



# **From Training to Learning in Workforce Development:**

*A Critical Discourse  
Analysis*

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# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction .....	9
Challenge.....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	14
Chaos Theory of Careers.....	14
Adult Learning Theory.....	16
Study Design .....	18
Research Questions.....	18
Research Methods.....	19
Partner Program.....	21
Research Activities.....	22
Contextual Analysis.....	24
Discourse Strand 1: Workforce Development .....	24
Discourse Strand 2: Soft Skills.....	27
Discourse Strand 3: Training/Learning .....	34
Discourse Strand 3.1: Content .....	39
Discourse Strand 3.2: Credentialing .....	45
Discourse Strand 3.3: Participant Experience .....	49
Discourse Strand 4: Applicability .....	52
Discourse Strand 4.1: Self-Identity.....	55
Discourse Strand 4.2: Career .....	59
Discourse Strand 5: Community .....	61
Summary .....	65
Key Findings .....	65
Recommendations .....	67
Study Limitations .....	70
Opportunities for Future Research .....	70
Conclusion .....	71
References .....	72
Appendix A: TechWorks Schedule, Spring 2020 .....	78
Appendix 2: JobWorks Soft Skills Courses .....	80
Appendix C: Participant Interview Questions .....	85
Appendix D: JobWorks Program Evaluation .....	86



## Abstract

Although labor market dynamics are highly complex, workforce development programs typically attempt to remediate unemployed or underemployed individuals through trainings focused on “soft skills,” or nontechnical skills centered on vague concepts like “professionalism.” But program participants experience these trainings as professional development sessions sparking meaningful personal growth. Using the chaos theory of careers and adult learning theory, this study focuses on five emergent discourse strands (soft skills, training/learning, applicability, community, and workforce development itself) that emerge in a sample soft-skills training program in Philadelphia, PA. By examining how soft skills are delivered, experienced, and credentialed through this program, I consider how the discourses intersecting within soft-skills trainings empower and are powered by program participants engaging in self-conceptualization through pursuing new careers. Drawing on training observations, facilitator and participant interviews, and analysis of student handbooks, facilitation tools, post-program surveys, and contextualizing documents, I explore how soft-skills credentials may enable individuals to learn by entering communities of professional practice throughout long, uncertain careers. For programs to move from training to learning, recommendations include leveraging program structures to support soft-skill achievement, strategic credentialing, supporting participant meaning-making, and contextualizing training materials within both broad professional disciplines and specific work environments.

*Keywords: workforce development, training, learning, soft skills, credentials, credentialing, chaos theory of careers, adult learning theory, discourse analysis*

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# Executive Summary

Rather than address structural inequities in the labor market, the discourse of workforce development centers unemployment alleviation efforts on remediating individuals through training sessions designed to close “skills gaps” (Cappelli, 2012). Many workforce development programs support job attainment by offering training in technical job-related skills for their program participants, who are often those individuals eligible for federal training subsidies (e.g., dislocated workers, youth and young adults, or veterans). This strategy aligns with a growing emphasis on lifelong training and learning: 87% of surveyed American workers think it is important, even essential, to engage in continuous training and skills development in order to stay employed (Pew Research Center, 2016). But workforce development programs also spend significant training hours covering “soft skills,” or those less-measurable abilities related to the navigation of professional environments, and many of these trainings vaguely offer advice to the point of absurdity. This observation prompted the following research questions:

- What is the relationship of training and learning in workforce development programs, particularly as related to soft skills?
- How does the process of credentialing intersect with both training and learning? How can credentialing in workforce development align with educational systems in order to support learning?
- How does a workforce development program meet its near-term funding requirements while also supporting more aspirational long-term career growth for program participants?

Philadelphia’s TechWorks, a 12-week, credential-focused workforce development program, focuses on preparing participants for entry-level IT support roles. Nearly a fifth of its instructional hours are allocated to soft skills like business communication, making it an ideal program through which to examine soft skills through the intersections of training, learning, and credentialing. Using the chaos theory of careers (Bright & Pryor, 2012) and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968/2005; Freire, 1970/2000; Lave, 1988; Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2014), this study provides a critical discourse analysis of the TechWorks soft-skills program to explore how a training program can activate learning and better prepare individuals for complex, recursive, and indeterminate careers rather than simply conveying prescriptive advice for workplace behaviors.

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Discourse analysis assumes that language and thought are interconnected, and that thought further influences belief and action (Breeze, 2011). By understanding how the language related to both workforce development and soft skills works – for program participants, especially – we can better understand the tensions and opportunities within these two discourses. How do participants engage in the work of self-conceptualization through these programs? How can the process of learning subvert a programmatic space focused on credential attainment? Analyzing how workforce development discourse either forecloses or opens job, career, or learning opportunities for participants can inform strategies around program design and execution. Understanding how soft skills are furthered and interrogated in training sessions can help program designers navigate potential tensions between learning and credentialing.

Adult learning theory and the chaos theory of careers lend themselves to this analytical strategy. In its acknowledgement that people use their experiences and perceptions to create “interpretive structures” (Bright & Pryor, 2011, p. 7), the chaos theory of careers can inform discourse analysis focused on how participants use language to affirm, expand, challenge, nuance, or discredit programmatic elements in workforce development programs. Adult learning theory acknowledges the overlay of motivation, the construction of self-concept, and the influence of prior experience on the learning experience at hand. Both situate individual agency within an uncertain and interactive/interactional environment. These factors are crucial to understanding how an individual’s multiple discursive contexts impede or support career advancement and personal growth. And like the chaos theory of careers, adult learning theory supports an adult-focused pedagogy that attempts to embed classroom content in broader professional contexts. Understanding those contexts is vital for stoking student motivation to learn (Cordova & Lepper, 1996).

After analyzing the discursive repertoires (Rymes, 2014, 2009) engaged and furthered by TechWorks constituents, coupling analysis of curriculum materials with classroom observations, survey results, and participant interviews, five key findings emerged:

1. Although technical training sessions required most of their energy during the program, participants identified the soft skills they developed as the most impactful and personally meaningful aspect of the program.
2. The program designers divide their technical and soft-skills content into discrete components, but participants experience the program as a whole rather than as a series of training sessions.
3. Participants largely perceive soft-skills workshops as helpful professional development tools rather than as instructional remediation. In other words, participants viewed the soft-skills sessions as advantageous to self-improvement; they did not view these sessions as being focused on addressing deficiencies.

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4. JobWorks credentials the soft skills aspects of its program under a “Certified Business Professional” certificate, and markets this credential as a value-add for both prospective participants and potential employers. Participants can add this credential to their resumes and boost their marketability, and employers can use this credential as a way to screen applicants for desired skills.
    - a. This structure moves the program closer to the discourse of college education, in which credentials are expected for all classroom investment, rather than the discourse of workforce development, in which trainings are often designed to remediate skills gaps without necessarily attending to whether participants develop desired skills or not.
    - b. A credential-focused approach to soft-skills training may make workforce development a salient tool for more educated workers who are also at risk of being displaced by automation and other trends in the future of work (Manyika et al., 2017). That is, rather than continuing to calibrate programs for those jobseekers who qualify for federal funding subsidies, workforce development programs can also prepare to engage participants with fewer preexisting employment barriers.
    - c. Credentialing soft skills can subvert the notion of mastering these skills. By converting soft skills to marketable resume credentials, programs like TechWorks subtly interrogate employer expectations while creating an entry point for participants to demonstrate skill performativity. That is, the credential creates cover for an individual to enter a new community of professional practice, where they will eventually learn the skills they need to learn as defined and recognized by the community.
  5. Balancing career development with job-focused contextualization is a complex oscillation. A training curriculum that can effectively equip individuals to navigate a long, uncertain career arc also faces pressure to deliver content specific enough that a program graduate can comfortably navigate the professional environments characteristic of employers who recruit from workforce development programs.

These findings suggest several recommendations for workforce development programs that must meet their funding requirements while holding the possibility of serving participants’ long-term career interests:

**Recommendation 1: Recognize that framing matters.**

Workforce development is a practice with a wide purview, and providers should be careful to articulate the specific goals of their training program. Is the program designed to prepare participants for on-the-job success? to supply employers with specialized talent pools? to correct perceived deficiencies among target populations? Program designers should carefully consider all aspects of the content in light of the program’s self-conceptualization. Why are certain skills considered vital enough to discuss? Are those

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decisions informed by input from employer or industry partners? How is training content aligned with other educational systems? Is the program prioritizing the needs of employer over jobseekers?

Conscious framing should also extend to participants' career narratives. My interviewees were able to spin tales of prior jobs and relationships and lessons learned in ways that simultaneously acknowledged the role of chance and their own agency. Understanding how the chaos theory of careers has emerged for them so far in their careers can help clarify how to navigate similar dynamics in the future, and may close the gap between earning a credential and engaging in the process of learning. These efforts may foster awareness about how individuals engage in self-construction within contextualized power structures. Further, participants may be more likely to accept new jobs with clearer goals, and this orientation may translate to a stronger commitment to engaging in workplace habitus.

### **Recommendation 2: Use program structures to support soft skill development.**

Along with workshops focused on soft skill topics, the design of the program itself can reinforce learning of these skills. How does the program encourage the application of concepts discussed in the classroom? Do conditions in the program (e.g., reflecting workplace norms of the target industry) invite participants to exercise new strategies and skills? How are participants held accountable to implement new communicative strategies?

### **Recommendation 3: Seek credentialing for original training content.**

JobWorks has a robust catalog of program offerings. As an organization, it has invested extensively in creating training materials. The TechWorks program may better achieve its goals of supporting credential attainment and maintaining a high-quality program if the organization seeks credentialing for its own materials rather than relying on off-the-shelf materials.

### **Recommendation 4: Facilitate learning along with training.**

TechWorks is clearly succeeding at credentialing its participants, providing ample evidence of effective training. However, the program should scaffold opportunities to activate and advance soft skills in a contextually-relevant way, making clear the connection between classroom topics and communities of professional practice. This transparency should support the ability of individuals to accrue power in context as they are able to effectively join discursive paradigms. This move could equip participants to navigate career uncertainties more successfully while still supplying employers with qualified talent.



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# Introduction

This project started with a simple question grounded in my own experience as a workforce development practitioner: why is so much workforce development training so basic? How can it possibly be helpful to a roomful of adults, multifaceted individuals with histories and opinions and obligations and education and experience, to tell them things like “be on time to work” and “stay calm when dealing with irate customers”? I couldn’t help but wonder if program participants were deeply bored by this level of content, if not insulted by the insinuation that they needed to hear this advice. I started to wonder what this surface-y, didactic, and prescriptive level of discourse indicated about how program participants were conceptualized by the organizations purporting to serve their career needs. However, I also recognized that my own subjective positioning – as a highly-educated, white, middle-class woman who has observed this type of workshop many, many times in my professional experience since 2011 – was clouding my perception of the problem. Was the existing curriculum actually useful for the individuals who joined these programs? If so, how? If not, what would make workforce development trainings the dynamic, career-accelerating resources I suspected they could be?

**JobWorks, Inc.** became a natural partner in this inquiry. For over 30 years, JobWorks has been a workforce development intermediary focused on implementing training and job placement programs in partnership with government agencies and private-sector employers. With offices in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and California, JobWorks is poised to become an influential provider with a regional perspective and sector-level reach. The organizational culture is no-nonsense, with a “just get it done” attitude that prioritizes replicable, scalable, and profitable projects. JobWorks offers industry-specific training programs for jobseekers in every demographic, but specifically targets content for adult and dislocated workers, youth and young professionals, veterans and active duty service personnel, incumbent workers at partner employers, and individuals with disabilities (JobWorks, 2019). JobWorks typifies private workforce development training intermediaries in that it has latitude to select its target audiences, develop training content, and focus on a particular industry or economic sector.

While this approach has allowed for robust organizational growth, one of JobWorks’s core products – its training curriculum – has been developed on an ad-hoc basis without explicit attention to best practices in instructional design (J. Casella, personal communication, October 18, 2019). In fact, the program relies on an off-the-shelf business communication curriculum offered by an organization called the International Business Training Association (IBTA), selected because it culminates in a proctored exam

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that can garner a “Certified Business Professional” credential for participants. Although JobWorks views the quality of this material as a limitation to its effectiveness and, potentially, its marketability (J. Casella, personal communication, October 18, 2019), the IBTA curriculum is used because JobWorks is ultimately held accountable for its participants’ credential attainment.

JobWorks’s flagship program is **TechWorks**, a 12-week training program preparing participants for entry-level careers in information technology (IT). Billed as a “first-of-its-kind, 4-certification virtual training program that quickly connects entry-level trainees to high-paying IT support jobs” (JobWorks, 2020), TechWorks offers intensive instruction in IT fundamentals. Participants can earn the CompTIA A+ certification (a highly-desirable credential for IT support professionals), two other entry-level IT certifications (Cloud Essentials and IT Fundamentals), and a “Certified Business Professional” certificate through IBTA that focuses on business communication. As of July 2020, TechWorks is the primary program offered by JobWorks. Unlike eight other short-term, certificate-driven training programs designed for positions like office administrators, bookkeepers, and certified nursing assistants, TechWorks focuses on a sector in which employers are still hiring despite the global coronavirus pandemic; because of the possibility of hiring, public-sector funders are still interested.

TechWorks is principally funded by Philadelphia Works, the workforce investment board serving the city of Philadelphia, through cost reimbursements for participants qualifying for training subsidies through the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).<sup>1</sup> The program aims to enroll 60 participants each year. Since the global coronavirus pandemic launched an ongoing economic shutdown in March 2020, JobWorks has also been contracted by workforce investment boards in Indiana, Nebraska, and Delaware to support virtual enrollment in TechWorks. Almost all of JobWorks’s clients are nonprofits or public workforce boards supporting training for individuals, and JobWorks is accountable for the number of participants obtaining IT certifications, not the number who gain employment. Philadelphia Works, for example, only requires JobWorks to report on the number of IT Fundamentals certifications attained; 99% of program graduates have obtained this credential.

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<sup>1</sup> WIOA eligibility requirements are complex, but largely hinge on household income, employment status, and other factors like disability or age. Workforce Solutions (2019) has published a helpful reference.

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## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this report, I use the words *participant* and *facilitator* to describe the primary roles within a workforce development program. *Participant* refers to the individuals who constitute a training cohort within a particular program. Although these individuals are sometimes called clients, customers, students, or adult learners, I have chosen to use the word participant for two fairly straightforward reasons: I think it most accurately describes the active role of individuals in co-creating meaning throughout a training program, and it is also the term preferred by JobWorks's staff. *Facilitator* refers to the individuals tasked with creating the conditions for learning within the program; rather than teacher, trainer, instructor, or even workforce navigator, I think it most accurately connotes a context-dependent role that relies on the input of others in order to successfully achieve training and learning goals.



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# Challenge

JobWorks faces a challenge common to workforce development organizations. Because of its WIOA-related funding requirements, it must be prepared to support jobseekers through the public workforce system, who are categorized by that system as adult and dislocated workers, youth and young professionals, veterans and active duty service personnel, incumbent workers (usually offered by an employer to employees with support from a contracted training provider), and individuals with disabilities (JobWorks, 2019). Those with overlapping identities, or with the additional hurdle of having low educational attainment or criminal backgrounds, are perceived as “hardest to serve” and are often routed toward occupations viewed as having low barriers to entry. In Philadelphia, individuals engaging the workforce development system are “more poorly educated than the city labor force as a whole” (Ginsberg, Kingsley & Eichel, 2012, p. 21). IT is an appealing career pathway for this constituency, as nearly half of Philadelphia’s IT positions are considered low- or middle-skills jobs (City of Philadelphia, 2018). While technological mastery should indeed be recognized as a potential career barrier, many entry-level positions do not require a college degree. Certifications help bridge this gap.

