Reimagining the Public Library's Role in Local Workforce Development

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THE **burningglass** INSTITUTE

Table of Contents

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About This Report

The Local Workforce Development Landscape

Even amid the tightest U.S. labor market in decades, millions of Americans struggle to find jobs.

While the official monthly unemployment rate has remained at 4% or below for the past two years, the picture painted by this number is highly misleading. As *The New Yorker* writer Nick Romeo put it, "Using the official unemployment rate to understand the labor market is a bit like peering through the arrow slit of a medieval fortification." It is a particularly narrow view.

Indeed, when you include those who aren't actively looking for work but indicate that they want and are available for a job, as well as those who want and are available for full-time work but have had to settle for a part-time schedule, things look far less rosy. Using this wider—and, arguably, more accurate—measure, the U.S. unemployment rate stands above 7%.

In 2021, Accenture and Harvard Business School described those who fall into this more expansive group, along with the long-term unemployed, as "hidden workers." In all, it counted 27 million Americans who fit this definition.

"They include caregivers, veterans, immigrants and refugees, those with physical disabilities, and relocating partners and spouses," the researchers explained. "They also include people with mental health or developmental/neurodiversity challenges, those from less-advantaged populations, people who were previously incarcerated, and those without traditional qualifications."

The authors chose the term "hidden workers" because these individuals are largely invisible to businesses—even while employers complain that they can't find the talent necessary to fill open positions. It is, they said, an "irony that companies

consistently bemoan their inability to find talent while millions remain on the fringes of the workforce."

Although the report relied on data collected as COVID-19 began to rage across the United States, roiling the labor market, the authors stressed that the trends they were seeing predated the pandemic. "Our findings," they said, "illuminate a situation that . . . has, in fact, been growing over recent decades."

Left to pick up the pieces, meanwhile, have been a host of workforce development organizations—public and private—that, taken together, might generously be described as a "system" but in reality are more of a hodgepodge. Since the early 2000s, with the increasing emergence of for-profit colleges, code schools and others crowding into the training space, things have become "more fragmented than in the past," the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta concluded in a 2015 study.

There is no reason to think that things have improved since then. A 2023 analysis by Harvard University's Project on Workforce characterized the heart of America's employment training and job-placement efforts—an array of programs eligible for funding under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act—as "vast and hard to navigate." Paul Douglas, the president of a Philadelphia-based workforce development and planning firm called The JPI Group, has decried the current state of affairs for generating "problems such as limiting important information to job seekers" and curbing "opportunities for both the job seeker and the employer, often leaving both to fend for themselves."

A 2023 report by the consulting report Deloitte noted that "one of the most important roles of a workforce development ecosystem is advancing the futures of at-risk populations." But finding the right mechanisms to fulfill this and other responsibilitles has been tough. "The siloed, disjointed workforce development ecosystem hasn't been able to keep up with a changing economy, helping contribute to a critical skills gap," Deloitte said. "Companies often can't find the right workers, and workers can't find good jobs."

It is unreasonable to expect that any single entity can fix this difficult situation on its own. But we believe that one institution, above all, is being underutilized when it comes to helping "hidden workers" find a viable path to employment while giving businesses a largely untapped avenue to find job-ready candidates: the public library.

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The Library's Influence on People's Lives—and Livelihoods

Gallup has found that Americans go to libraries far more often than they go to the movies, sporting events, concerts or the zoo.

A chief reason that libraries are such powerful magnets is that they offer so much more than books. People from all walks of life come for classes, an array of social services and a bridge across the digital divide. People trust the library—a rarity at a time when they've lost faith in so many other institutions. "The library," sociologist Eric Klineberg observed in his book *Palaces for the People*, "is where they feel cared for and connected."

All of these qualities have helped to thrust many of the nation's 9,000 public library systems into the realm of local workforce development.

It is a role that, by all accounts, has been growing steadily (with surges in demand during economic downturns, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic). In a 2010-11 study, nearly 92% of libraries reported that providing employment services was vital to their communities, up from 66% in 2008-09 and 44% in 2006-07.

In 2019, the John. J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University published a seminal study that laid out how libraries "actively contribute to the public workforce system by providing a myriad of job-seeking activities and career services, and addressing workforce needs in their communities." Among its key findings:

- Seventy-five percent of respondents to a nationwide survey of state library staff said that local library systems in their state provide some type of career services.

- Eighty-eight percent of respondents described the current demand for career services in their state library system as high (29%) or medium (59%); only 12% said it was low (10%) or nonexistent (2%).

- Eighty-nine percent of respondents expected that the role of libraries in workforce development would increase.

People of color, in particular, count on such assistance. Among those 16 and older, 34% of Hispanics and 28% of Black people said that libraries help those in their community "a lot" to find jobs or training, compared with 14% of white people.

The job services that libraries offer vary widely. At the most basic level, tens of millions of Americans a year use library computers and internet access for employment or career purposes, including conducting job searches, submitting online applications and writing resumes. Librarians often help patrons with these activities.

