues as a viable source of future income, and incorporated this understanding into its future plans for membership growth and cultivation.

## **Goal #2: Serve as the fiscal agent for the P-Tech Employer Liaison**

The second goal of the RJITP was to establish TC as the fiscal agent for a P-Tech employer liaison. P-Tech (Pathways in Technology Early College High School) is a national program whose Rhode Island iteration is managed by the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation. The RJITP planned to have the P-Tech liaison at TC represent the business sector of the technology industry in TC's efforts relating to education. This employee would work in this capacity to assist in the development of a K-12 and higher education program aimed at helping students attain an associate's degree in Computer Science. This liaison would coordinate mentorships between P-Tech students and members of the industry. As part of this goal, the RJITP worked with both TC and the P-Tech liaison to ensure that the liaison was fully incorporated into TC's staff and projects. This allowed the P-Tech liaison and TC to be aware of the projects on which the other was working, to fully collaborate with one another, and to share connections and services to advance their projects.

## **VI. Achievements**

### Partnerships

#### *Recruiting an Industry Leader*

The RJITP utilized the assistance of a key industry leader who volunteered to lead TC's capacity-building process. This industry leader was key in restructuring TC's board, recruiting new board members and organizational partners, co-signing lines of credit, consolidating and restructuring the organization's debt, and championing the new vision of TC. This person's participation was crucial to the success of this grant's implementation.

TC did not discuss any achievements related to recruitment, trainee barriers, training, or transitioning trainees to employment because TC did not implement a training program in 2016.

## Other

### *Achievement of goals*

TC successfully achieved its goals from this grant. It hired new employees who now oversee the organization's finances and development efforts, stabilized its finances, and established a new strategic plan. These developments will allow TC to provide training and other development needs for the IT sector.

### *Ability to refocus on training*

The RJITP's efforts to increase the capacity and sustainability of TC were successful enough to allow TC to begin refocusing on delivering training programs. TC started to examine where it best fit in the tech industry pipeline and plans to deliver support services to women and girls in technology. TC has also started working with the national non-profit Opportunity@Work on its Tech Hire initiative and its General Assembly Web Development Immersive, and participated in industry discussions to improve cybersecurity in the private sector.

## **VII. Challenges**

### Partnerships

#### *Recognizing the difficulties of rebuilding an organization*

The RJITP, and especially the RJITP's leadership, underestimated how difficult it would be to rebuild TC, and was initially discouraged. It overcame this, however, with support from the DLT and its strong belief in its mission to have a strong workforce intermediary in the tech sector.

#### *Coordinating services with other organizations*

Multiple organizations exist in Rhode Island to serve the state's tech industry. TC worked with the DLT and these organizations to prevent duplication of services. TC also learned the best ways to share its services and utilize the services of these other organizations to maximize the services offered to the members of the tech industry.

TC did not discuss any achievements related to recruitment, trainee barriers, training, or transitioning trainees to employment because TC did not implement a training program in 2016.

## Other

### *Independent Competency*

After the initial DLT intervention, TC was able to develop a strategic plan for its organization without substantial oversight from the DLT. The DLT did provide guidance and



assistance in some instances, but TC primarily built up its organization, mission, and strategic plan independently.

## **VIII. Sustainability**

The overall goal of this grant was to provide TC with the structures needed to become sustainable without DLT funding. Through this grant, TC stabilized its finances, restructured its board, brought industry leaders to the board, and established a strategic plan to build capacity and stability. These developments should enable TC to operate as a successful workforce intermediary without DLT support.

## **IX. Lessons Learned**

TC identified no specific lessons learned during the 2016 implementation process.

## **X. Best Practices**

These best practices were utilized by the DLT and TC in this implementation process:

- Recognizing and supporting the value of a functional workforce intermediary in the technology sector.
- Embracing capacity building and being flexible to retool proposals.
- Working with the DLT and government leaders to effectively identify and utilize sector partners to develop and stabilize a necessary workforce intermediary.
- Connecting private sector leaders who can assist in establishing or building workforce intermediaries with partnerships.
- Ensuring grantees have the fiscal and structural capacity to handle the trainings they propose before funding RJRI proposals.

## **XI. Recommendations**

Based on the successes and challenges of the Real Jobs IT Partnership, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Require an assessment of an organization's capacity and ability to implement proposed programs in the application for RJRI funding.
- Assist sector workforce intermediaries or partnership lead applicants in developing the necessary resources to develop their organization and their partnership before applying for money for training programs.