However, TechWorks does not solely provide technical credentials. It also spends 19% of its active instructional time teaching soft skills, more than is required for participants to obtain the “Certified Business Professional” credential through IBTA (see Appendix A for a sample schedule). In fact, JobWorks has invested significant resources in a robust catalog of nearly 300 soft-skills workshops (see Appendix B) ranging from self-management and leadership to customer service and communication (JobWorks Education and Training Services, 2020). In this way, JobWorks is typical of many workforce development providers who foreground soft skills trainings as an essential aspect of preparing participants for the workforce. This approach reflects a neoliberal ideology that construes training as the appropriate mechanism for closing career achievement gaps for workforce development participants (Patrick, 2013); individuals assume the burden of achieving employability.

For JobWorks, soft-skills trainings are also part of the program’s recruitment strategy. Both applicants and potential employer partners respond favorably to learning that TechWorks offers a soft skills program (“They say, ‘oh, that’s great! Customer service is so important,’” J. Casella, personal communication, July 13, 2020). Indeed, while they clearly value their new technical skills and credentials, program graduates cite soft skills as their most important takeaways from the program. Here an opportunity emerges to

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leverage a system focused on credential attainment – the training subsidies and program resources designed to “solve” unemployment through cultivating individual skills – toward less transactional and more growth-centered learning. Personal development is already happening in the current program: why not intentionally use this aspect of the program to enhance human flourishing?



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# Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two primary theoretical frameworks, the **chaos theory of careers** and **adult learning theory**.

## CHAOS THEORY OF CAREERS

The chaos theory of careers was developed by Bright & Pryor (2011) as a way of recognizing the ever-complexifying milieu of career development in the twenty-first century. This theory developed in opposition to what they perceived as four common programmatic shortcomings:

1. Failure to incorporate the range of potential influences on people's careers
2. Failure to move beyond a narrow sense of matching the dynamic, interactive and adaptive nature of human functioning in the world and in making career decisions and taking career action
3. Failure to incorporate into theory the tendency of humans to construe experiences/ perceptions into meaningful and often unique interpretive structures for understanding themselves and their world
4. Failure to adequately conceptualize unplanned, unpredictable experiences, which are crucial and sometimes determinative aspects of individuals' career narratives (Bright & Pryor, 2011, pp. 6-7)

The chaos theory of careers attempts to overcome these failures by embracing the features of today's careers: "complexity; non-linearity; change; chance; emergence; and fractals" (Bright & Pryor, 2012). By acknowledging the many overlapping and unforeseen influences on one's career, as well as the unpredictable and uncertain characteristics of ongoing change, jobseekers can better navigate immediate opportunities with an eye to the long-term patterns that, in the end, constitute a career (Bright & Pryor, 2012). A program drawing on the chaos theory of careers will emphasize a "more holistic, process-oriented approach that recognises the realities of change, chance and complexity in the modern careers world" (Bright & Pryor, 2012, p. 18). Because they are almost wholly focused on job attainment and career development, modern workforce development programs are well-positioned to deploy this pedagogical lens, especially if they worked to support their participants in "construct[ing] their own development as their careers progress and the workforce changes" (Mesaros, 2019). McIlveen (2014) adds that the

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chaos theory of careers prepares jobseekers to confront failure “sympathetically and practically” (p. 42), thus remixing the normative discursive impulse around failure with a convincing case for optimism and hope.

Amundson, Mills & Smith (2014) note the paradoxical element to chaos theory in that it holds in tension “both disintegration (chaos) and emergence (patterns)” (p. 18). By bringing both the probable and the possible into the same discourse event, the chaos theory of careers emphasizes the need for career seekers to understand the simultaneous need to be prepared for opportunity and to understand how actions and decisions prime available opportunities (Amundson, Mills & Smith, 2014). And where this could align with neoliberal discourse in commodifying adaptability in response to economic instabilities (Patrick, 2013), the chaos theory of careers also restores some agency to individuals. Knowing that a career relies on chance does not change emergent opportunities, but it may prepare individuals to recognize and take advantage of those opportunities more quickly.

Discourse analysis informed by the chaos theory of careers can identify how training curricula can support personal development. Bright & Pryor (2005) cite the importance of the more analogical abductive reasoning to the chaos theory of careers, in being “not linear but lateral; it deals with patterns and relationships and accepts that all knowledge is open to doubt and revision and open to interpretations from different perspectives” (p. 294). By destabilizing epistemological certainty, participants can engage their own ability to observe, analyze, and respond to work environments and career opportunities. Breaking open a linear sense of career cause and effect may further invite program participants to engage in the fundamental work of critical analysis (Freire, 1970/2000).



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A pedagogy grounded in the chaos theory of careers would encourage participants to actively make connections between job-related training and the larger context of their lives. It would seek to amplify those connections by prompting (and responding to) participant efforts to expand their context, to apply discoveries to their professional identities, and to critically analyze opportunities to thrive in potential workplaces. It would also encourage individuals to acknowledge that actions and choices may create or preclude career opportunities – while recognizing the equally present role of chance and complexity. Recognizing the danger in the neoliberal idea that individual capabilities can overcome inequitable hiring systems does not negate the useful and humanizing sense of agency afforded by the chaos theory of careers.

## ADULT LEARNING THEORY

Knowles's (1968/2005) influential theory of adult learning is useful in workforce development settings because it holds space for adults to engage in learning outside of formal educational environments. This theory posits six core principles of adult learning:

- **The need to know**, which recognizes that learners need to understand why they are being asked to learn something; this is explicitly connected to Freire's (1970/2000) emphasis on "consciousness-raising"
- **The learners' self-concept**, which recognizes that adults have a sense of responsibility for their own decisions and their own lives
- **The role of the learners' experiences**, which recognizes the depth of personal history and experience that exists as present context for adult learners; these experiences contribute to identity formation and make adult learners particularly rich resources for one another
- **Readiness to learn**, which recognizes that adults invest time and energy in learning information and strategies that help them navigate real-world complexities; Knowles thought that this readiness could be primed through exposure, simulations, or even "career counseling" (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005, p. 66)
- **Orientation to learning**, which recognizes that adults are motivated to learn through an interest in applicability to the extent that they perceive learning will enhance their ability to navigate life, perform tasks, or solve problems
- **Motivation**, which recognizes that adults respond to external motivators like career advancement and internal motivators like job satisfaction and self-esteem

Although adult learning theory has rightly been criticized for insufficiently differentiating between learning and teaching (Hartree, 1984; Davenport, 1987), it forwards an important acknowledgement that programs for adult learners should be designed for adults, for individuals who have an active and vested sense of their own learning, rather



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than being designed against a more abstracted perception about what a “classroom” should feature.

Like the chaos theory of careers, adult learning theory lends itself to discourse analysis. It specifically acknowledges the overlay of motivation, the construction of self-concept, and the influence of prior experience on the learning experience at hand, and these factors are crucial to understanding how an individual’s multiple discursive contexts impede or support career advancement and personal growth. And like the chaos theory of careers, adult learning theory supports an adult-focused pedagogy that attempts to embed classroom content in broader professional contexts. Placing the chaos theory of careers and adult learning theory in conversation with each other makes possible a robust theoretical examination that aligns with the methodological approach of discourse analysis.

A primary thread in adult learning theory supports the agency of adult learners, and learners with agency are likely to seek meaningful choice and the opportunity to develop competency in desired skills. Agency can be understood as the intertwining of “human intention and action” (Chen, 2006, p. 132). Workforce development programs would do well to foster participants’ sense of ownership over both intention and action. Training curricula should allow all participants to not only contribute to the conversation but also feel confident in their ability to do so. Cultivating a sense of competence should be especially valued when designing programs for individuals who have been economically marginalized: dislocated workers, veterans, opportunity youth, and other groups without high levels of confidence in their career mobility.

The chaos theory of careers, in emphasizing a fundamental orientation toward interpretive structures built on adaptiveness across the career lifespan, offers a curricular framework that could amplify long-term opportunity. Adult learning theory, in recognizing that adult learners are embedded in multiple discursive practices that extend far beyond the bounds of a single program, can elevate the participant perspective in workforce development programs. In turn, attending to the perspective and interests of participants could spark learning opportunities that outshine the transactional nature of credential-focused programs.

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# Study Design

This study focuses on the soft skills curriculum within the TechWorks program. Scheduled at weekly intervals at the beginning and end of the 12-week TechWorks program, these sessions constitute approximately 19% of active instructional time and cover topics that include business communication, job searching, self-management, and professional presentation.

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## *Research Questions*

- What is the relationship of training and learning in workforce development programs, particularly as related to soft skills?
  - How does the process of credentialing intersect with both training and learning? How can credentialing in workforce development align with educational systems?
    - What are the perceptions of participants regarding the soft skills curriculum?
    - What are the perceptions of facilitators regarding the soft skills curriculum?
  - How does a workforce development program meet its near-term funding requirements while also supporting more aspirational long-term career growth for program participants?
- 

Designed as a qualitative inquiry, this study examines the overlapping discursive modes engaged by both facilitators and participants in TechWorks. I coupled an analysis of curriculum materials with classroom observations and participant interviews. Through transcribing and coding the hours of instructional content and conversation recorded in both the individual and cohort contexts, several key discourse strands surfaced:

- Training/learning
  - Credentialing
  - Content
  - Participant Experience

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- Applicability
    - Self-Identity
    - Career
    - Community

This study examines these strands within the context of broader programmatic discourses related to workforce development and soft skills. By analyzing these strands in light of the theoretical frameworks of adult learning theory and the chaos theory of careers, this study identifies several strategies for workforce development programs interested in encouraging long-term career opportunity for program participants: frame the program holistically and intentionally, integrate soft skills across training modules, and focus on enhancing learning throughout credentialing preparations.

For me, what is at stake in these questions is the opportunity to identify strategies that support learning, growth, and development for adults who are generally disconnected from formal educational systems (Ginsberg, Kingsley & Eichel, 2012). It is problematic to think of workforce development trainings as a panacea for unemployment (Jacobson, 2016; Cappelli, 2012; Fadulu, 2018), and training as a practice risks functionalist neoliberalism in defining an individual's value as a market-driven commodification tied to skill attainment (Urciuoli, 2008). However, the fact that workforce development programs are experienced by participants as sites of learning and development enables a unique opportunity to leverage utilitarian structures to support the potential for human flourishing. To me, the people who find themselves in workforce development programs are worth this type of values-driven investment. To state the obvious, being unemployed, or low-income, or a returning citizen does not minimize an individual's worth. While a credential may potentially enable career mobility, using resource allocations to convert training into learning almost certainly supports increased equity and person-centered development.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study provides an inductive qualitative analysis drawing on the methodology of discourse analysis (Gee, 2006). I leverage the model Rymes (2014, 2009) used in exploring discursive repertoires within classrooms. This technique effectively serves the study questions because it fosters a close examination of both the framing used by program staff in designing and delivering classroom content as well as the framing of learning and critical engagement experienced by participants within the program.

Throughout this study, I draw on an understanding of discourse as the means through which individuals construct a "socially recognizable identity" (Gee, 2006, p. 21) inflected with a critical attention to power (van Dijk, 1993). In fostering social recognizability within

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workforce development programs, discourse contributes to the formation of an individual's self-conceptualization as an emerging professional (Foucault, 1980).

The process of constructing a social identity reflects and undergirds forms of social power, which grows when it is positioned as a positive enticement toward social acceptance and self-realization. Rather than gain traction solely as a coercive force, power "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). Power emerges through the everyday practices of program participants, while simultaneously being defined and made possible through those practices. Participating in TechWorks's habitus (Bourdieu, 1972/1977) allows participants to accrue and define power by concurrently advancing and creating the discourse of TechWorks. Individual power emerges in the collective learning experience, and vice versa. "Discourse is Janus-headed" (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 10) in being both a consequence of and technology for reinforcing power (Foucault, 1980). In the discursive repertoires constituting TechWorks, participants start to understand how to access power as recognized within their target industries and constitute a self in response. TechWorks is a provisional space, simultaneously serving as an introduction to an industry-conscripted power and as a site for negotiating power in its own right. This provisionality allows participants to try on new selves, to perform professionalism as a remix of histories and values with aspirations and informed analysis of market-driven opportunities, to learn in the antechamber of a profession before risking economic capital.

Because effective analysis requires explanatory frameworks (Fairclough, 1985), because "in a globalised world people are exposed to many different discourses, [learning] to navigate them, ignoring many, accepting some, rejecting others" (Breeze, 2011, p. 508), this analysis is intentionally context-driven. The site at which discourses interact becomes a locus for recognizable identity formation: understanding how discursive boundaries are drawn (and by whom) provides key insights into the limitations and possibilities of that engagement. Shifts in practice become possible by pushing out the bounds of discursive practice.

By encouraging the self-construction of professional identities, TechWorks sparks an active engagement in the work of self-conceptualization; "crafting identities in practice becomes the fundamental project subjects engage in; crafting identities is a social process" (Lave, 1996, p. 157). The process of identity construction fundamentally reflects the process of learning. In this way, TechWorks becomes "the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'" (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010, p. 334). Individuals craft these stories-so-far in response to the powerful habitus of the training program while also bringing into existence that very habitus. Because the boundaries of workforce development are ill defined, each individual is able to port into the training space a nexus of discursive repertoires that enable additional definitions and demonstrations of power. Here the

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training program has a chance of transcending functionalism to realize transformative growth among participants.

Rymes (2009) defines discourse analysis as the study of how language-in-use and context affect one another. Such analysis of discourse “is not to say what it means but to investigate how it works, what conditions make it possible, and how it intersects with nondiscursive practices” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2004, p. 462). How are individuals and communities navigating language to both generate and absorb meaning? Rymes (2014) also advances the notion of communicative repertoires, or those bodies of knowledge that empower commonalities with others. This is not strictly sussing out shared bodies of knowledge; the more a communication node is engaged, “the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be” (Rymes, 2014, p. 10). The more individuals engage with concepts, ideas, terms, and paradigms, the more those categories expand and shift, accruing deictic power.

These considerations become especially important when considering how Freirean dialogue might function in workforce development settings. Dialogue, as a learning-with instead of teaching-to, becomes the site of productive exchange among discourse partners. This framing becomes vital when designing programs to engage participants who may be experiencing economic marginalization. By creating a space for active, equitable dialogue, workforce development programs affirm the “intense faith in humankind” named by Freire (1970/2000), “faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 90). Engaging in organizational discourse, in the creation of contextualized power structures, becomes a fundamental assertion of humanity. As a transactional bonus, such engagement practices may spark confidence that enhances workplace capacity. More importantly, however, foregrounding participant voices within workforce development discourses can decenter “expert” voices – workforce development professionals, training facilitators, or labor economists – and expand shared perceptions of how value accrues in the practice of workforce development.

## PARTNER PROGRAM

This study examined JobWorks’s flagship program in Philadelphia, PA: TechWorks, a 12-week program designed to support novices in qualifying for entry-level positions as IT professionals. Along with instruction to support participants in receiving IT-related certifications, nearly one in five (19%) of the active instructional hours are focused on soft skills like job searching, business communication, resume writing, interviewing, and self-management. The program is delivered by two technical skills trainers and two soft skills trainers.

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TechWorks is a small program, serving cohorts of 9-10 adults with varying degrees of prior exposure to the field of information technology. These individuals primarily connect to TechWorks through CareerLink, the network of public-facing job-support offices run by Philadelphia’s workforce investment board, Philadelphia Works. However, as of July 2020, the CareerLink offices remain closed to the public due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and Philadelphia Works has instead encouraged JobWorks to recruit participants directly. JobWorks has the latitude to recruit and screen strong candidates. For this purpose, JobWorks has created a new advertising and application portal, as well as a high-quality marketing video, that have generated new interest in the program.