Others go much further. Some public libraries, for example, have integrated American Job Centers, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, into their facilities. "Embedding access to the one-stop delivery system in the public libraries helps

us bring employment and training services closer to where businesses are located and where job seekers live," Jaime Cruz, executive director of Workforce Connections in Southern Nevada, has remarked.

In Florida, the Broward County Library has hosted fully subsidized workshops on topics including data analytics, marketing and coding through a partnership with General Assembly, an education company. In Georgia, the Gwinnett County Public Library provides a six-month business course to individuals who were formerly incarcerated and are now interested in starting their own commercial ventures. In Arkansas, a state-of-the-art kitchen at the Fayetteville Public Library prepares local residents for restaurant and hospitality jobs.

The Nevada State Library, as part of a community college partnership, has used virtual reality headsets to train people to become dialysis patient care technicians. In Tennessee, the Memphis Public Libraries has rolled out a Mobile Career Center—a bus equipped with 10 laptops, internet access, digital resources and specialized staff. In Connecticut, the Hartford Public

Library offers training that can lead to industry-recognized credentials in IT and cybersecurity, food handling and personal care. (Other libraries, as part of a national initiative to help low-income and underrepresented communities, offer services to small firms and entrepreneurs—a close cousin of workforce development.)

But as impressive as these and other such initiatives are, they remain great exceptions. Only 20% of U.S. libraries employ a dedicated business or career librarian, and only about a quarter have formal workforce development programs.

"Most libraries . . . that claim to offer employment services focus mainly on interview training, resume and cover letter editing, and online job-seeking assistance," the *Georgetown Public Policy Review* has pointed out, as opposed to becoming more "dynamic institutions that leverage technology to train individuals on a large scale," as well as "train librarians to assist job-seeking individuals with a personalized approach" and take other steps to create "a seamless pipeline" between different parts of the workforce development ecosystem.

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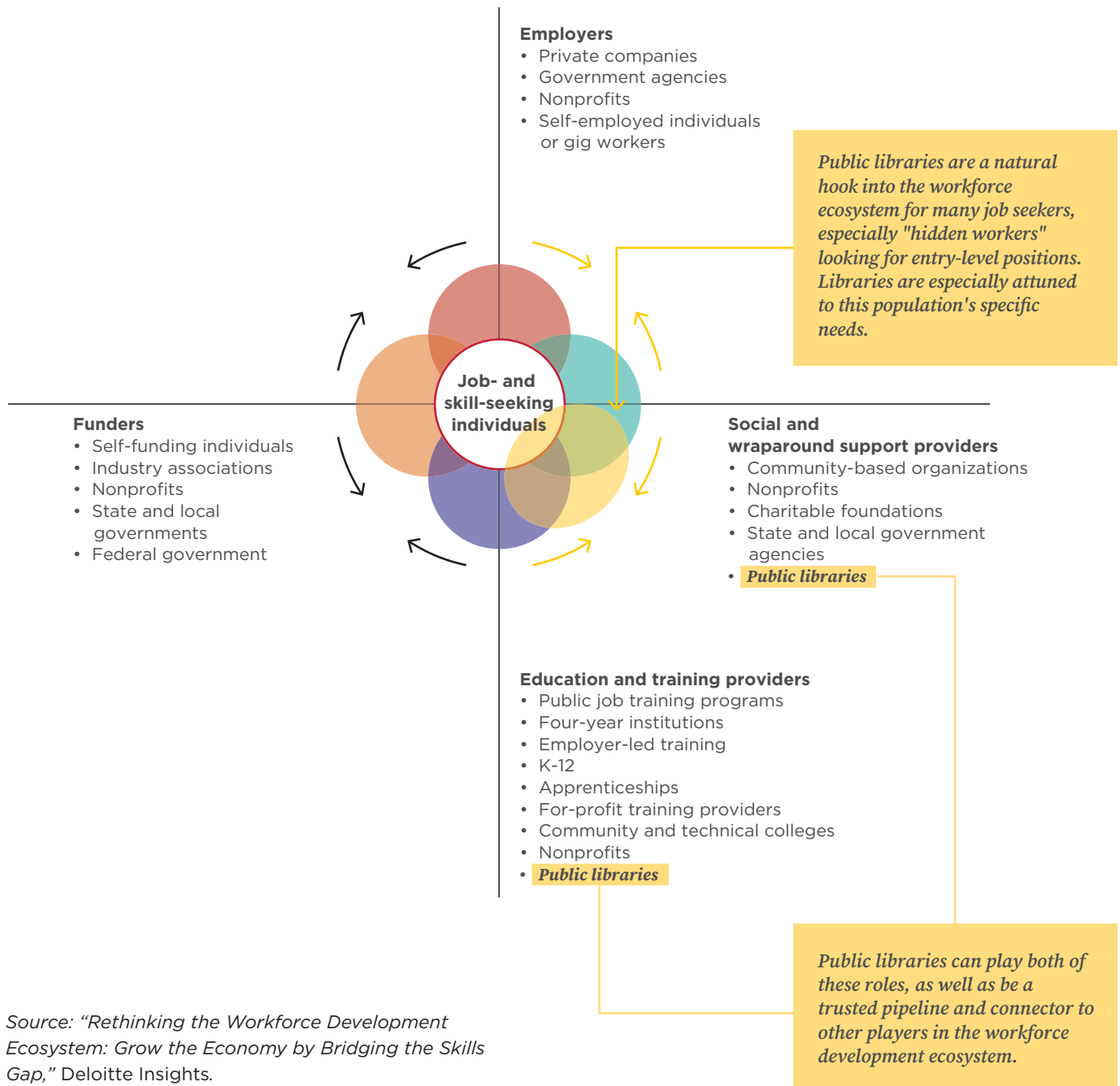
The Workforce Library of the Future