Although JobWorks has an institutional presence in a number of U.S. states, the Philadelphia office is small and the director quite accessible. Because the director and I worked together for another organization from 2013-2015, John Casella is an active member of my professional network. When I approached him about this project, he was eager to partner from a sense that this study might provide the opportunity and resources to improve the program.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

To ensure rigorous analysis, I needed access to a range of verbal and written texts. The present study is grounded in the following investigative activities:

- Semi-structured interviews with 7% of program participants across three training cohorts
- Unstructured interviews with the two soft-skills facilitators
- Observations of three class sessions across two training cohorts
- Analysis of extant curriculum materials including instructional slides, course lists and schedules, and participant guides
- Analysis of post-program participant evaluation forms
- Analysis of contextualizing documents related to workforce development and soft skills

Most research activities were conducted between February and June of 2020, which means the TechWorks program and the research process were both modified during the study due to the global coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic shutdown. TechWorks moved its operations to an online-only format, holding live trainings via Zoom (a web-based meeting software platform) and deploying a simulator program to deliver its technical training modules. Except for my initial interview with the program director, all other interviews were conducted remotely, via the telephone or Zoom. I was able to observe three classroom sessions across two separate TechWorks training cohorts, one

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in the TechWorks classroom (a rented, newly-renovated room located in the School District of Philadelphia's headquarters) and two via Zoom.

I ended up with a convenience sample of participant interviews: I conducted an interview with every person willing and available to be interviewed. All program participants in both cohorts I observed, as well as participants in the most recently-completed cohort in October 2019 – a total of twenty-nine individuals – were asked to participate in interviews for this study. The program director emailed information about the project to participants and then reinforced the request in live classroom sessions. During all of my classroom observations, I introduced myself, the project, and the JobWorks partnership, and also encouraged participants to engage in the one-on-one interview process. My interviewees were 50% male and 50% female but, although the cohorts I observed were ethnically diverse – 62% Black, 21% white, 14% Asian, and 3% other – the interview respondents were 100% Black. Conducted through Zoom, the one-on-one interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, as were audio recordings of classroom observations. Participant interview questions are included here in Appendix C.

I also conducted a close read of several key texts: the IBTA facilitation materials for the CBP certification trainings, the JobWorks modifications to those off-the-shelf materials, the program's marketing materials, participant surveys, publicly-available data about related credentials, and industry information about workforce development and soft skills. These sources provided crucial information about the context in which TechWorks operates, and about the perceptions and values of facilitators and program designers.

I reviewed texts, transcripts, observation notes, and interview recordings multiple times in order to absorb the overall discursive pathways and listen for emerging themes and individual discourse strands. These texts were coded in a matrix according to topical and analytic themes (Richards & Morse, 2007). I combined the theoretical frameworks of the chaos theory of careers and adult learning theory with insights from the texts themselves to determine the scope and content of the discourse strands. I read texts in conversation with one another, continually doubling back to undermine the primacy of any one source. Quotations from interviews and classroom dialogue were selected for inclusion in this report for their ability to illuminate emergent discourse strands.

My analysis identified five primary discourse strands: workforce development, soft skills, training/learning, applicability, and community. The training/learning strand held three distinct substrands: content, credentialing, and the participant experience. Two substrands were found in the applicability strand: self-identity and career. Each of these were activated to a greater or lesser degree by particular sources; taken together, they provide robust insights into the program as a whole. In fact, it is impossible to consider these as disconnected strands, as their intersections constitute the particular habitus of TechWorks.

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# Contextual Analysis: Discourse Strands

JobWorks operates at the juncture of two primary “discursive constructions” (Osgood, 2009): **workforce development** and **skills training**. The skills training discourse strand further subdivides into two categories, **soft-skills training** and **technical skills training**. This study does not focus on the latter, but I acknowledge this discursive mode here because it featured prominently in the participant experience. If the TDP fails to meet its goals. The evaluation will provide a roadmap for program development and improvement for the primary use of this stakeholder group.

## DISCOURSE STRAND 1: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

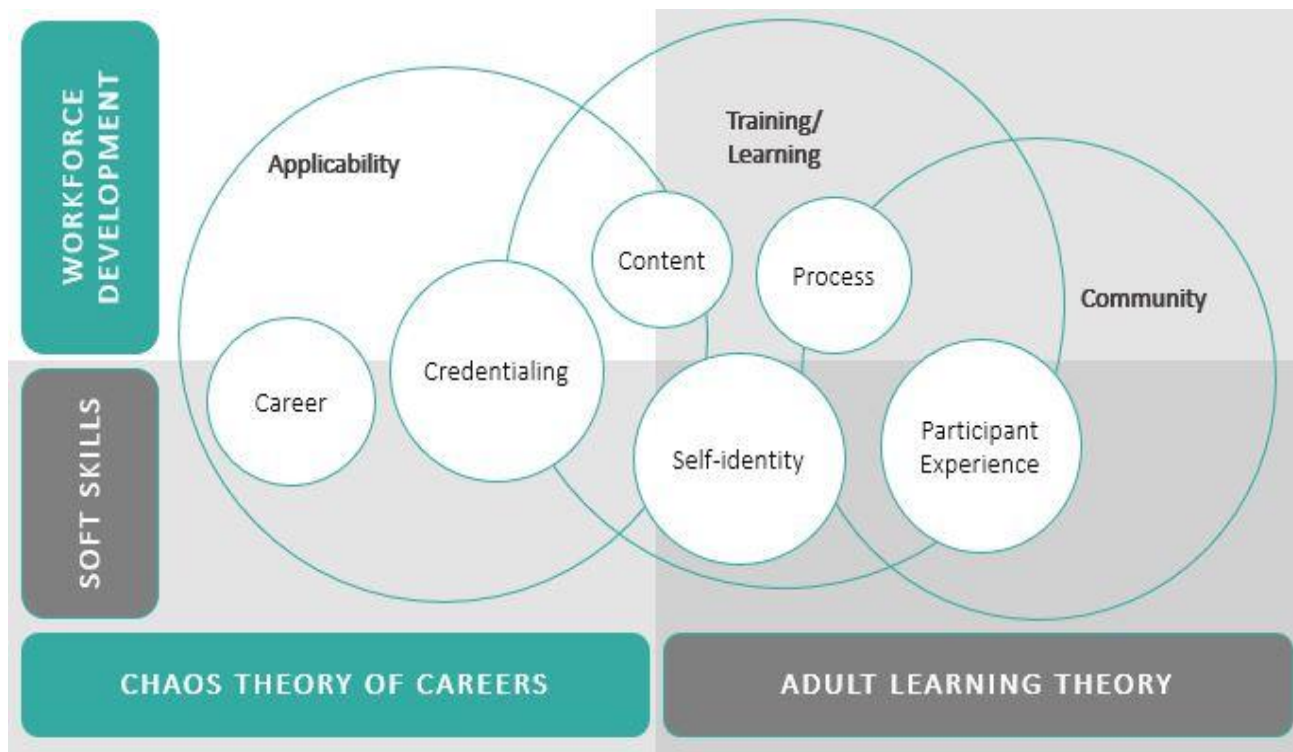
Starting with the New Deal in the 1930s (Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association, 2019), job training and re-training has been a go-to solution for addressing poverty and unemployment. However, Jacobs & Hawley (2009) note that “workforce development” has more recently emerged as a catchall term for programs including secondary vocational education, welfare-to-work and other public assistance programs, and regional economic development initiatives (p. 2537). At its core, “workforce development responds to the broad societal need to address the relationship between human competence and national prosperity” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 66). As an industry, workforce development focuses on reducing unemployment through training programs designed to close the skills gaps that are perceived as impeding jobseekers’ success.

In Philadelphia, this calculus is particularly appealing. Workforce development is a long-established anti-poverty strategy, as more than 400,000 Philadelphians live below the poverty line (pegged at \$24,600 annually for a family of four) and the city’s poverty rate is among the highest in the U.S. at nearly 26% (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019). Before the 2020 pandemic and economic shutdown, approximately 7% of Philadelphians were unemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 6, 2020); as of June 2020, this percentage had risen to 14% – over 437,000 people – for the Philadelphia metropolitan area (Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 29, 2020).

Despite this reality, workforce development training as a strategy remains problematic. Any form of development is an ideological practice (Brookfield & Holst, 2011), and workforce development rests on insidious pillars. Even within a small geographic ambit, Bartelt (2010) can name four strands of “conversation” being held across Philadelphia’s



**Figure 1: Analytical Model and Discourse Strands**



workforce development organizations: employer skills, soft skills/customer service, welfare and dependency, and community development. These disparate discourses reflect deep perceptual divides in the valuation of short-term job placement versus longer-term skills attainment and professional development; the question of whether organizations should primarily focus on training jobseekers, engaging employers, or addressing ancillary issues related to an individual’s ability to maintain employment is not easily resolved.

Across these conversations, Bartelt (2010) makes the case for increased accountability related to performance quality. But even equating quality with individual development “reflects a move away from policy and programmes wherein employment of workers is the goal, towards an orientation that sees the employability of individual workers as the task of career and labour market education” (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006, p. 76; emphasis added). Although the connection between employment and income (or economic stability) makes intuitive sense, poverty and unemployment are the result of highly complex factors beyond the ambit of an individual’s control. Nevertheless, the basic neoliberal argument seems to run thus: people are poor because they don’t have money, and they don’t have money because they don’t have jobs. Why don’t they have jobs? Because they don’t have the skills needed to compete and they don’t have the ability to market themselves to potential employers. They may also lack the resources to secure the necessary resources like childcare, eldercare, or reliable transportation that

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may prevent successful work attendance or on-the-job performance (Holton & Wilson, 2002). Like JobWorks, most workforce development programs typically offer solutions for these problems by focusing “first and foremost on societal issues at the individual versus the organizational level” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 68). They offer technical skills training (aimed at employer-recognized credentials), soft skills training, and wraparound supports to address external barriers to employment.

However, the skills gap discourse, positing a lack of skills as a primary barrier to employment, elides significant concerns with workforce development training as a programmatic panacea. Cappelli (2012) found that the focus on “skills gaps” misdirects from examining faulty hiring practices, the lack of competitive wages, and the need for contextualized, on-the-job training. Jacobson (2016) offers a succinct and compelling critique of workforce development programs: “we cannot train our way out of poverty one worker at a time” (p. 13). A focus on remediating individual workers, rather than addressing the economic inequalities inherent in capitalism, misses the mark. Rather than place the onus on individual jobseekers, Jacobson (2016) argues for structural thinking and strategic policy advocacy aimed at remediating capitalism’s structural inequities. Instead of training for training’s sake, “for adults who currently don’t have work, the demand should be for jobs programs, not training programs. As has been said, employment, not employability” (Jacobson, 2016, p. 17). Programs might better serve participants by offering targeted and contextualized training designed to close the distance to attainable jobs.

For Conway (2018), training is a limited strategy for achieving narrow job placement goals. Systemic advances require that workforce development leverage a wider tactical portfolio including tax incentives, engaged leadership, and technical assistance (Conway, 2018). Citing a 2014 federal study, Nightingale and Eyster (2018) note that “the evidence shows that the most effective type of job training is connected directly to work, rather than ‘stand-alone’ training not aligned with jobs in demand” (p. 104). The more one knows about the shape of a discursive environment, the more one is able to engage with power. A program like TechWorks reflects the spirit if not the letter of this idea. It does not start with a formalized employer partnership that guarantees jobs for successful participants, but it does focus on a defined set of practices relevant for IT professionals. And it is far more contextualized than an educational program might be.

Efforts to change economic systems should be unflagging, but systems change can take time (even a cataclysm like the 2020 pandemic, ongoing at the time of this writing, is unlikely to resolve into a more equitable economic system). In the meantime, individuals cannot wait for the system to be righted but instead need opportunities to flourish. The resources poured into workforce development are designed to improve economic self-sufficiency for participants, but to stop there abandons the rich growth opportunities afforded by the strategies of the chaos theory of careers and adult learning theory.

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Workforce development programs like JobWorks are well-positioned to work at the intersection of human development and systems change, of personal growth and professional achievement. And as institutions of higher education endure increased scrutiny over tuition costs and employment outcomes of their own graduates, workforce development programs may emerge as an increasingly viable career pathway for a larger percentage of the American labor force. There is growing interest in workforce development among educational institutions (Schwartz, 2018), although it is not clear whether this interest is yet reciprocated. Most workforce development programs can be measured in months or weeks instead of years, so the distance between training and employment is shorter and more straightforward than college for jobseekers. Rather than asking individuals to spend at least two years preparing for a particular career – as in the college model – workforce development programs can design and implement nimble programs that reduce the distance between career-focused training and job attainment. That is, workforce development has the potential to grow into the educational continuum instead of being positioned as a lesser alternative to a college degree, but this move has not yet emerged.

For this to happen, however, workforce development as an industry must consider investing in third-party credentialing and accreditation. It is all too easy for a community development or social service agency to bolt on a few soft-skills trainings to existing programs and call it workforce development. Without credentialing, it is nearly impossible to understand the difference between programs that offer high-quality resources and those that simply check a box for training hours. JobWorks is highly interested in the meaning and power of credentialing, and I will return to this theme in analyzing credentialing as a distinct discourse strand.

## **DISCOURSE STRAND 2: SOFT SKILLS**

Like other workforce development programs, JobWorks offers training focused on soft skills (also called transferable, power, behavioral, twenty-first century, career, or employability skills). Soft skills generally comprise topics like communication, self-management, time management, teamwork, and job search tools (e.g., resumes and cover letters). Grugulis, Warhurst, and Keep (2004) note that understanding soft skills as skills is a relatively recent development; these skills may have been understood as attitudes, personal characteristics, or character traits even thirty years ago. Lafer (2004) charts a rather insidious evolution: “over the past twenty years, the skills-mismatch thesis has shifted from a focus on technical skills, to an emphasis on basic English and maths, to résumé writing and interviewing, and finally to the attitudinal ‘skills’ of punctuality, loyalty and discipline” (p. 111). No training will yield the same benefits to employees as would higher wages, unionization, and better working conditions (Lafer, 2004). This is a vital point, but

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I think there is nevertheless an opportunity (albeit slim) in the current skills training milieu for providers to leverage public-sector resources for training in order to build career mobility. If concepts as vague as “character traits” or “attitude” ultimately signify demographic markers like gender, race, or socioeconomic status, that these traits are now framed as teachable, learnable skills at least gestures toward increased access to economic opportunity. In other words, if employers are asking for workers with, say, a strong work ethic, perhaps a certificate from a program like JobWorks can signify the presence of that skill – or at least make potential employers take a chance on hiring.

These trainings may be vaguely helpful at best. But soft-skills curricula within workforce development face several fundamental challenges: subjective positioning (Bartelt, 2010; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006), a shared understanding of definitions (Evetts, 2003), hegemonic values (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006), a lack of quality control or oversight, and the assumption that trainings are in fact the best mechanism for cultivating soft skills (Elnaga & Imran, 2013). Most crucially, they also miss the larger context: training will not fast-track individuals out of poverty and/or into careers (Jacobson, 2016).

Byrd and Stewart (2000) note that employers often desire employees (or candidates) with “soft skills” but are unable to define the skills they’d like them to have. This is true for TechWorks; it includes soft-skills trainings because “every employer partner has emphasized the importance of communication and customer service to tech support success” (J. Casella, personal communication, July 16, 2020). These employer partners supplied no further detail about what is meant by “communication” or “customer service” skills. Thus, because employers fail to define their terms, training intermediaries have the latitude to propose trainings on any number of topics. A typical survey of 606 employers by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) listed these skills broadly enough to comprise a full range of human traits. The eight competencies identified in this survey as key to twenty-first century employability are critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency. Elastic enough to comprise nearly any type of soft-skills training, such a list allows for any willing organization to devise a workforce development training program without necessarily promoting these skills with any relevant contextualization. As Butterwick and Benjamin (2006) observe, “this position raises questions about both the significance of the skills being outlined and also suggests that a rather superficial approach is being taken in relation to life skills and employability skills” (p. 82).