Imagine if there were a better-coordinated workforce development ecosystem, capitalizing on what each actor does particularly well. For libraries across the country, this would mean leaning into their proven ability to assess patrons' needs, support lifelong learning, cultivate trust throughout the community and forge strong partnerships with outside organizations.

HOW THE LIBRARY FITS IN

This graphic from Deloitte depicts what it described as a "thriving and connected workforce ecosystem." We have added an important additional element, showing where the public library fits in.

Employers
- Private companies
- Government agencies
- Nonprofits
- Self-employed individuals or gig workers

Public libraries are a natural hook into the workforce ecosystem for many job seekers, especially "hidden workers" looking for entry-level positions. Libraries are especially attuned to this population's specific needs.

Job- and skill-seeking individuals

Funders
- Self-funding individuals
- Industry associations
- Nonprofits
- State and local governments
- Federal government

Social and wraparound support providers
- Community-based organizations
- Nonprofits
- Charitable foundations
- State and local government agencies
- *Public libraries*

Education and training providers
- Public job training programs
- Four-year institutions
- Employer-led training
- K-12
- Apprenticeships
- For-profit training providers
- Community and technical colleges
- Nonprofits
- *Public libraries*

Public libraries can play both of these roles, as well as be a trusted pipeline and connector to other players in the workforce development ecosystem.

Source: "Rethinking the Workforce Development Ecosystem: Grow the Economy by Bridging the Skills Gap," Deloitte Insights.

The model we've developed—which aims to help more libraries serve not only as a community's last mile of equitable broadband access but also the first mile of workforce development—is built on these strengths.

It begins with a job seeker who comes to the library hoping to find some way to land an entry-level position—a typical scenario that plays out every day all over the United States. (For more on the personas we used to design our model, see Appendix A.) To meet the needs of such individuals, the workforce library of the future will make sure they are met with the following:

- A librarian who has been well-trained as a workforce development navigator.

- Learning pathways that help the job seeker become placement-ready.

- An effective way for the job seeker to signal that they have the skills local employers are looking for.

- Ultimately, a warm handoff to a partner organization that is positioned to pick up the next phase of the workforce journey.

In each case, we are looking to enhance the role of libraries in the local workforce development ecosystem while being mindful of the limits—in funding and capacity—that libraries face and the distinct culture that many have.

BEHIND THE MODEL

The design of the workforce library of the future has been informed by a combination of practice and research:

- Since 2020, the team at Bendable Labs (formerly based at Claremont Graduate University's Drucker Institute) has deployed Bendable, a lifelong learning and workforce development platform, to more than a dozen library systems across the country, giving us considerable insight into how librarians work on a day-to-day basis. Several of these Bendable implementations have come through the California State Library's CAreer Pathways program.

- Bendable Labs, in partnership with the labor market analytics firm Lightcast, piloted a library-based job-readiness program in north San Diego County,

California, from August 2022 through June 2023, giving us added insight into how a local library can be integrated with a local workforce development ecosystem.

- To gather stakeholder feedback on the workforce library model, we conducted focus groups on Zoom with 20 librarians and also fielded a set of questionnaires that produced 36 responses from people who use or say they would use the library for job help and 21 responses from workforce development intermediaries (such as workforce board professionals). In addition, the Society for Human Resource Management fielded a survey that generated 504 responses from HR professionals engaged in hiring entry-level workers.

Onboarding

When job seekers enter the library, they will be introduced to the workforce program. As appropriate, their foundational skills will be assessed to identify needs that should be addressed—literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and English-language learning—before embarking on the library's workforce development journey. Many libraries are already providing services to help fill these gaps either directly or through community partnerships.

Once in the program, job seekers will be guided on their journey by a librarian-navigator who can not only help with online job search and resume preparation but who are also well-versed in making the first mile of a patron's workforce journey successful and charting a clear path forward out of the library to the next mile.

Librarians will need to be trained for this navigator role. Nearly all public libraries offer their staff opportunities for professional development, making it natural to integrate workforce-related training into the mix.

For starters, librarians will need a solid understanding of the local workforce ecosystem, including the particular skills that employers are seeking to fill high-demand entry-level jobs. The source of this information will vary depending on the community. In some cases, it will come from the workforce board and in others from a chamber of commerce or economic development organization. It will be important for the library to build the relationships that lead to the flow of relevant data. For larger library systems, it may be appropriate to acquire data directly from a third-party vendor such as Lightcast or Revelio Labs.