Take *professionalism* as a frequently-promoted soft skill. Although a common term, attempts at definition are compartmentalized according to specific professions which were, historically, medicine and law (Evetts, 2003). Even in these fields, professionalism remains abstract; the term lacks a clear sense of the behaviors required to achieve a state of professionalism (Lesser et al., 2010), or it is understood as a variable emphasis on

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behaviors over time (Birden et al., 2014). Professionalism is frequently positioned as a means of attaining autonomous decision-making and problem-solving (Evetts, 2003; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006), but Evetts (2003) argues that professionalism is now more often understood as a normative value system associated with the condition of being an employee rather than as a reflection of specific professional practices. Further “studies have pointed to how the skills, values and attitudes presented as neutral and universal, more accurately reflect particular interests and specific worldviews that are capitalist, Western and middle class” (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006, p. 79). One might also add that these worldviews are likely white or Eurocentric. The discourse around soft skills is hegemonic, although acknowledging these latent expectations for what they are is not a frequent topic for discussion in workforce development training spaces. Rather, “the issue of the [subjective] and potentially divisive aspects of the soft skills discussion remains largely subterranean” (Bartelt, 2010, p. 128). In theory, acknowledging these factors should be easier in the context of the 2020 racial justice movement, when commitments to the long process of dismantling white supremacy have become part of America’s national conversation. In practice, however, this work requires vigilant attention to the constructionist nature of discourse in training spaces. How are concepts like professionalism being presented or parsed for exclusionary renderings? How is power organized or reframed in the self-constituting work of engaging in soft skills development?

Applying the expectation of professionalism to workforce development program participants has another practical problem. Simply encouraging professionalism, vaguely and without an organizational framing, elides the contextual specificity of the various careers desired by program participants. “Fostering professionalism” can all too easily become a means of imposing normative behaviors on participants who may be unfamiliar with the norms of professions they have yet to enter. This misfire compounds when training facilitators lack firsthand experience in the industries their participants are pursuing (Ginsberg, Kingsley & Eichel, 2012). Relationships between training staff and potential employers are too often anemic, providing little nuance or guidance for either the curriculum as a whole or for individual candidates seeking employment. The tenuous connection between employers and workforce development providers (Ginsberg, Kingsley & Eichel, 2012) appears at TechWorks, where guest speakers represent companies like Robert Half, a temporary employment agency that supplies IT professionals for companies across different industries.

Cappelli (2012) found that, in the U.S., 50% of professional development training is now provided by the for-profit training industry and is largely paid for by individuals instead of companies. But training through workforce development providers is usually free for both jobseekers and employers. Workforce development programs reduce the financial burden of work-related credentials for jobseekers, a benefit especially important when “this cost is increasingly shifted onto the shoulders of workers themselves” (Prince, 2018).

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While college credits may be financially unattainable for many workforce development participants, having access to job-specific training can translate into viable career opportunities. Moore et al. (2003) add, “evidence is mounting that American employers, from an economy-wide perspective, do in fact underinvest in worker training [...] Underinvestment seems to be particularly acute in the training of non-college-educated workers, who are the great majority of the workforce” (pp. 23-24). As educational resources become less attainable for the average jobseeker, workforce development programs, in providing credentialed training, may reduce inequities in the opportunity ecosystem.

Repositioning training programs in the direction of educational systems may help check a trend that has grown over the last two decades. As Thurow (1999, as cited in Moore et al., 2003) describes,

The basic problem in the United States is that every employer wants a free ride in the training system. “You train, I’ll hire” is the American way. Whenever unemployment is low, employers who themselves do no training, bitterly complain about the shortage of trained workers. They see nothing strange about their complaints. As for employees, without career ladders they cannot intelligently acquire the right skills on their own. Since they will be switching employers frequently, they do not know which skills they will need or how long those skills will be relevant to their earning opportunities. As a result—rationally—they don’t invest in skills. (p. 24)

There is a false equivalency here between career ladders and employment security; as individuals become accustomed to career unpredictability, it is more likely that they engage in discourse at the level of professions rather than employers. But this description brings forward a latent dynamic in training programs, especially soft-skills training programs: namely, that employers would like to benefit from this kind of human capital development without fronting the investment needed to ensure such a talent pool.

But centering training as part of a workforce development program again misses a crucial discursive gesture from employers. When framing high turnover as a lack of qualified workers, employers can minimize their own deficient managerial and corporate structures (e.g., low wages, dangerous conditions, or the risk of job outsourcing) that may disincentivize workers from choosing to work for them. TechWorks may have just as strong an impact on career outcomes if it focused on cultivating employers’ willingness to improve working conditions and offer higher wages (Fadulu, 2018). Emphasizing training suggests a certain commodification of skills, but it also indicates that training intermediaries are still trying to solve unemployment by addressing only one aspect of the divergent discourses between employers and jobseekers.



Here emerges a point of divergence with our theoretical tools. Adult learning theory may posit that connecting training to specific job opportunities would make the classroom more relevant – tapping into participant motivations by reinforcing the immediate applicability of concepts – but TechWorks’s broader framing, eschewing contextualization in favor of a wider understanding of professionalism in IT, tacitly acknowledges the process of self-constitution as a career professional. Skills trainings are implicated in this process; Urciuoli (2008) describes skills discourses in reference to Foucault’s “technologies of self [...] as ways of being and acting that [move] tasks forward” (p. 212). The chaos theory of careers connects self-identity with the ability to signal relevant skills across a career. Actively engaging with what it means to be “an IT professional” invites participants into the discursive repertoire of the profession. From this standpoint, space between a training provider and a specific employer should be welcome.

### ***Defining Soft Skills in Context***

When asked to define soft skills, TechWorks participants are already drawing on broadly decentered references. Rather than providing detailed definitions relating soft skills to IT careers, participants compressed soft skills into the frame of interpersonal communications:

You got to be able to communicate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report, quotations from interview respondents have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

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Soft skills to me is like – I always say verbal communication. I know we took that business communication course. It was like when you get in front of an audience, sometimes your hand gestures, your posture, your movements, certain words that you will use in order to gain the audience’s perspective. So that would be my definition of, you know, a soft skill [...] I really liked that business communications course. You know, I went to college and had taken it before, so it was a nice refresher.

These statements reflect a discursive repertoire extending beyond the bounds of TechWorks. Participants logically use a communications lens because TechWorks grouped most of its soft-skills sessions into a series with the header “Business Communication.” However, interviewees were quick to frame the concept as interpersonal communications, transcending more narrowly-defined business contexts. This nuance allows for both the transfer and receipt of information. Although the second response does explicitly reflect the TechWorks curriculum – Module 9 of the IBTA Certified Business Professional course somewhat tangentially focuses on formal presentation skills – respondents are coding the term “soft skills” against their own experiences, prior education, and training. By mixing discursive contexts from inside and outside of TechWorks, participants are incorporating useful aspects of several discourses. It seems quite possible that these external repertoires are more important to participants’ self-construction than TechWorks, and introducing these markers into interviews with me is a way to stake out a form of expertise. Indeed, respondents easily drew on other repertoires. One interviewee shared that

My grandfather died just before I graduated [from high school]. And I had to stay with my uncle. And guess what he told me – and this is one of the things a lot of young people don’t get – I used to, I used to eat really fast. You could put down a plate of food, by the time you got back from the oven, I was done. So, so, so we’re staying during the time before I graduated, I graduated, we stayed with him afterwards, right, and he said to me, he said, you kids don’t know how to communicate. So sometimes when you’re eating you got to come up for some air. It’s a good thing to come up for air when you’re around people, and you’re eating, eating together and you’re conversatin’. But if you’re down like this all the time, you will never come up for air. He said, when you come up for air, you can say, ‘Hi, how you doing,’ you could talk, conversation, and then you go get some more food. But long as you keep on being down on in there, you never gonna be able to communicate with nobody. [...] In your terms, he was trying to say, y’all have no soft skills. No matter how many, no matter how much I know, right, now I can be the mad scientist, I can be a genius, but if I cannot speak to the person I’m helping, it’s not on the board.

Adding this descriptive definition to the soft-skills discourse adds a process-driven resonance. Soft skills are posited both as teachable/learnable and as skills that emerge



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over time (e.g., the adult figure is favorably compared to “you kids” who “don’t know how to communicate”). The interviewee implies that someone must deliberately teach these skills – there is no acknowledgement that communication skills would have been garnered without a facilitator – but skills development is also embedded in family relationships extending back to childhood. Soft skills mix both language and action, the ability to prioritize social dynamics over one’s immediate physical needs or desires, and character traits. By including this story in the interview, the respondent shows as well as tells that he is able to draw on narrative to enliven his point. He contrasts these communication tools with Einsteinian tropes, underscoring the distance between conveying information and connecting with dialogue partners. Those partners are, in fact crucial to the work of staking out identities through discourse. Soft skills can (perhaps should) be taught and learned in the course of daily activities, in quotidian moments with trusted community members who have long-term investments in one’s future success. Where learning in context enables the application of new techniques, the relationships within those interactions support the motivation to try.

Similarly, participants viewed the soft-skills trainings as review for themselves: while framed as part of successful IT careers, the concepts presented were first recognized by participants against the backdrop of prior experience. Although TechWorks perhaps did not consciously recognize this dynamic in the context of the program, such a review tactic affirms adult learning theory: it opens space for participants to bring forward their prior learning and their investment in self-identity. Indeed, “one of the most frequently expressed components of radical teaching is a negotiated curriculum grounded in students’ experiences” (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 114). Participants have the opportunity to draw on life experiences and prior learning opportunities in interacting and engaging with the TechWorks content, asserting power in shaping the discourse to their own needs.

Despite this rearview grounding, participants did note that the soft skills trainings prompted further growth and development:

Every day is a learning, it’s a learning thing for us all to go, because now you got to talk and these – this generation is different from ten years ago. So what I meant to say ten years ago may not penetrate. But if you, if you, know how to adjust to a situation, then your soft skills are excellent.

Learning in context is dynamic, not static. Being able to communicate with others, described here as an ability to “penetrate,” requires an ongoing commitment to renewing one’s skills. This process also implies the need for a community: soft skill attainment is signaled by the ability of “us all” to adjust to various situations. This statement aligns with the chaos theory of careers: rather than trying to achieve a fixed skillset, a clear goal is to “know how to adjust to a situation.” Such context literacy, in which one continues to

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engage in the process of learning within specific settings, becomes a core skill in navigating unpredictable professional environments. The more one can productively engage with professional discourses, the more one is likely to activate the sources of power that are present.

Despite the lack of fixed indexicality (Urciuoli, 2008), soft skills remain a power tool for workforce development programs seeking both philanthropic funding and employer partners. Providers tout the benefits of soft skills in terms of contributing to a participant's long-term employability (among many examples, see Demaria, Fee & Wardrip, 2020, or Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Technical skills are downplayed as holding less value than communication skills, teamwork, time management, or other interpersonal capacities (e.g., "soft skills are really the hard part"). The human development aspects of training programs are positioned as the real value-add, creating employees who will arrive with self-mastery and present few challenges for their new managers. Philanthropic funders and social investors also buy in to the idea that these training sessions will benefit participants over the long term (perhaps reducing their need to access similar training subsidies in the future). This fissure between training and personal development opens space for learning, as I will discuss in the next section.

### **DISCOURSE STRAND 3: TRAINING/LEARNING**

That workforce development programs are categorized as "training" rather than "education" signals where in the hierarchy of value they generally land. Training, focused more on the performance of "practical skills" rather than a broader cultivation of knowledge, capabilities, or intellectual curiosity, "is viewed as the realm of operational categories whereas development and education [are] the preserve of managers and professional grades" (Garavan, 1997, p. 47). Training seems designed to make almost surgical interventions, with curriculum laser-focused on the skills identified as being required in a particular role. Dewey (1916) reminds us that skills training that "does not lead to new perceptions of bearings and connections [may result in] gross ineptitude" (p. 91). That is, skills development must happen in relation to the context in which those skills are implemented or risk being perceived as incompetence. Beyond skills acquisition – however defined – learning equips individuals to use their experience in negotiating the present environment.

Garavan's (1997) taxonomy outlines the differences between development and learning as well as training and education; see the chart on page 36 for details. Learning has been positioned as a higher-order, human-centered operation combining self-actualization with experience and reflection. As Garavan (1997) notes,

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Training was essentially designed to equip the apprentice with skills which would be used throughout his/her career [...] It was essentially taken that there was no more to learn other than some honing of the skill accruing from experience. It was assumed that the demands of the job would not alter significantly during the working life to warrant other forms of training. (p. 43)

Through this lens, training looks like a tool of a different time, when workers were not expected to change jobs – let alone careers – with any frequency. What was learned during one’s initial training period should be enough to sustain productivity across decades spent at a manufacturing line or customer service desk. In contrast, the educational system was designed to serve the needs of individuals aiming toward professions like medicine and law that are now characterized by interpersonal abilities, creativity, and clear standards of practice (Garavan, 1997).

Within Philadelphia’s workforce development milieu, training and education are often undifferentiated. The City of Philadelphia (2018) released a strategy for citywide workforce development efforts called *Fueling Philadelphia’s Talent Engine* (FPTE). This strategy positions workforce development training as an education delivery mechanism rather than a distinct program model. FPTE collapses the two, making training an expanded educational arm; the City’s Office of Adult Education is offered as a curriculum consultant to integrate education remediation into workforce development programs (p. 33). Here opens an opportunity to push outward the discourse around workforce development. Rather than viewing workforce development programs as strictly vocational or technically focused, viewing them as educational environments can reframe them as spaces where learning occurs. And although FPTE does not explicitly define learning, positioning workforce development programs as education-adjacent allows a perceptual shift about the potential value of workforce development programs to human development.

A distinction between training and education appeared in the discourse of TechWorks just as the distance between training and learning narrowed. As one of the soft-skills facilitators observed, “we are so trained [in] our educational system out of a way of thinking about ourselves” (emphasis added). Implied here is a sense that formal education distances learners from the work of self-construction or self-understanding, with the tacit criticism that what is conveyed in the classroom is less important, relevant, or useful than that which is conveyed in the (potentially) more personal context of a training program. Overtly discussing soft skills invites discourse participants to both think critically about how skills are framed and to draw connections between the conceptualizations and application to their own career contexts. And it is just this shift that may enable learning for participants.

# TAXONOMY OF INSTRUCTIONAL MODELS FOR HUMAN GROWTH

*Adapted from Garavan (1997)*

CATEGORY	CHARACTERISTICS
<b>Training</b>	<p>Practical education; efforts to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes to advance performance in select activities; aims to impart skills that are immediately useful in particular situations; has narrow goals and more focused outcomes than education; training activities can occur on and off the job, be formal or informal (e.g., through work experience), or be designed for specific groups of people (e.g., younger workers, returning citizens)</p>
<b>Development</b>	<p>Process of developing that involves a gradual unfolding or growth; embraces both outer organizational realities and inner reality of emerging self; involves being able to take advantage of opportunities in both inner and outer spheres; mostly informal; can take place at any point in an individual's life cycle; facilitates the expansion of individual potential with a view toward cultivating future leadership; focuses on learners more than learning; attends to life planning and intellectual curiosity for its own sake</p>
<b>Education</b>	<p>Usually occurs during one's formative years and ceases when social maturity is reached; content is given by particular generations to their successors in order to exercise influence on those who are considered not yet ready for social life; the reconstruction of experience which adds to its meaning and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience; an institutionalized and chronologically graded, hierarchically structured system; delivered with the expectation that at a given life stage individuals have received sufficient knowledge and skill to last across the life span; humanistic processes leading to the state of being "educated"; involves understanding</p>
<b>Learning</b>	<p>Process by which behavior changes as a result of experience; relatively permanent change in behavior (or potential behaviors) resulting from experience; form of self-actualization; could include affective domains; affirms learner's natural curiosity, motivation for self-improvement, experience, problem-solving preferences, and interest/capacity in taking charge of the learning process and preferred learning styles</p>

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## Defining Learning

My analysis understands learning through two traditions: rationalism, or “the process that takes place when the mind applies an existing structure to new experience in order to understand it” (Case, 1996, p. 80), and sociohistoricism, or “the process of being initiated into the life of a group, so that one can assume a role in its daily praxis” (Case, 1996, p. 80). The rationalist frame confers agency by assuming that individuals can leverage prior knowledge to understand emerging experiences, where the sociohistorical frame reminds us that individual learning must be praxis-driven and contextually recognizable. I define learning as the process by which individuals leverage existing knowledge and prior experiences to engage in practices recognized and validated by a specific community; the goal of this process is that individuals are initiated into the ongoing life of that group.

This understanding also appears in the instructional practices at TechWorks. For example, in one session I observed, the facilitator, Michael,<sup>3</sup> validated participant learning by accepting as evidence active application of the training material:

Michael: How’s it going for you so far, everyone?

Martin: Great.

Michael: Doing okay?

Taylor: Good.

Michael: We’re learning?

Taylor: I’ve been making changes the whole time – to my [LinkedIn profile]

Michael: [laughs] Good, good. That’s what I like to hear.

The application of knowledge becomes evidence of knowledge learned. As a representative of the community of practice, Michael’s validation actuates learning for the participants. At the same time, participants are implicated in making choices that move them toward or away from legitimate participation in their selected profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The embeddedness of individual learners within communities is core, and creates pathways into more fluent participation. Active engagement is key: “Context is not so much something into which someone is put, but an order of behavior of which one is a part” (McDermott, 1993, p. 290). Organizational context is not inert ground, unresponsive to individual action; it is brought into being by behavioral engagement. The more TechWorks participants engage with the program, the more the program becomes a

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

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center of discursive practice. The more TechWorks mirrors the IT profession, the more participants will be prepared for careers in their chosen industry. And Greeno & Gresalfi (2008) further posit that as an individual learns, so does the community:

Learning by an individual in a community is conceptualized as a trajectory of that person's participation in the community – a path with a past and present, shaping possibilities for future participation. Learning by a group or community is also conceptualized as a trajectory – a path that corresponds to change in the community's practices. (p. 170)

Individuals may take cues about acceptable behaviors from peers as they integrate into the life of an organization, but those organizations as communities also evolve as individuals learn and grow. At TechWorks, just as program participants will learn from one another and modify their own actions, facilitators will take their experiences with a particular training cohort and make changes for future training sessions. Learning facilitates a symbiosis between individuals and collectives with the potential to advance long-term goals for both.

Rymes (2009) notes that “from a discourse perspective, learning is an interactive process through which learners gain the use of tools necessary to participate in their multiple social worlds” (p. 151). But Gee (2006) reminds us that “we are all members of multiple Discourses and so the analytic task is often finding which of these, and with what blends, are operative in the communication” (p. 93). How do we know when various lenses are salient in a particular situation, given that we each leverage a complex and specific blend of histories, opinions, relationships, and personalities? It is incumbent on a training program to signal to participants which overlays are relevant in a given environment – or at least provide them with the tools for context literacy, to navigate new situations and ascertain answers for themselves. Tapping into the theoretical discourse of the chaos theory of careers would reinforce workforce development's ability to acknowledge the unforeseen and incorporate a sense of strategic flexibility while encouraging career responsiveness.

Considering the experiences of individuals against the backdrop of an institution (whether an organization or profession) highlights the complexity of legitimate peripherality (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which “can itself be a source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). In one light, workforce development programs empower jobseekers to pursue their own learning by positioning the process as self-directed and self-motivated. Career development is incumbent upon individual participants; programs provide tools and information that individuals can use to pursue their goals. If “learning is a process of transformation of participation itself”, if ‘how people develop is a function of their transforming roles and understanding in the activities in which they participate’,

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the question to be asked of [...] spatializing activities is how, and in what activity systems, they situate [...] participants” (Nespor, 2000, p. 36). Learning becomes an avenue for increased engagement with the particularities of an organization, team, or role, and individual development is reflected in one’s ability to navigate unspoken norms and complex discourses. In another light, however, these programs undercut individual capacity by failing to create and convey organization-specific standards so that participants can gauge their mastery of institutional practices. These programs allow individuals to bring their histories, lived experience, and knowledge to the learning space while simultaneously providing few affordances for jobseekers to explicitly put forward their whole selves.

Recognizing one’s social situatedness opens the potential “to become lived arguments for the possible” (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016, p. 595). Workforce development programs can uniquely engage in this type of strategically imaginative human development. By designing programs that accurately reflect the norms and culture of target professions, they create incubating spaces that allow participants to try out new versions of themselves fitted to their selected industries. And rather than ask program graduates to sink or swim in new professional environments, workforce development programs create spaces that can mirror the norms of these fields. This type of program would allow participants to build relevant performative recognizability before they get job offers. This tactic reduces risk for program participants: they have the chance to learn from mistakes before their reputations (and compensation packages) are potentially at risk. Workforce practitioners can thus become effective intermediaries to translate candidates and employers to and for one another.

## DISCOURSE STRAND

### 3.1: CONTENT

JobWorks selected as the foundation for its soft-skills trainings the IBTA’s Certified Business Professionals (CBP) series. Philadelphia’s site director explained that, although he was unimpressed by the caliber of the material, the curriculum offered an “industry-recognized credential” (J. Casella, personal communication, October 2019). TechWorks allocates three training days to this material, including time for participants to take a proctored, online, multiple-choice certification test. Although facilitators for JobWorks put their own spin on the curriculum – which includes updated PowerPoint slides, activities, and discussion questions – they retain the core curriculum because of the possibility for participants to gain the CBP credential. Although “business communication” has been only loosely defined (Bell & Muir, 2014), the CBP material features ten modules:

1. Introduction to Business Communication
2. Structuring Business Communication
3. Developing a Business Writing Style

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4. Types of Business Writing
  5. Writing for Special Circumstances (covering tactful writing, persuasive writing, and writing a “bad news letter”)
  6. Developing Oral Communication Skills
  7. Doing Business on the Telephone
  8. Non-Verbal Communication
  9. Developing Effective Presentation Skills
  10. Conflict and Disagreement in Business Communication

The content, seemingly designed for an abstracted white-collar professional environment, is a grab bag of work-related tools, from tips for compelling PowerPoint presentations and conflict resolution strategies to telephone fundamentals and instructions for forwarding emails. JobWorks typically delivers all ten modules across two eight-hour training days, with an additional full-day session dedicated to material review and participant testing. IBTA trainings can be delivered by a facilitator either remotely using Zoom or in a classroom.

JobWorks’s ambivalence about the curriculum filters through to the training space. During my first observation, the facilitator, Eleanor, spent time talking about the curriculum’s limitations with the participants. She noted that the material seemed out of order, had not been updated in at least five years, and lacked information that she thought was important for participants:

We’re in 2013 when this was written.

In terms of the year [...] keeping in mind that these are the best practices in terms of where things were in 2013. So [it] sounds like now what you’re experiencing since 2013, there’s a lot more to it.

And then it just got into effective presentation skills. This is where the flow of the curriculum in this book is a little bit disjointed.

On the one hand, TechWorks staff members were very invested in portraying TechWorks as top-notch, wanting to ensure that participants had no doubts about the quality of the content they were receiving. At the same time, staff readily undermined the student handbook, offering frequent criticisms of the materials. JobWorks had indeed improved IBTA’s core materials by expanding the classroom facilitation materials, but the instructional focus remained on the unmodified student handbook and stock PowerPoint slides.

As an illustrative example, JobWorks significantly expanded and modified the tenth module of the CBP curriculum, “Conflict and Disagreement in Business Communication.”



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In fact, the module on conflict received the most modification of any of the original content modules (JobWorks, n.d.). This unit has seven primary objectives:

1. Describe the effect of conflict on communication
2. Describe methods for dealing with conflict
3. Identify both the sources of conflict and potential resolution styles
4. Select an appropriate resolution style for a given scenario
5. Recognize the role of values in resolving conflict
6. Explain the importance of active listening
7. Recognize cross-cultural challenges to communication

The curriculum equates conflict with challenges inherent in interpersonal communications, including poor listening, cross-cultural differences, and communication failures. Suggested tactics for resolving conflict include negotiation, mediation, and compromise, with special attention given to the need for continual appreciation of the norms of various cultures. The language used throughout the IBTA curriculum relies on the repertoire of “business discourse,” (Malyuga, 2012), or the “lexical and phraseological structures” (Malyuga, 2012, p. 7) signaling the parameters of a professional discourse, to foreground emotional neutrality and results-driven functionalism (e.g., “Conflict is common in business relationships. You should practice effective conflict resolutions strategies to promote win-win solutions” [IBTA, n.d., Slide 107]). While this tone may be helpful in orienting participants toward a particular framing of conflict in professional environments – it normalizes the presence of conflict while simultaneously mandating that it be resolved – it does not hold space for participants to negotiate the concepts on their own terms, or even grapple with how this approach might translate into particular situations. This material moves from instructing an indefinite “you,” a purportedly professional-neutral positionality, to discussing the role of a manager in responding to and resolving conflict. Tips for active listening are followed by steps for mediation, implying that most conflict requires an external party to join the resolution process. It concludes by outlining the responsibilities of “the cross-cultural communicator” (IBTA, 2013, p. 149). Language is forwarded here as a neutral vehicle for conveying meaning rather than a technology actively constituting meaning for both speakers and listeners.

TechWorks retains all of IBTA’s original content in its facilitation plan, but expands the material with textured practical suggestions. For example, where the original curriculum nearly equates difference with conflict, TechWorks diagrams the interplay of various differences against a backdrop of “high stress and misunderstandings.” In this small shift opens a world of discursive possibilities. By naming the possibility of a misunderstanding, a communicative gap, the revision creates a way to understand conflict as a no-fault byproduct of a conversational misfire. It is not the existence of difference that causes conflict, but rather the inability of dialogue partners to effectively contextualize what they



are transmitting and receiving from others. Framing the shift as such may equip participants to engage workplace conflict in more resonant, productive ways.

Where the CBP curriculum names differing values as a primary reason for conflict, TechWorks provided specific examples of how values may appear in conversational modes. The exercise asked participants to identify their personal boundaries related to jokes, sarcasm, or oversharing: are these conversational modes part of standard professional discourse? How do you know? And how can you know what the rules of engagement are?

The translation from abstracted business discourse to an activated engagement of ideas was repeated throughout the facilitated sessions. I noticed in my first classroom observation, a review session preparing students for the CBP business communication certification test, that participants seemed interested in finding ways to apply the concepts to other aspects of their lives despite the test-focused, workbook-heavy

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conversation. TechWorks readily engaged with this interest. For example, the CBP's flat advice for managing conflict – "Acknowledge how you feel about what is being said, but do not respond emotionally" (IBTA, n.d., Slide 103) – contrasts with the more narrative approach taken by the TechWorks facilitator:

Eleanor: So she – started doing this, on her calendar when it was an appropriate time for her to feel it, and she said that she learned that it takes her exactly eight minutes and 25 seconds – it's very specific, eight minutes and 25 seconds – for her to feel the emotions she needs to feel until she can get on with her day and it's worked its way through. So that was her timing. And so now, she knows if she feels like a thing, she schedules eight minutes and 25 seconds and then she feels her feeling and gets on with her day. And it's about giving yourself permission to be – human, while not allowing it to impact your professional engagements or your personal life. So this can – anyway – you guys, you may want to try it out and test it. I've tried this a couple times – it, it works.

Fred: I think this is – a really good strategy, especially – like everybody should –

Eleanor: Mmhmm

Fred: ...be taught this, I mean you can be doing so much and

Eleanor: Ah. I think everyone – I agree with you. Yeah.

Fred: [inaudible]

Eleanor: Yeah. No one talks about this because it's not – this is not the typical thing in Business Communication, or like "leave your stress at home" or like – no.

Fred: like all of, uh, the shootings we hear, about people hurting other people

Eleanor: Yeah.

Fred: ...becoming angry for

Eleanor: Yeah.

Fred: I mean, this is – this is great, 'cause it will give you time to go back and avoid

Eleanor: some of

Fred: some of

Eleanor: some of what I'll share with you, uh, some of what I'll share with you is pulled from, um, like FBI negotiating, FBI negotiation strategies and techniques. I've looked at a lot of things – like there are people in very, very high volatile situations who have to stay calm. If they can do it, how can we do it when we're just, when we're dealing with a stressful situation or conflict

Fred: Yeah

Eleanor: or you know, whatever it might be, road rage

Fred: Mmhmm

Eleanor: you know, all of this kind of stuff that is causing challenges in our day to day because we just have a lot of anxiety in pieces. There are people that have – again these are just strategies to try if you, if you want to. You're gonna personalize these for yourself.

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Despite the relational positioning between facilitator and participant, Fred struggles to find dialogic space to fully join the conversation. Eleanor's was by far the dominant voice throughout my classroom observations, even though in our introductory conversation she had explicitly stated her commitment to a participatory style of classroom engagement. Pointing to well-established pedagogical discourse foregrounding dialogue (Freire, 1970/2000), Eleanor noted by way of example that she intentionally sits with participants rather than standing at a lectern. She expressly intended to equalize power and elevate the expertise of participants. During the classroom-based session I observed, she had indeed seated herself at the table. This physical positioning, however, did not override the pedagogical discourse of lecturer-class, expert-novice, or professional-jobseeker. The concept of expertise may have been nominally decentered, but the power of expertise still, too easily, reigned. In this case, the discourse of classroom-based education, which generally forms teachers and students, seems to have undercut the facilitator's stated intentions.

A tension in these impulses is evident here, as the content of this exchange supports a participative application of the concept to ancillary discourses. Fred seems to be introducing the discursive repertoires of de-escalation and antiviolence techniques into a business-professional space. While Eleanor amplifies his point by referencing road rage and FBI negotiation tactics, her interruptive method serves to underscore the primary repertoire of instructor-learner. The facilitator remains centered as the gatekeeper to validation and full membership in this community of practice. Fred is unable to complete a sentence without Eleanor interjecting; although he persists in trying to finish his thought, I couldn't help but wonder about the connections he would have made if he had been permitted to speak without interruption.

In contrast with her facilitation style, Eleanor reiterated a desire to introduce participants to the theoretical frameworks supporting the curriculum modifications. For example, she recommended relevant TED Talks, a one point sharing the following in a PowerPoint slide:

- Lera Boroditsky: How language shapes the way we think (cultural awareness, bias, learning, decisions, blame, etc.)
- Brene Brown: The power of vulnerability; the anatomy of trust ([www.BreneBrown.com](http://www.BreneBrown.com))
- Amy Cuddy: Your body language shapes who you are
- Carol Dweck: The power of believing that you can improve
- Tasha Eurich: Increase your self-awareness with one simple fix
- Isaac Lidsky: What reality are you creating for yourself? (JobWorks, n.d., Slide 165)

Compressed into this list are topics ranging from linguistics to self-awareness to perceptual biases to the limits of self-perception. TED Talks are meant to provide

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accessible introductions to complex ideas (an “intellectual adrenaline rush,” in the words of one Forbes reviewer [Fidelman, 2012]), and the format has proven popular with professionals in many disciplines. By encouraging TechWorks participants to engage with this accessible professional resource, Eleanor has doubly reinforced the chaos theory of careers and adult learning theory. First, she has shifted the discursive repertoire to more closely align with professional development resources outside of workforce development. If TED Talks are a well-established part of mainstream business discourse, it is important that workforce development participants find a way to join those conversations. In fact, positioning the cohort as a group of professionals, as individuals who can pursue their interests and take charge of their own learning, is the second power move accomplished by sharing this list of recommendations. In the assumption that participants are emerging professionals, we see that TechWorks positions participants as individuals with the capacity to engage in professional development in wide-ranging business settings.