In designing workforce training for librarians, there is no need to begin from scratch. The Rework America Alliance and Hope Street Group have created powerful programs to help career coaches become highly effective. Organizations such as the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals and the National Career Development Association also offer professional development resources. In 2021, the Public Library Association held a series of webinars on workforce development, including using local labor market information "to connect residents with in-demand jobs, gain in-demand skills and improve economic mobility." There is much to learn—and borrow—from these initiatives and others.

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Job-Readiness Training

Armed with information on the local labor market, librarian-navigators will be poised to put in place library-based job-readiness learning opportunities. These might come through a partnership with a local training organization, such as the workforce board or Goodwill, and be held in person.

Alternatively, the library may choose to curate its own online job-readiness course pathways. This won't happen automatically. Someone on the library staff will need to be trained in curriculum design in order to select and sequence courses with learning objectives that align with the skills being sought by local employers.

Either way, having a more sophisticated understanding of the local labor market will allow librarian-navigators to give job seekers confidence that developing the skills for a first job can lead to a better job and, eventually, to a career. Helping job seekers see a more hopeful future—and understand their own role in realizing it—will be essential to program completion and speaks to one of the key roles for the workforce librarian: acting as a learner success coach.

The library's learning pathways can be built out of a wealth of online content that is already in use in libraries around the country. Classes from Cell-Ed, Coursera, Gale, LearningExpress, LinkedIn Learning, WorkForge and other learning providers give entry-level job seekers (along with those ready for middle-skill jobs and beyond) abundant opportunities to acquire or polish soft skills—including time management, teamwork, workplace communication and conflict resolution—as well as certain technical skills. And they can do so at their own pace and, because the courses come via the library, for free.

For the libraries themselves, adding these courses to their digital databases could prove challenging, especially in light of the tight budgets that many are wrestling with. But funding may be available through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which gives libraries access to federal dollars for job training and job-search programs. What's more, state libraries may be able to negotiate the bulk purchase of online course content that can then be distributed for wide use. In 2022 and 2023, for example, the California State Library acquired workforce development resources—from Coursera, LearningExpress, LinkedIn Learning, Skillshare and others—and made them available to the state's local library systems. Of the nearly 20,000 learners a month who visited these platforms, sizable numbers reported feeling more knowledgeable (79%), more confident (63%), more prepared (57%), more engaged/connected (46%) and more competitive in the job market (36%).

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CHARTING THE COURSE

This table shows an online job-readiness course pathway being used by the Carlsbad City Library in California. For more, visit **northcounty.jobreadinessroom.com***.*

	TARGET SKILLS	COURSE	TIME ESTIMATE
CORE COURSES	• Workplace Communication • Teamwork	WorkReady: Starting a New Job (Cell-Ed)	**40 minutes**
	• Digital skills • Critical thinking	WorkReady: Self-Confidence at Work (Cell-Ed)	**40 minutes**
	• Teamwork • Conflict resolution	Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills for Work (Study.com)	**2 hours**
	• Detail orientation • Time management	WorkReady: Time Management (Cell-Ed)	**40 minutes**
CAPSTONE	Overview of what it is like to work in a specific industry	Study.com and WorkForge courses on customer service, healthcare, hospitality and food service, office administration, logistics and manufacturing	**8-12 hours**

Signaling

Once job seekers complete their library-based job-readiness training, they need an effective way to signal that they have acquired valuable skills.

In order to facilitate this, our model seeks to build on the emerging world of learning and employment records, or LERs, which can securely house verified digital credentials and allow individuals to share them with employers of their choosing.

For the past several years, a growing constellation of funders, researchers and public policy organizations—including Walmart, JFFLabs, the National Governors Association and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation—have been promoting the establishment of LER

systems and standards. "An LER ecosystem has the potential to help learners and earners overcome systemic inequities that limit access to learning opportunities and higher-paid jobs," a report from the T3 Innovation Network, an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, has declared.

We agree and believe that the public library should be a major part of any such ecosystem by issuing a microcredential to anyone who completes the job-readiness program. The credential itself will carry detailed metadata showcasing the skills that the job seeker has acquired. But beyond that, it's really saying, "This person is a good bet. You can trust the library on that."

In some communities, we foresee an even bigger LER-related role for the library. Rather than being just a credential issuer, the library can be a natural place for people to sign up for a "digital wallet" to store all of their credentials, whether earned through the library or another institution. One aspect of the professional development training at the workforce library of the future could be devoted to implementing such a system.

Referring

The final step is for the librarian-navigator to help job seekers—with their library-backed microcredentials in hand—get to the next station on their workforce development journey. It is a task for which libraries are well-suited. Some 98% of libraries have at least one type of partnership with an external organization, with nearly 6 in 10 qualifying as formal relationships. Most libraries have multiple community partnerships, some of them with businesses, workforce boards, colleges and nonprofits that offer job services.

Building on existing partnerships—as well as fostering new relationships—to take a bigger role in the local workforce development ecosystem should not be a big stretch for most libraries; it is a core competency.

That said, we do not believe that the workforce library of the future should make direct job placement a priority. For nearly all libraries, this would be a bridge too far, notwithstanding their acumen for developing partnerships, even with businesses. Job placement is a highly specialized field. It requires carrying out a set of practices that fall well outside the scope of most librarians' daily duties.

Instead, libraries are better positioned to hand off microcredential holders—depending on the individual's needs and desires—to the local workforce board, Goodwill or a similar service agency for entry-level job placement; to the community college or adult education for further skills development; or to a program such as Climb Hire, which moves those who complete its specialized training to become a Salesforce administrator, business analyst, project coordinator or digital marketer into a job that pays at least $40,000 a year.

DESIGNERS, STEWARDS AND EVANGELISTS

In the workforce library of the future, librarians will be trained to become:

- Local labor-market interpreters.

- Job-readiness curriculum designers.

- Learner success coaches.

- Microcredential issuers.

- Learning and employment record stewards.

- Primary connectors to other players in the local workforce development ecosystem.

- Equitable hiring-practice evangelists.

For these intermediaries, having someone come to them with a job-readiness credential backed by the library would be a significant benefit. (For a fuller discussion, see "Stakeholder Reactions to the Model," below.)

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for the workforce library of the future will be getting employers—and, more specifically, hiring managers—to recognize and trust the value of a library-backed job-readiness microcredential.

Libraries are hardly alone in this challenge. Although there has been some progress made in moving to "Skills-Based Hiring" and away from having a bachelor's degree serve as the lone signal that someone is ready for a job, the overall gains on this front have been "negligible" in the words of Joe Fuller, co-chair of Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work and a senior fellow at the Burning Glass Institute.

A 2024 study by Fuller and his Burning Glass Institute colleagues documented that many employers are removing degree requirements from their job ads, but this has yet to translate into substantially more hiring among those without a diploma from a four-year college or university. "For all its fanfare," their report said, "the increased opportunity promised by Skills-Based Hiring was borne out in not even 1 in 700 hires" in 2023. "Our analysis makes clear that successful adoption of Skills-Based Hiring involves more than simply stripping language from job postings. To hire for skills, firms will need to implement robust and intentional changes in their hiring practices—and change is hard."

At the local level, it will be incumbent on libraries to collaborate with intermediary partners to bring to the table local businesses to gain buy-in for the library-based job-readiness system being created. Such an undertaking may well require the time and commitment of a library's CEO, as well as board members. And it may necessitate new funding to put out marketing materials, hold convenings and organize stakeholder trainings.

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What the workforce library of the future might look like, end to end.

Onboarding

JOB SEEKER JOURNEY
- Attend an info session
- Sign up for the program; activate digital skills wallet

**KEY FEATURE:
LIBRARY-BASED
LER SYSTEM**

**KEY INPUT: LIBRARIAN
PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT**

LIBRARIAN JOURNEY
- Prepare, through professional development training, to be a librarian-navigator
- Assess and refer those who need foundational skill development (digital basics, literacy, etc.)
- Run info sessions Introducing the library's job-readiness program

**KEY FEATURE:
FOUNDATIONAL
SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

Job-readiness training

JOB SEEKER JOURNEY
- Embark on a job-readiness learning pathway
- Join a cohort of learners at the library, and receive support from your navigator

**KEY FEATURE:
LEARNER SUCCESS
SUPPORT**

**KEY INPUT:
LABOR MARKET DATA**

LIBRARIAN JOURNEY
- Use labor market data to identify in-demand skills and to create learning pathways
- Serve as a learner success coach for job seekers
- Receive training to issue digital job-readiness credentials backed by the library

**KEY INPUT:
CURRICULUM DESIGN**

Signaling

JOB SEEKER JOURNEY
- Learn to accept your library-issued digital credential and to view it in your digital skills wallet
- Learn how to use your skills wallet in your job search
- Work with your navigator to prepare for the next step in your career journey

**KEY FEATURE:
DIGITAL SKILLS
WALLET**

LIBRARIAN JOURNEY
- Issue library-backed microcredentials to those who complete the job-readiness pathway
- Train job seekers to use their credential effectively
- Work with credential earners to find the right training or placement opportunities and/or apply directly for jobs

**KEY FEATURE:
VERIFIABLE
LIBRARY-BACKED
CREDENTIALS**

Referring

JOB SEEKER JOURNEY
- In addition to applying directly for jobs, receive a warm handoff to a community partner or training organization that recognizes the value of the skills you posses and the microcredential you've just earned

**KEY FEATURE:
PLACEMENT-READY JOB
SEEKERS**

**WARM HANDOFF TO
PLACEMENT SERVICES
AND FURTHER TRAINING**

LIBRARIAN JOURNEY
- Build on or cultivate new community partnerships—with the workforce board, local apprenticeship programs, the community college, Goodwill and others

**KEY PARTNERSHIPS:
WORKBOARD, TRAINING
PROGRAMS, PLACEMENT ORGS**

Stakeholder Reactions to the Model

As part of our research, we pressure-tested the basic design and core features of our workforce-library-of-the-future model with individuals from all relevant stakeholder groups: job seekers, librarians, workforce intermediaries and hiring managers.