## DISCOURSE STRAND

### 3.2: CREDENTIALING

For JobWorks, the importance of credentialing cannot be overstated. Not only is the program’s funding contingent on credential attainment, credentials enhance the program’s marketability. By offering participants an immediate resume boost, credentials can signal a jobseeker’s potential value to employers, which increases the likelihood that candidates will be hired.

This value is explicit for JobWorks: “I’m sure our 20 hours of training only has a marginal influence on their actual customer service skills, but the certification itself seems to say something to these employers” (J. Casella, personal communication, July 16, 2020). The IBTA agrees: they note the “need to differentiate between ‘ordinary employment seekers’ and ‘Certified Business Professionals’” (IBTA, 2013, p. vi). Converting skills into a discrete credential implies quality control, clear standards, and measurable achievement. Increasingly, higher education is interested in the training space; more institutions are considering more “stackable” or “micro” credentials to certify learning, as emphasis on lifelong learning grows in response to technological pressures (Rainie & Anderson, 2017; Schwartz, 2018).

Credentials like the CBP have referential instability (what exactly does it signal? for whom?), but they do provide two easy wins. First, jobseekers may get a boost of confidence by adding an updated certificate to their resumes. Embracing a new sense of oneself as a qualified professional amplifies the ability to make a strong positive impression throughout an interview process (Moore et al., 2017). Second, programs like JobWorks gain credibility. If participants can earn a “bonus” credential on the way to a more technology-focused certificate, they may translate that sense of accomplishment into a conferral of greater legitimacy on the program as a whole. In fact, it would appear that JobWorks is actively cultivating this impression, as it launched a new advertising

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campaign in July 2020 that touts TechWorks as a “first-of-its-kind, 4-certification virtual training program.” The CBP is presented along with three IT credentials, although this is the only certification for which a justificatory explanation is included (the website explains, “communication is a critical component of every IT job. This credential helps you communicate more effectively with customers, colleagues, and managers” [JobWorks, 2020]). JobWorks benefits from increasing its reputation, because every participant is both a customer and a product. Participants’ willingness to persist through a time-consuming program is partially contingent on their perceptions about the program’s quality. They expect a high level of service from JobWorks. Employers who partner with JobWorks expect the program to provide excellent candidates who can perform job duties well. They expect high-quality referrals from JobWorks.

The vaguely defined value of such credentialing can be exploited. “Industry-recognized” credentials range from those with occupationally-proven value, like OSHA-10 or A+, to those with spurious value at best (e.g., through LinkedIn [2020] one can earn a certificate titled “Working with Difficult People”). Here we find a misalignment between jobseekers and training providers. Where workforce development organizations are eager to demonstrate that participants gain employer-recognized credentials, jobseekers are eager to translate training credentials into job offers. Where jobseekers are interested in moving their careers forward, workforce development organizations are interested in maintaining funding by ensuring that a certain percentage of participants can attain credentials.

Because of the credentialing offered by IBTA, JobWorks continues to use its CBP curriculum despite having nearly 300 proprietary workshops in its own catalogue. Although they modify the core IBTA curriculum, the goal is for each participant to pass the test and become a “Certified Business Professional.” The test actually builds something like an incentive into the program structure; participants are willing to complete assignments and participate in classroom exercises as they prepare for the test.

Two major job boards, Indeed and CareerBuilder, yielded only one result in response to four CBP-related search terms (CBP, Certified Business Professional, IBTA, and International Business Development Association). The one result was a job posting for a workforce development literacy coach, perhaps indicating that the CBP primarily has value in the job-training sector. Interestingly, the CBP did appear in Indeed’s database of credentials (Indeed, 2019). Jobseekers were asked to respond to a brief survey:

1. Did this certification help you make more money?
2. Did this certification help you get a job?
3. Would you recommend this certification?
4. Why did you decide to earn your Certified Business Professional?
5. What was your job title after earning this certification?



6. What do people wish they knew before earning their Certified Business Professional?

7. What advice would you give to someone interested in earning their Certified Business Professional?

The 21 individuals who volunteered responses to this survey do not constitute a statistically significant sample size, but their responses provide helpful context to a critical reading of the CBP. Respondents who listed their current jobs unanimously self-reported entry-level positions or those that do not require college degrees: customer service representative, automotive detailer, beautician, shift manager, or executive administrative assistant. Perhaps CBP trainings are targeted toward jobseekers aiming at these positions, or jobseekers at this career level are especially interested in attaining a CBP. Perhaps a connection exists between workforce development programs offering CBP trainings and the employer partners who seek to fill entry-level roles by hiring from those programs.

Overall, survey respondents expressed skepticism about the value of the credential in the employment marketplace. Of the 13 individuals who responded to the sixth question listed above, 31% wondered which employers “are actually hiring for these credentials” (Anonymous, Indeed, 2019). Within this very limited sample, the CBP as credential seemed to hold questionable value for career advancement. In contrast, when asked to provide advice for others considering the CBP, 94% of the 16 respondents shared encouragement: “This certification will open many doors out there in the work force, it will not only improve your success rate at another job but it will motivate you to become something better” (Anonymous, Indeed, 2019).

These responses point to a tension between credentialing and learning. Although only 62% of respondents thought the CBP helped them make more

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money or get a job, 100% would recommend it. This divergence could indicate that the content transcended its utilitarian application, or that its value as an occupational tool is lower than its value as a learning experience. That is, participants may value the process of learning or studying more than they do the resulting credential (i.e., perhaps respondents took pride in the accomplishment of earning the CBP). Over a third of respondents (38%) offering advice for others mentioned the need to study and prepare for the CBP exam. Perhaps this challenge was engaging enough to generate a sense of accomplishment when the test was passed and the credential received.

A credential like the CBP illustrates the inherent immeasurability of soft skill development. As a result, tying program funding to participants' soft skill attainment – instead of credential attainment – is nearly impossible. Skills like self-management may take years to master. In contrast, it is relatively easy to set up a credentialing program around soft skills: no specialized equipment is required, and trainers can generally position themselves as experts on any of these topics. TechWorks stands as evidence that existing funding structures incentivize credential-focused workforce development programs. However, TechWorks may be able to better achieve its goals of quality/prestige and participant certificate attainment by pursuing accreditation or other credentialing for its own original training content. Where IBTA materials are focused on an undefined “professional,” TechWorks could customize its communications trainings for IT professionals. This type of contextualization may facilitate clearer pathways for participants interested in this industry.

Insisting on credentials subverts the idea that soft-skills trainings are the right tool for human growth and development. Rather than ensuring participants have soft skills – like engaging in productive business communication, for example – a focus on credentialing invests value in resume-inflating certifications. Credentials are a sorting mechanism for employers evaluating candidates, and certifications can be a differentiator: even a little-known credential like the CBP has a veneer of professionalism and could signal that a job applicant is at least familiar with the training process and the potential value that training may offer an employer. Listing soft skill credentials on a resume does not prove competence, but it does show that candidates may at least be familiar with the basic concepts of workplace competencies. This impression may translate into a favorable impression of these candidates and increase their appeal to potential employers.

In a way, credentialing enables learning. If an A+ certification, CBP, or other credential elicits job offers, participants are able to enter new work environments and engage with the communities of professional practice found there. Participants can then engage in the discursive repertoires that are productive in those contexts, increasing their ability to construct recognizable selves and enhance their ability to participate fully in their professions. What better way to learn how an IT professional handles workplace conflict than to immerse oneself in that exact environment?



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A better way to support career gains for workforce development participants would be to advocate for improved worker conditions and equitable hiring practices, especially given that participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to face a persistent pay gap once they enter a new organization (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). At the very minimum, soft-skills trainings provide participants with a set of tools that can be used to navigate the system as it currently is. It remains to be seen whether the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 results in a sea change for entry-level worker supports, but it is yet unlikely that the system of hiring candidates and providing safe, meaningful, and well-paying work will improve quickly. In the meantime, workforce development participants need to be able to sell their skills in such a way that they are competitive with larger labor pools.

## **DISCOURSE STRAND**

### **3.3: PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE**

Any distance between intention and implementation becomes important, as JobWorks has a strong interest in participants' experience in the TechWorks program. Throughout my research process, facilitators repeatedly emphasized that they would like me to explain the research in such a way that did not undermine the legitimacy of the TechWorks program. That is, they were very careful to portray TechWorks as exemplary, as a program being studied for the benefit of other training programs.

A full 50% of the questions in JobWorks's post-program survey (Appendix D) ask how "satisfied" or "highly satisfied" participants were with the program, with an additional 17% of the questions asking whether they "enjoyed" or "highly enjoyed" various programmatic elements. This either reflects an effort to gain simple initial reactions (Kirkpatrick & Kayser Kirkpatrick, 2016) or reflects JobWorks's organizational investment in participants actually having positive experiences. Perhaps it is both; positive initial reactions also bolster JobWorks's ability to leverage participant testimonials in its marketing materials. Indeed, the program's recruitment website prominently features statements like one from a December 2019 graduate: "this program is nothing short of amazing!" (JobWorks, 2020).

Interestingly, survey results from graduates of three TechWorks cohorts indicated that the business communication component was one of the lowest-ranking aspects of the program. It did not receive an outright poor evaluation. It received a "neutral" response from 10% of participants in response to the survey prompt "I am highly satisfied with the Business Communication component of the curriculum," but only the quantity of hands-on training ranked lower in the post-program assessment, with 29% of respondents providing a "neutral" response. Because "neutral" was the lowest ranking provided about

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any of the program's components,<sup>4</sup> it suggests that participants may have carried reservations about the value of the business communication content. In contrast, the Certified Business Professional credential as a resume value-add elicited 100% agreement. These results are not necessarily an indictment of the curriculum's quality, however; the ranking could indicate that participants chose to join the TechWorks program because they are seeking IT careers and the required soft-skills workshops were not of direct interest to them.

Despite this reservation, 90% of survey respondents listed soft skills like motivation and self-confidence among their three most important takeaways from the program. Sample statements include:

I can accomplish anything I want with dedication. I learned to dream big and to believe in myself because I'm worth it. I'm walking away knowing that there is so much possibilities [sic] in IT.

Continue educating myself, be confident and work as a team

Fail faster, never feel like you aren't good enough, and be confident in what you know and don't second guess yourself.

Participants articulate a complex understanding of personal growth as a key benefit of the program. Not only have they developed professional confidence, they have also developed a sense that professional goals are worthwhile, a strong team is intrinsic to learning, and failing can be an iteration toward growth and success. When asked for one unexpected aspect of TechWorks, similar themes continued:

I didn't expect to change my mind and outlook in such a short period of time.

That I would get so much positive reinforcement, not just about the program but as a person.

That I would experience a lot of personal growth. I would meet so many wonderful people. I also didn't expect to get the level of job development assistance that we did.

Given the lukewarm response to the business communication training component as a standalone element, it is likely that the overall TechWorks structure reinforced these positive impressions. Eleanor emphasized the program's commitment to standards like

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<sup>4</sup> The only question eliciting outright disagreement – from one respondent – was about whether participants consistently completed all reading assignments and team projects.

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starting on time, and one interviewee particularly expressed appreciation for being able to treat the program like “a real job.” In both interviews and survey responses, participants favorably mentioned the professionalism and consistent encouragement proffered by the TechWorks trainers. The latent focus on work, of reinforcing soft skills by creating an atmosphere in which demonstrating such skills is highlighted and praised, perhaps becomes the strongest method through which soft skills can be taught. In this environment, participants can flex their growing skills; any failures happen in a low(er)-risk environment because participants are not depending on TechWorks for their livelihoods. While soft-skills training sessions can be useful in introducing concepts, providing explicit rationales for certain suggestions, or developing shared discursive repertoires, workforce development programs may better support soft skill attainment through thoughtful program design and consistent, predictable management.

Participants appeared to have an equally strong response to the technical training components of TechWorks. Both survey respondents and interviewees expressed a strong interest in more hands-on experience. 40% of survey respondents offering suggestions for improvement requested this, and interviewees said things like:

I think every, every program needs an extra two weeks. You know why? Because of the pressure of trying to get things done.

To me it was a hands-on thing.

It was just that I wanted more hands-on. I just wanted more hands-on, you know, my main thing.

Although none of my interview questions related to the program’s IT content, respondents proactively volunteered their evaluation of the technical aspects of the program. Here lies a crucial lesson for workforce development programs: despite the discursive emphasis on soft skills as the key to career mobility (Demaria, Fee & Wardrip, 2020), technical skills still matter. TechWorks benefits from having both types of training woven into its program, but the quality of each has an impact on the other. Experientially, participants do not silo the two offerings; their affective response is to the program as a whole. TechWorks would do well to ensure that the technical training quality remains exemplary. High-quality technical training will reinforce the legitimacy and impact of the soft skills sessions, and vice versa.

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## DISCOURSE STRAND 4: APPLICABILITY

In the TechWorks context, concept application is central to the learning process; this aligns with adult learning theory in reinforcing an orientation toward learning. Without the contextual cues afforded by the program’s focus on IT careers, participants would perhaps not be able to apply new skills and strategies in recognizable, relevant ways. However, the program could better leverage the chaos theory of careers: rather than emphasizing how actions afford or foreclose on future opportunity, the curriculum seems content with the short-term goal of credentialing.

My third classroom observation covered a workshop called “Using LinkedIn for Job Search Success.” Scheduled toward the end of the TechWorks program, the training is designed to equip participants to apply concepts learned to their public-facing profiles on a career-focused social media platform. Facilitated through Zoom, the training session included nine participants and two facilitators. The cohort’s technical trainer was the meeting “host;” although he did not actively provide instruction, he did engage in the more informal moments of discussion. The soft-skills trainer, Michael, drove the majority of the dialogue.

TechWorks did not require active participation – most participants did not share video feeds, and only three had uploaded photographs to their Zoom profiles – but conversation between the facilitator and 2-3 of the participants was sustained as a steady call and response. Michael launched the conversation by highlighting LinkedIn’s global usage statistics, but the workshop primarily focused on using LinkedIn to build one’s network, conduct a job search, and compellingly present professional qualifications. Existing LinkedIn profiles served as the primary pedagogical tool used to shape the dialogue, including those of participants in previous cohorts.

One exercise asked participants to position themselves as recruiters seeking to hire an IT professional. They were to imagine that they had received applications from many candidates, and wanted to get more information about two individuals through LinkedIn. After pulling up the first profile – that of a Philadelphia-based, entry-level IT professional with no TechWorks affiliation – Michael oriented the participants to the LinkedIn platform (e.g., headline, work history, education, connections, etc.). He then invited participants to engage in critical analysis:

Michael: So that’s his whole profile. What information did we get from that? Good or bad. Is it worth – and again, we’re trying to figure out, does this make him look stronger or weaker as a candidate?

Martin: At DaVita he was an IT Support Specialist, at Stein he’s doing...at Bissinger he was a client support. His job title, the job titles they were under, those are there, and he went to Penn [State], but I don’t like his profile picture.