Feedback was gathered through interactive Zoom sessions with 20 librarians from across the country; a set of questions asked through in-person interactions and phone interviews with 36 people in California, Maine and Indiana who use or say they would use the library for job help; and online questionnaires completed by 21 workforce intermediaries (such as those at Goodwill and workforce boards around the United States). In addition, the Society for Human Resource Management fielded a survey that generated 504 responses from HR professionals engaged in hiring entry-level workers. (Our survey questions can be found in Appendix B.)

The biggest takeaway was that all stakeholder groups expressed considerable interest in having the library play the workforce development role that we described.

Among library patrons, 58% of respondents said that they were "very likely" to participate in the job-readiness program; another 28% said they were "likely" to do so. The overwhelmingly positive response indicates that patrons are hungry for free, high-quality training and career navigation that is aligned with employer needs, and that they trust the library to provide these services.

At our focus-group sessions, librarians were also excited about the model, especially in the face of what they view as a broken workforce development system—one that is particularly frustrating for the typical patron who visits the library for job help.

Current workforce-related adult services programming—such as foundational skill development, computer help, resume writing and interview prep—was seen as important and necessary to continue. At the same time, librarians expressed enthusiasm at the idea of leveraging the library's strengths as a connector in the community to play a more effective role in their patrons' workforce development journey.

Many librarians also conveyed interest in the kinds of professional learning that would be required for them to play a more prominent role in their community's workforce development ecosystem, particularly around understanding labor market data and gaining more insight into the skills that local employers are looking for. The notion of the library issuing its own verifiable job-readiness credentials into a digital skills wallet elicited positive responses as well.

Among workforce intermediaries, two-thirds said they would be "enthusiastic" or "very enthusiastic" to have microcredential holders from the library referred to their training or job-placement program. What's more, nearly half of intermediary respondents (48%) said

> " *At our focus-group sessions, librarians were excited about the model, especially in the face of what they view as a broken workforce development system—one that is particularly frustrating for the typical patron who visits the library for job help.*

they thought a client with a library-backed microcredential would fare "better" or "somewhat better" in terms of being placed into a job or another training program than other clients they serve. Just as library patrons do, many community workforce organizations clearly trust the library to deliver valuable and relevant learning content.

Finally, of the HR professionals surveyed, 46% said they would value a library-backed microcredential as much as a traditional job reference, and nearly 30% said they would value this signal from the library attesting to an individual's job-readiness even more.

Despite all of the positive responses, there are good reasons to view these results with some caution.

Librarians related concerns around capacity— that is, whether new workforce-related responsibilities could wind up being piled onto already full plates. Some also worried whether patrons with limited digital confidence will be able to effectively use a skills wallet.

Among job seekers, 86% said they were "confident" or "very confident" they could complete the library's job-readiness program. We know, however, that persistence in completion of any training program is difficult. During our

library-based job-readiness pilot program, conducted in north San Diego County, California, just 38% of the 50 individuals who started the program completed the 15 hours of job-readiness training—and that was with a success coach available to every participant. This reality underscores the need for the librarian-navigator in our model to double down on learner support.

Despite the overall positive findings among intermediaries, some expressed reservations. Several respondents at local workforce boards, in particular, questioned whether the model we've proposed would needlessly duplicate existing efforts.

We also know from our experience that hiring managers' systems, practices and norms are deeply entrenched. Saying in a survey that you'd give strong consideration to a job seeker with an alternative credential from the library is one thing; actually doing so is another.

None of these notes of caution should be seen as show-stoppers. In the end, if America truly wants to create more access to opportunity for more people, it only makes sense to integrate the nation's most trusted, most visited institution more deeply into the effort.

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Tens of millions: "Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits From Internet Access at U.S. Libraries" by Samantha Becker, Michael D. Crandall, Karen E. Fisher,Bo Kinney, Carol Landry and Anita Rocha, Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2010. Specifically, the study found that 30 million Americans used library computers and internet access for employment or career purposes. Although this research is more than a decade old, all indications are that such usage has only increased since then.

"Embedding access": As quoted in an April 9, 2021, letter from the American Library Association to Sens. Patty Murray and Richard Burr. See www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/Workforce/ALA_Senate%20HELP_workforce%20comments_4.9.21.pdf

In Florida: The examples in this paragraph and the next are drawn from "Work in Progress: Workforce Development in Public Libraries" by Elizabeth Kobert, *Library Journal*, Sept. 16, 2021, and "Public Libraries' Role in Workforce and Small Business Development," Mt. Auburn Associates, September 2022.

Small firms and entrepreneurs: See www.ala.org/advocacy/workforce/grant

Only 20%: "Public Libraries: Hubs for Workforce Development," EBSCO Information Services, March 21, 2023.

About a quarter: "Public Library Services for Strong Communities Report: Results from the 2022 PLA Annual Survey," Public Library Association, 2023.

"Most libraries": "Lifelong Leveraging of Human Potential: The Role of Public Libraries in Lifelong Workforce Training" by Christian Conroy, *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, Jan. 19, 2018.