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Michael: I don't either, Martin. Why don't – why don't you like it. I don't like it either. Why don't you like it?

Martin: It's just – it's a little strange, you know.

Michael: [laughs] Yeah. It's a little strange, right.

Martin: Right.

Michael: Like...no, no, go ahead, sorry, Martin.

Martin: No, it's just that it's, um, it's a big red jacket and his hands is out, like it makes it seem like a certain type

Michael: [laughs]

Martin: you want to be as professional as possible in here

The informal conversational style taps into several discourse themes within TechWorks overall: it draws on self-identity to reinforce learning; it drives toward applicability; it relies on participants' understanding of soft skills (e.g., "what should you wear to an interview?"); and it allows for a contextualized approach to career development. This tone reflects adult learning theory in encouraging participants to critically analyze professional signifiers like clothing and posture.

Indeed, in his tour of the profile's "anatomy," as he described it, Michael provided very brief descriptive insights into the site's elements ("this is the default image"; "this means that he's connected to a connection of mine"). But instead of didactically explaining the significance of each profile element, he asks an open-ended question: "What information did we get from that?" This invites participants to use pre-existing bodies of knowledge to apply concepts in real-world situations: "meaning making, on which arguably genuine education is based, emerges and lives in dialogue [...] Meaning making is never given (preset, finalized, positive) but always emergent, unfolding, unfinalized, and relational, in the eye of the beholder" (Matusov, 2018, pp. 276 & 286). Michael has drawn a clear path from participants' existing knowledge to the context of LinkedIn by providing an open orientation to the structure; he refrains from commenting on the value of any individual element. In this way, participants are able to construe meaning in dialoging with others.

Martin traces a similar path to Michael's ("his job titles are there"), but then quickly moves to an evaluative judgment about the profile photo. The photo shows a man standing against a swirling, blurry background; he is cropped from the knees up, and is wearing a red jacket and holding his arms outstretched in an exaggerated shrug (see figure 2). The facilitator quickly responds by agreeing, and although he seems about to expand on the opening Martin created, he instead takes a verbal step backward and prompts Martin for more information. Given this prompt, Martin is able to pivot from a highly subjective evaluation ("I don't like it") to an evaluative judgement more closely grounded in the elements of the photo; he describes the red jacket and outstretched arms before noting that "you want to be as professional as possible in here." With this comment, Martin conscribes the bounds of professional presentation to exclude this

**Figure 2: Sample Profile Photo**



image. For him, professionalism does not accommodate a brightly-colored windbreaker or the individual's somewhat inscrutable posture (is it jokey? welcoming? meant to show openness?). Martin does not offer a corrective suggestion so his explicit understanding of professionalism is unclear, yet his reaction reinforces a latent idea that "you'll know professionalism when you see it." Here recognizability is a leading indicator of whether a skill has been appropriately used in specific professional contexts.

Although Martin is reinforcing the core idea that LinkedIn can be used as a powerful tool for professional advancement, two of his colleagues actively disagreed with him:

George: My wife thought it was

Sandra: So I thought it was

George: a professional photo.

Sandra: But I thought it was cool. I thought it gave a little bit of his personality, you know what I mean. Like he's not so rigid, like, so I thought it was kind of cool.

Michael: You know, it's funny, because I understand all of your points. Like in some ways, if you work for a company that has a very relaxed culture, you would likely look at this and say something as to what Sandra said. This, this is a more relaxed, casual professional. Um, you know, I always err on the side of caution, that's just who I am. And I would agree with Martin that – you know, your LinkedIn profile photo should look like you are showing up for an interview. So, like, how would you look if you're showing up for an interview?

And, um, I'm going to show you another example. And, you know, every company has their own culture. Sometimes you don't know what that culture is ahead of time. So I think it's because most companies still have a more corporate-y conservative culture. And I don't mean politically conservative, I just mean kind of the way that people put themselves out there. I think it's always best to err on the side of caution, so I'm gonna have to agree with Martin and George on this one that it's not professional and probably not the best choice, but Sandra, I do think there is an argument to be made for something like this.

Sandra responds to Martin by sharing a contrasting interpretation of the profile photo. To her eye, the image reads as "cool" and reflective of a "not so rigid" personality. She expands the discourse of professionalism beyond rigidity and a lack of "coolness;" both of these characteristics are appealing in a way that an abstracted "professionalism" might not be. Michael contextualizes Sandra's interpretation, noting that the photo does meet the standards of professionalism in certain environments. Whether a photo is considered

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professional depends on the organizational context of the reviewer. Michael allows the category of “relaxed, casual professional,” but overtly agrees with Martin’s assessment of the photo as unprofessional. He describes his own understanding of “most organizations” as more conservative, although he acknowledges that Sandra’s interpretation may be preferable for less-conservative organizations.

By asking participants to evaluate profiles from the perspective of an IT recruiter, TechWorks subtly reinforces a sense of belonging for participants as rising professionals. They are invited to position themselves firmly within a specific community of practice, trying out behaviors and perceptual frameworks standard in their target industry. Yet the conversation resists hegemonic interpretation, encouraging instead a more dynamic negotiation of context. This reflects the big-picture emphasis promoted by the chaos theory of careers.

Of note is George’s interjection that his wife thought the image was “a professional photo.” As TechWorks had not shared the workshop’s content with participants beforehand, George’s wife was most likely in the room with him during the live Zoom session. Here the line thins between a learning environment and a participant’s individual context. Although this dynamic is unique to remote learning, it only makes visible a dynamic that has always existed (especially with adult learners). Participants carry into training spaces existing relationships, past experiences, intersecting ideologies, and intertwined discursive repertoires. Acknowledging these relationships, encouraging participants to make connections between new information and existing bodies of knowledge, contextualizes and accelerates learning.

## DISCOURSE STRAND

### 4.1: SELF-IDENTITY

Both adult learning theory and the chaos theory of careers centralize self-identity. To ground learning in prior experience, to have a sense that future career opportunities are partially afforded by one’s actions, individuals need to understand how their own motivations and values translate into the work of self-construction.

TechWorks unambiguously positions itself as a space in which participants can engage in self-reflection and self-reinvention. It is persistent in reinforcing participant understanding of what signifies status as an industry professional. Participants are encouraged to enter the industry discourse about what it means to be an IT professional by first thinking of themselves in clear terms:

Michael: I feel like this part of the program is when we all understand that we’re stepping out of our own world and we’re stepping – we have, we’ve made it. Now I’ve said before that TechWorks is a bit of a gauntlet. Um, you

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know, you've made it. You know, you've made this transition to IT. And I think what we're doing here today is we're, we're taking off our, our old clothes and we're putting on our new ones and we're walking into this new world of IT that we've been working really hard to get to. And this is where we're, we're shedding our old skin. You know, we're growing a new, new one. We're growing new skills. We're this, kind of, this new IT professional. And we're putting ourselves out there into the world as an IT professional today. So between the resume, between your LinkedIn profile, your job applications, we're saying to the world, "I'm here. I'm in IT. And I want to be here."

Sandra: You know, Michael, I, I shared that email that you sent me, I shared it with my son, and it was funny because he looked at it and then he texts me a few minutes later and he goes, "Congrats, Mom, you got your wings." [laughs]

Michael: That's what I'm talking about. That's what I'm talking about, Sandra, that's, I mean, that's awesome. That's so awesome. That's great. I love it. I love it. Yeah, we should have little IT wings made as a giveaway for TechWorks. I love it.

TechWorks is doing this work both collectively and in individualized interactions among participants. Here the facilitator is mapping a course for participants to establish themselves as IT professionals by connecting the work they've already completed together (resumes, LinkedIn profiles) to a new career stance they can embrace in seeking their next jobs.

TechWorks is reinforcing professional performativity, or the work of social construction through discourse (Butler, 1993). By enacting the norms of an IT professional, participants produce themselves as IT professionals. This work must take place within relevant contexts in order to take effect (Butler, 1993), and the structure of the TechWorks program effectively closes the distance between existing bodies of knowledge, prior experiences, and communities of professional practice.

When analyzing their own LinkedIn profiles, participants turn toward an outward orientation of professional engagement. This move, in demanding application, asks participants to fold new career-oriented tactics into their self-construction. Professional discourse exerts power on individuals, asking not for surface application but for inward transformation; individuals are constituted by the discourses in which they engage (Foucault, 1980). TechWorks participants transition from reaction to application in providing a close read of tacit messages conveyed through their profiles:



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Sandra: It kind of goes on your point, Michael, like, early in the class. It's like, the psychological aspect of seeing somebody with 500-plus connections – it grabs your attention and, like, you're impressed. Like, "hm!"

Michael: Exactly. Yeah, it's this, it's this incremental – each of these little things are these incremental, um, like, wow factors. Like I look at Taylor's, and I think, "Oo-o, wow. That's a cool photo." She's, you know, she's, she's in it. "Oh, cool. Look at this headline. Oh wow. Oh, you know, she's got you know 500 connections – oh, wow, she knows somebody I know. Oh wow, what a great introduction." So all of these little things really add up to this big impactful, um, profile. It's like a, it's like a painting. All of these different little brushstrokes, when you put them together, it comes together in this big impact.

Here Sandra advances a dynamic that had been mentioned as an aside by Michael, who immediately amplifies and supports her observation. He demonstrates an interpretive and discursive pathway that starts with acknowledging subtle data points, engaging in meaning-making, and identifying a possible action. However, the cohort did not stop with responding to volunteered data points; they also interpreted one of the most visual elements of the page, the profile header (see figure 3):

Eric: And you know what's interesting with Taylor's, in the background, that background actually says – from someone who's been a visual – I don't know if you agree with this or not, Sandra, but you get the essence of the person from watching that video, because it's, like, either sunset or sunrise, of that, and you get an understanding, even though they don't have a photo. That's just my, uh, projection.

Sandra: Oh yeah, no, like, and it shows that they – it does, it tells a little bit about their personality. And plus, they didn't keep the default

Eric: Yes.

Sandra: like, like, banner. They put thought into the one that they picked.

Eric: And any representation of the city that, what – you already know what the city is. And that actually adds to what's seen in the background with the cities. That actually because it's already, you see, okay, I see you have a passion for your city. So with the passion of your city, you're gonna have the same passion with your work.

Eric and Sandra conduct a particularly generous read here, as the cohort had spent significant time discussing the importance of uploading a LinkedIn headshot and Taylor had not done so. By focusing on the one photo Taylor had uploaded, the Philadelphia skyline as her header, her classmates offered constructive feedback. The third-person

*Figure 3: Participant LinkedIn Header*



grammatical positioning (“they put thought into the one that they picked”) deflects the implicit criticism of not including a profile photo. Though Taylor is not engaging in the performative work of self-construction as an IT professional, her colleagues reflect the self-constituting work done by the headline photo.

Then, as though seeking permission or validation, Sandra names the facilitator and the participant being evaluated as she moves from analyzing performativity toward speculating about self-identity:

Sandra: You know, I get into, ha, into, Michael and Taylor, I get into, like, okay with the, the behavioral health [sic] aspect. It’s like, “who’s a morning person? who’s an evening person?” [laughs]

Michael: Yeah, Taylor is going to be hired for the night shift.

Sandra/Eric/Michael: [laugh]

Taylor: I don’t mind.

Whole group: [laughs]

Sandra: See?!? [laughs] It’s so true.

Eric: I like how you did that, Taylor. That was very cool.

Michael:

Um

Taylor: Thank you. [laughs]

Michael: So, gang, this is a really good conversation. I definitely appreciate everyone’s comments so far. This is great. I really appreciate all of your energy and enthusiasm around this, and I’m telling you, this tool is gonna work to your advantage if you put all of these little things into play and are intentional about it.

Sandra reads the crepuscular image in terms of preferred working hours, and Michael then links this observation to the career options available to someone who is noticeably

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energetic at the beginning or end of the day. The group’s laughter would seem to interpret this dialogic move as slightly absurd, but the facilitator’s statement neatly embodies Freire’s (1970/2000) insight that dialogue with can facilitate learning. The cohort understands the coded message as an argument for job suitability, and associates this tactic with more direct professional tools.

Taylor’s simple interjection – “I don’t mind” – works on two levels. First, she affirms the discourse that connects identity and careers; perhaps she is truly a night person and would work well on the night shift. Second, the cohort has spent hours learning how to effectively apply for jobs, as the program is designed to support a career change. To have someone speak a job into being – “Taylor is going to be hired” – based on a stock photo slices through the effort and energy required to secure a new job, and Taylor recognizes and accepts this opportunity. Michael’s small quip becomes an opening for Taylor to demonstrate her prowess at interweaving discursive strands and generating her own opportunity.

## DISCOURSE STRAND

### 4.2: CAREER

In some ways, the discourse strand related to careers is an uber-discourse, as it weaves together elements of self-construction, performativity, dialogic meaning-making, and the chaos theory of careers.

The simplest way to understand what a career is might be to contrast it with a job, which is “usually considered to describe paid positions or a similar group of tasks performed by one person that occur in a single organization” (Gray & Herr, 1998, p. 114). But while jobs generally exist whether individuals fill them or not, “a career really is not independent of the person who constructs it [...] careers are unique to each person and are created by what one chooses or avoids choosing” (Gray & Herr, 1998, p. 114). Cochran (1990) expands this to include self-development: “Following Super (1976), a career involves the sequence of work and work-related roles that make up a life. Indeed, a career includes life roles generally as they rise and fall in a person’s pattern of self-development” (p. 4). Jobs constitute careers, but the latter is a far more personal process and effect. Simply acknowledging this difference may help workforce development programs better implement the strategies offered by the chaos theory of careers. Understanding that iteration and process are inherent in career growth supports participants in contextualizing the next job they choose to pursue. And understanding that careers are built equally on self-identity and active participation in communities of professional practice should inform strategies for supporting participants’ career advancement over the short- and long-term.

A career is hardly a straightforward thing. Developing a sense of vocation, of work that reflects one’s values and entices an investment in building relevant skills and

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competencies, is a process that can take decades. The chaos theory of careers reminds us that a career is fraught with advancement, detours, failures, reinventions, and growth. There are very few professions with clear, straightforward career ladders; individuals must identify paths forward, staying aware of opportunities that emerge along the way. To operationalize the chaos theory of careers in engaging a lifelong career requires a strong sense of self-identity coupled with the willingness to make long-term investments in continued development. Workforce development programs typically flatten such nuance, instead focusing on moving participants into their next jobs (Bartelt, 2010). A job is much easier to measure (do you have one? how much does it pay?), and a job is also undeniably necessary for people who would like to achieve economic growth. Measuring (or even defining) career success requires a much longer-term relationship with participants than generally occurs in workforce development.

Because of its metrics, TechWorks is uniquely positioned to support long-term career development. Instead of measuring the program's success by job placement and retention rates, TechWorks is evaluated against the number of credentials obtained by participants. That is, instead of being focused on connecting participants to quick-fix jobs that may or may not be suitable for them in the long run, TechWorks can focus on the tools needed for careers in IT and then support participants in pursuing their own goals. Somewhat ironically, a focus on technical credentials divorced from specific professional contexts opens participants to potential career opportunities across contexts. In this way, workforce development moves closer to the discourse of higher education where credentials are sought in pursuit of indeterminate careers. In general, college graduates are responsible for leveraging those credentials to pursue opportunity.

Participants clearly expressed a sense that TechWorks supported their career development efforts. One participant describes an "acceleration of career goals" in response to questions about the program's benefits, and 23% of responses to an open-ended prompt for generalized feedback named a sense of preparedness to start or continue an IT career ("I feel as though I can grow in this career"). As one interviewee shared,

You gotta go, you gotta push. And so what I was trying to tell him – I said, y'all can talk about me all y'all want to, but at the end of the day, I know what it takes to get to the next level.