Typical scenario: That the library is often used by entry-level job seekers is borne out by our team's experience working with librarians and library patrons across the country, as well as Pew Research Center's finding that 26% of those with household income of less than $30,000 a year help those in their community "a lot" to find jobs or training, compared with 14% of those with incomes of $50,000 to $74,999. Also see "Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits From Internet Access at U.S. Libraries" by Samantha Becker, Michael D. Crandall, Karen E. Fisher, Bo Kinney, Carol Landry and Anita Rocha, Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2010.

Nearly all: 97% of libraries offer paid time off for professional development activities, and 88.5% of libraries provide funding for professional development, according to "Public Library Staff and Diversity Report," Public Library Association, 2021.

Rework America Alliance: See www.markle.org/career-coach-skills-training/. In October 2023, the alliance was moved from the Markle Foundation to JFF.

Hope Street Group: See www.skillingamerica.org

Series of webinars: See www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/workforce/series

Essential to program completion: See "Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research," National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2012.

Gives libraries access: "ALA Applauds Congress for Passing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act," American Library Association news release, July 10, 2014.

California State Library: For details, see www.library.ca.gov/services/to-public/career-pathways/

"An LER ecosystem": "LER Ecosystem Map," lermap.t3networkhub.org

Some 98%: "Public Library Services for Strong Communities Report: Results from the 2022 PLA Annual Survey," Public Library Association, 2023.

Climb Hire: 80% of those completing the program secured new jobs within six months, raising their average annual income to more than $50,000 from $24,000.

Some progress: See www.tearthepaperceiling.org

"Negligible": "College for All Has Failed America. Can It Be Fixed?" by Rick Wartzman, *Capital & Main*, Dec. 14, 2023.

Yet to translate: "Skills-Based Hiring: The Long Road from Pronouncements to Practice" by Matt Sigelman, Joseph Fuller and Alex Martin, Burning Glass Institute, February 2024.

Appendix A: Personas

A persona is an archetype of a user that helps designers understand their users' personal and business contexts. By basing personas on user research, as we have, designers can avoid the pitfalls of designing for fake or extreme users. (Adapted from "IBM Garage Methodology.")

THE JOB SEEKER

Our job seeker is underemployed. He's been out of the full-time job market for several years and is making ends meet—barely—with gig work. He's looking for a full-time entry-level job with a path to a better job and a career.

He's ready to learn, work hard and feel valued. He wants to show a good employer that he'd be a good bet.

He's not very digitally confident, but he uses technology to stay in touch with family and friends. He has an email account and normally accesses the internet on his cellphone. He doesn't have high-speed wireless at home, but he uses the Wi-Fi at his child's school, at the coffee shop and at the library.

He knows that job boards are out there and that job applications happen online, but he doesn't know how to navigate them or find opportunities that might be a good fit.

He doesn't have an up-to-date resume. He has skills—he is organized, is an active listener and has high emotional intelligence—but doesn't know what an employer really wants to see. Or how to be seen. Most of the time he applies for a job, he doesn't hear back.

He has a high school degree and thinks that community college might have something to offer. But he doesn't have the time to figure out what courses or programs would be good for him or a reliable way to get to a classroom regularly.

He really needs a full-time job to get stable. Then, maybe, he can start planning for the future.

THE LIBRARIAN

Her role used to be called "adult services manager"; now it's "workforce navigator." She has worked for nearly a decade with programs across the community that help develop foundational skills, including adult literacy and English-language learning, digital skills and citizenship. She knows trusted places to refer patrons for wraparound social services: food, housing, healthcare.

For five years, the library has offered its own digital-skills program and one-on-one support for writing resumes and preparing for interviews. She has personally helped patrons create email accounts and accounts on Indeed and ZipRecruiter. She has proofread resumes and helped job seekers apply for open positions. She has always had the feeling that these applications and resumes get filtered out by some algorithm long before they make it to an actual hiring manager.

Patrons always want to know, "How do I get a job?" The honest answer, which she would keep to herself, used to be, "I don't really know."

Her role used to feel far more like that of a triage nurse than a career counselor. All that has changed.

Appendix B: Survey questions

HIRING MANAGERS

A total of 504 surveys were completed from Dec. 4 to Dec. 28, 2023. The survey was fielded electronically using the SHRM Voice of Work Research Panel to U.S.-based HR professionals working for organizations as paid employees.

Question 1: On average, how many entry-level hires do you make annually in your role?

Response	Number of respondents (out of 504)
0	0
1-10	195
11-50	180
51-100	68
More than 100	61

Question 2: To what extent do you consider microcredentials when assessing a candidate?

Response (out of 504)	Number of respondents (out of 504)
Never	59
Rarely	144
Sometimes	234
Frequently	58
Always	9

Scenario: Imagine that the local public library has a job-readiness training program for entry-level workers focused on the skills that local employers say are most important. Job seekers who complete the training earn a library-backed microcredential that can be securely shared with you as part of an online application.

Question 3: How much would you trust the library as a source of job-readiness training?

Response	Number of respondents (out of 504)
Would not trust at all	14
Would be somewhat distrustful	81
Would be somewhat trustful	354
Would trust completely	55
More than 100	61

Question 4: Compared to a reference, how much would you value the library-backed microcredential?

Response (out of 504)	Number of respondents (out of 504)
Much less	34
Somewhat less	89
About the same	232
Somewhat more	127
Much more	22

Question 5: How likely would you be to attend an information and feedback session (virtual or in-person) about a library-hosted training program?

Response (out of 504)	Number of respondents (out of 504)
Not at all likely	48
Somewhat unlikely	90
Somewhat likely	275
Highly likely	89
No response	2

WORKFORCE INTERMEDIARIES

A total of 21 workforce intermediaries responded to an online questionnaire and feedback prompt. The National Association of Workforce Boards help to circulate the questionnaire among its members.

Imagine that the public library has a job-readiness program for entry-level job seekers. After developing foundational skills (if needed), participants engage in about 10 hours of job-readiness training focused on workplace skills like communication, time management, and digital skills. Job seekers activate a learning and employment record (LER) at the library, and those who complete the learning pathway earn a library-backed microcredential. Job seekers are trained in how to use their LER to highlight their skills when applying for jobs.

Question 1: How enthusiastic would you be to have this pipeline of library-backed job-readiness microcredential earners referred to your organization?

Response	*Number of respondents (out of 21)*
Not enthusiastic	1
Somewhat unenthusiastic	2
Somewhat enthusiastic	4
Enthusiastic	7
Very enthusiastic	7

Question 2: Compared to other clients you are helping to place into entry-level jobs or technical training programs, how well do you anticipate library-backed microcredential earners will fare?

Response	*Number of respondents (out of 21)*
Less well	2
Somewhat less well	4
The same	5
Somewhat better than	8
Better than	2

Question 3: How willing would you be to meet regularly with staff at the library to share information about the skills that local businesses are seeking and the needs of job seekers?

Response	*Number of respondents (out of 21)*
Not willing	0
Somewhat unwilling	2
Somewhat willing	4
Willing	8
Very willing	7

ENTRY-LEVEL JOB SEEKERS

A total of 36 individuals responded to a questionnaire administered through in-person intercepts at the library and telephone interviews.

Question 1: How difficult is it for you to show employers that you have the skills they're looking for?

Response	Number of respondents (out of 36)
Not difficult at all	9
Not very difficult	6
Somewhat difficult	11
Difficult	5
Very difficult	5

Now, imagine that the public library has a job-readiness program for job seekers like you. The program gives you free access to online courses selected specifically to help you develop the foundational skills that local employers say are most important (such as communication, time management and using a computer in the workplace). You can complete the courses at home or at the library, with support from librarians.

After completing the learning pathway (about 10-15 hours total), you'll earn a microcredential and receive training on how to use the microcredential to highlight your skills when applying for jobs online.

With your microcredential in hand, you'll meet with one of the library's workforce navigators and then be referred to one or more trusted partners in the community. Those partners will help you get placed into an entry-level job and/or explore opportunities for more training that could help boost you to an even better job.

Question 2: How likely are you to participate in a program like the one described at the library?

Response	Number of respondents (out of 36)
Not likely at all	1
Not very likely	1
Somewhat likely	3
Likely	10
Very likely	21

Question 3: How confident are you that you could complete the training and earn the library-backed microcredential?

Response	Number of respondents (out of 36)
Not confident at all	0
Not very confident	2
Somewhat confident	3
Confident	6
Very confident	25

LIBRARIANS

A total of 20 librarians participated in interactive feedback sessions on Zoom in which they were presented with early iterations of the job seeker and librarian user journeys and prompted to discuss and provide feedback.

Imagine that your library offers a job-readiness program for entry-level job seekers. Also imagine that you've taken part in professional development designed to help you lead the program.

THE USER JOURNEY

- *After a needs assessment aimed at identifying foundational skill gaps, patrons engage in about 10 hours of job-readiness training. The training is offered as an online learning pathway and targets the development of the skills that local employers say are most important-—such as communication, time management and digital skills. It is made up of courses selected from the library's database subscriptions and other freely available, high-quality content.*

- *With support from library staff, job seekers activate a digital learning and employment record (LER) and those who complete the learning pathway earn a library-backed microcredential. Job seekers are trained in how to securely share the data in their LERs to highlight their skills when applying for jobs.*

- *Patrons who complete the program are celebrated for passing the "first mile" of their workforce development journey and are now deemed "placement-ready." Microcredential earners are referred in a warm handoff to one or more trusted partner organizations in the community. Some partners (such as the workforce board or Goodwill) will aim to place job seekers directly into an entry-level position and others (such as the community college or adult education) will identify opportunities for more training that could help boost the patron to an even better job.*

Professional development training would prepare you to become a:

- *Local labor market interpreter.*
- *Job-readiness curriculum designer.*
- *Learner success coach.*
- *Microcredential issuer.*
- *Learning and employment record steward.*
- *Primary connector to other players in the local workforce development ecosystem.*
- *Equitable hiring-practice evangelist.*

Feedback prompts:

- *What parts of this program most excite you? Why?*
- *What parts make you most uncomfortable or feel unrealistic—and why?*
- *What are the biggest challenges to overcome?*
- *Did we miss anything essential? If so, what?*
- *What other changes or refinements would you suggest to strengthen the model?*