The sense here is that TechWorks participants feel motivated to pursue career goals, whether or not others are able to keep pace. Across responses, TechWorks participants reiterated a sense of themselves as individuals interested in developing careers – and as confident professionals with the ability to pursue career goals. Aside from one interviewee who described a new job she had obtained through a TechWorks referral, none of the other participants mentioned specific jobs in their responses. They did,

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however, speak favorably of the job development programming TechWorks provided (e.g., training on how to conduct job searches or meeting hiring managers as guest speakers).

## DISCOURSE STRAND 5: COMMUNITY

I have already discussed how learning relies on social context, but the value of social networks to professional success cannot be understated. In addition to familiar concepts about how networks can alert jobseekers to new openings (Sharabi & Simonovich, 2017), networks allow newcomers to quickly acclimate to the expectations inherent within any social environment. Propinquity may determine a group's cohesiveness and productivity, as Sawchuk (2003) explored in his research on working-class life:

What I saw was that one's knowing – even for the most experienced worker on the floor – depended upon ongoing integration with others. Learning was our ability to move about the plant, it was how closely we could be watched, and it was the structure of our time and space. Learning was defined by the chances we had to participate in mundane conversation. The reality of this learning had precious little to do with classrooms that made writing a test alone a measure of what a person could do or know. Solidarity and social connection defined one's ability to learn. It was the barriers, and the ways people beat them and didn't beat them, and listening to the stories people would tell about trying to beat them – this was the guts of the learning process. (p. 2)

Here learning is articulated as a twofold process: it requires that one be fully embedded in a social milieu, and it acknowledges that how individuals narrativize events, especially negative ones, is core to the ability to learn. Webb (1989) further notes that different groups may have different effects on participants, and that how a group responds to an individual is closely tied to learning. At TechWorks, the cohort structure is foundational to individual success. Participants move through a challenging task-focused and test-intensive curriculum in groups of 8-10, and according to interviewees, rely on one another to master the material:

I like the interaction. Whenever we met up every day and then we build that rapport with each other, that was really cool. But then the Network Plus [test] and then, you know, being able to have the A+, or part of it, and then finding the job, it was more convenient to do it online and do it at your own pace. I just wish that I could have interacted with others a little more – but I still would talk to, like, [two people], um, and some of my other colleagues that was in the program with me. But that was the only thing that was different from the Network Plus. I

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kinda miss meeting up with everybody and then studying together and then trying to achieve greatness or success together. I really miss that.

I said, [...] me and my buddy, we would go to [Drexel University] Tuesday and Thursday when we wasn't supposed to have class [...] we would act like we in class, and study, and do tests in the library [...] he told me about the – about how you can go in this building [...] And then on top of that, it was so funny that, that people would come around us and ask us questions and, and a couple of students wanted us to help them with their program, you know. Yeah, so, so, so it was really exciting to know that. You know we treat it like it was a real job.

Participants built social and professional networks that supported their goals. Overall, interviewees favorably described their self-driven, collaborative approach to test preparation, particularly the small groups they formed to prepare and study. The primary motivations described are accountability and the social pressure to keep studying and pass the IT tests. The second anecdote highlights a collaboration with a study partner that allowed test preparations to be treated like “a real job.” This comparison was shared with a sense of pride; the interviewee was pleased that working with a colleague, establishing regular patterns, and being perceived as an expert by college students contributed to his self-identity as a “real” IT professional. The ability of others – whether direct collaborators or those outside of daily networks – to affect an individual’s self-construction (and experience in a training program) cannot be understated.

Notably, for the participants I interviewed, cohort interactions were enjoyable. A strong sense of having a good time with other participants contributed to an individual’s overall positive perception about the TechWorks program. All of the respondents surveyed by TechWorks agreed with the statement “I enjoyed working with most of the other students in this class” (and 91.7% strongly agreed). Such a dynamic affects an individual’s ability to learn in the program: a positive experience eases the process of becoming part of that community of practice. Indeed, learning as a group accelerates learning for individuals, because individuals are able to learn both from direct experience and from the examples of their peers (Bandura, 1971).

At TechWorks, the value of the cohort seems to hold steady, despite the fact that participants are presumably at the same point in their career development processes and would theoretically be competing for the same job openings. They are all sending out resumes updated with the same new credentials into the world at the same time. But one interviewee was careful to tell me,

Don't make life a competition. If you compete, right, trying to be best in class, that's good, but I'd rather for a person that compete at the same time [be] helping



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everybody else. That is the best competition in life. Well, let's say that I was running and I'm trying to win this race. And one of, one of the runners falls and hurts himself. Is it better for me to finish the race or to help that person? [...] And I got to the finish line and realized that the person – nobody else found that person. And end up, end up in a situation that I could, I could, I could have did something. But I didn't. [...] You don't win. I may, I may have got the trophy. But on the other side, I lost.

Competing successfully holds less value than having and maintaining positive social connections, particularly when others are perceived as being hurt or having a disadvantage. In a way, this social positioning is an orientation toward long-term relationships, as professional networks do provide connections with career opportunities. From the perspective of keeping the door open to career advancement through networking, maintaining positive collegial relationships in the short term becomes an important priority.

In addition, the self-identity of being a helper rather than the recipient of help was mirrored across my interviews. While the TechWorks business communication facilitator explicitly encouraged a sense of camaraderie among the group – “you guys are a resource for one another” – the participants seemed to view themselves as being more likely to be a resource than to need resources. One interviewee remarked, “regardless of what – however the situations are now, I'm – I still want to push myself. But other people don't have that.” This positioning, this articulation of self in context, reflects the process of self-construction as a professional. By viewing oneself as a resource for others, participants are able to take up full membership in the cohort and contribute to the well-being of the group.

There is one area, however, in which the cohort cultivation efforts fall short. During Zoom sessions,

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JobWorks does not require participants to share their video feeds. During my observations, the majority of participants chose to remain hidden from their colleagues. Although the participants were present – they responded when queried directly by the facilitator and were able to use Zoom’s chat feature to engage with the material as requested – the fact that turning on videos is not required serves to maintain the instructor’s centrality to the material and potentially the learning process. As one interviewee said, “It should be that when you’re doing the Zoom presentation, I think that everybody should see each other. Talking to people that you can’t – you don’t even see their face, makes me feel like I’m talking to a robot or somebody that’s not there.” Not being able to visually track other participants was perceived as impeding an individual’s ability to engage, which in turn impedes an individual’s ability to learn.

Although the TechWorks program engenders a sense of community, the program’s constituency is nevertheless divided between facilitators and participants. Moore et. al (2003) note

As anyone who has ever taken a class knows, the effectiveness of the instructor is a key to class success. In these projects, the quality of instructors was the highest-rated item on our survey [...] We found many instances where, even though trainees criticized the training, they praised the instructors. When confronted with a generic curriculum or materials that were pitched to an inappropriate level, the skilled instructors often attempted to change the instruction to make it more effective. Trainees responded well to instructors who were knowledgeable about their company’s industry and took an interest in the trainees as individuals. (p. 91)

Other than a few mentions of facilitators being slow to respond to questions, participants view the TechWorks training team favorably. While JobWorks as an organization prizes the facilitator’s ability to support credential attainment, both soft-skills facilitators valued being “good” facilitators, defined as sparking conversation and engagement during training sessions. The facilitators each attempted to decentralize their own voices as authoritative and create space for broader participation (to some degree), but the participants clearly saw a divide between themselves and the facilitation team. One interviewee noted, “In real life, the professor or the teacher ain’t got time to spoon-feed you [...] sometimes you got to take responsibility for yourself.” Responsibility for learning is held differently by participants and facilitators. Although facilitators take responsibility for providing content and shepherding the development of context, participants are ultimately tasked with the work of learning. Facilitators may make themselves available to receive questions, but obtaining answers requires a commitment from participants to engage the material. Thus learning emerges in context, requiring the contributions of communities of professional practice and individuals engaging in self-identity formation to be fully realized.



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# Summary

This analysis supports the thesis that workforce development programs like TechWorks are well-positioned to support learning for their participants. Although workforce development as a practice has a mandate to attend to the larger economic factors that afford or preclude job opportunities, treating training as a simple vocational equation misses a key opportunity to cultivate learning and a sense of career ownership. Rather than develop programs that didactically guide participants toward single job openings, workforce development programs would better serve their participants by equipping them to analyze information and navigate environments characterized by complexity and change. The study provides a rich opportunity to understand the many factors that constitute a successful workforce development program, and surfaced five key findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

**FINDING 1: Although technical training sessions required most of their energy during the program, participants identified the soft skills they developed as the most impactful and personally meaningful aspect of the program.**

In interviews and post-program surveys, participants named their personal development as the most meaningful takeaway from the program. Participants responded strongly to the technical training sessions (volunteering extensive unsolicited feedback about that part of the program), but they consistently cited their personal growth, communication skills, career development acumen, and confidence as primary takeaways. This suggests that soft skills training have a resonance beyond an individual's next job, which might position soft skills trainings as a salient tool for navigating career chaos over the long-term. It also suggests that participants were able to use these skills and concepts in different ways than they could the technical skills; soft skills more readily lend themselves to various contexts.

**FINDING 2: The program designers divide their technical and soft-skills content into discrete components, but participants experience the program as a whole rather than as a series of training sessions.**

TechWorks divides its program into technical skills and soft skills components, but participants do not differentiate. This suggests that the discursive overlap may actually contribute to learning overall. Participants are easily able to carry ideas and strategies

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from one type of training session to another, from interacting with peers and facilitators to working with others. This may indicate that participants are integrating the work of self-constitution, of understanding how they fit into discursive repertoires, across the hours spent in the program. Soft skills trainings provide an opportunity to develop shared concepts, but the program as a whole provides an opportunity to develop those skills.

**FINDING 3: Participants largely perceive soft-skills workshops as helpful professional development tools rather than as instructional remediation. They viewed the soft-skills sessions as advantageous to self-improvement, not as sessions focused on addressing deficiencies.**

Although workforce development programs may schedule soft skills trainings from a sense of closing a perceived skills gap between where participants are and where they “should be” in relation to a job opportunity, participants viewed the soft-skills sessions as supporting self-improvement, not addressing deficiencies.

While participants recognize that it is advantageous to improve oneself through soft skills trainings, these sessions are not viewed as being in the program to address deficiencies. Naming this dynamic supports a pedagogical approach that does not position participants as remedial but instead draws a relatively direct line from the program to communities of professional practice. A tension emerges between the idea that soft skill training sessions are review – meaning participants feel they already know these concepts – and the idea that the soft skills are the most valuable part of the program. By formalizing the discourse around concepts that participants feel they already know, the program creates structure for them to bring their prior knowledge into new professional spaces. And participants bring their expertise and experience into the program, they contribute to the emerging habitus of TechWorks.

**FINDING 4: JobWorks credentials the soft skills aspects of its program under a “Certified Business Professional” certificate, and markets this as a value-add for both prospective participants and potential employers.**

Participants can add this credential to their resumes and boost their marketability, and employers can use this credential as a way to screen applicants for desired skills. This structure moves the program closer to the discourse of college education, in which credentials are expected for all classroom investment, rather than the discourse of workforce development, in which trainings are designed to remediate skills gaps without necessarily attending to whether participants develop desired skills or not.

Credentialing soft skills can subvert the notion of mastering these skills. By converting soft skills to marketable resume credentials, programs like TechWorks subtly interrogate

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employer expectations while creating an entry point for skill performativity that allows individuals to draw on divergent communicative repertoires. In other words, credentials provide cover for individuals to enter new communities of practice, where they will eventually learn the skills they need to engage and contribute as defined and recognized by that particular community. Credentials enable learning because credentials elicit invitations to professional discourses. And when new participants join these professional discourses, those communities of professional practice will respond to new contributions.

As an ancillary business development benefit, a credential-focused approach to soft-skills training can make workforce development a more salient tool for white-collar workers who are also at risk of being displaced by automation and other trends in the future of work (Manyika et al., 2017). That is, rather than continuing to calibrate programs for those jobseekers who qualify for federal funding subsidies, workforce development programs can also prepare to engage participants with fewer preexisting employment barriers.

### **FINDING 5: Balancing career development with job-focused contextualization is a complex oscillation.**

A training curriculum that can effectively equip individuals to navigate a long, uncertain career arc also faces pressure to deliver content specific enough that a program graduate can comfortably navigate the professional environments characteristic of the program’s employer partners. TechWorks partially mitigates this tension by differentiating its technical skills trainings from its efforts to encourage the development of soft skills. That is, the technical skills trainings provide tools needed by participants to obtain a job offer, where the program’s content and structure – from the facilitated content to the culture of accountability and professionalism – encourage the skills needed to build meaningful careers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

JobWorks has many strengths. It is well positioned to initiate program improvements and achieve its goals of facilitating credential attainment and providing high-quality content. The following recommendations are designed to prompt growth for a dynamic organization that desires to go from good to great.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Recognize that framing matters.**

Workforce development is a practice with a wide purview, and providers should be careful to articulate the specific goals of their programs. TechWorks should remain conscious of the type of program it would like to be. Is it a competitive IT certification program? Is it serving participants who qualify for federal training subsidies?

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If the goal is to prepare participants for on-the-job success, program designers should carefully consider all aspects of the content. Why are certain skills considered vital enough to discuss? Are those decisions informed by input from employer or industry partners? Is the program adjusted accordingly for subsequent cohorts?

Workforce development providers like JobWorks need to think strategically about their employer partners. Too often, providers frame unemployment as a problem to be solved by remediating individual jobseekers through trainings. But unemployment might just as readily be attributed to low wages or poor working conditions, and these issues are better addressed through institutional change (whether through cultural shifts or through rearticulated partnerships). Because it has created a desirable credentialing program, JobWorks has a platform for employer engagement, and it could use this platform to advocate for pro-employee policies.

Conscious framing of the program should also extend to participants' career narratives. My interviewees were able to spin tales of prior jobs and relationships and lessons learned in ways that simultaneously acknowledged the role of chance and their own agency. Understanding how the chaos theory of careers has emerged for them so far in their careers can help clarify how to navigate similar dynamics in the future, and may close the gap between earning a credential and engaging in the process of learning. These efforts may foster awareness about how individuals engage in self-construction within contextualized power structures. Further, participants may be more likely to accept new jobs with their clearer goals established; in turn, this orientation may translate to a stronger commitment to engaging in the habitus of that workplace.

Because TechWorks is measured on its core product – career-related credentials – rather than job attainment, facilitators are free to focus on preparing participants for long-term success in their target industries. This flexibility allows for curricula informed by both adult learning theory and the chaos theory of careers. Content can build on participants' prior knowledge and their investment in the learning process, while acknowledging that a twenty-first century career can be an ever-moving target. In its approach to program development, TechWorks demonstrates a latent acknowledgment of the primacy of careers over jobs; foregrounding career development as an explicit goal of the program should hold space for participants to leverage their own discursive repertoires in crafting careers. And by working to narrow the gap between workforce development and educational discourses in understanding how learning occurs for participants, the program can perhaps better facilitate career preparation for participants.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2: Use program structures to support soft skill development.**

Along with workshops focused on soft skill topics, the design of the program itself can reinforce the learning of these skills. How are soft skills invited in those training sessions

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focused on other topics? How does the program mimic the structures of the workplace? Do conditions in the program (e.g., honoring participants' time or reflecting the workplace norms of the target industry) invite participants to exercise new strategies and skills? How are participants supported in creating meaning in the process of career development?

Although TechWorks divides the curriculum (and training team) according to technical training and soft skills training sessions, participants experience the program holistically. TechWorks participants made clear in interviews that their perceptions about the soft-skills program components were influenced by their experience in technical trainings. Because participants are actively learning across the program, providers should continue to support soft skill development during technical skills trainings.

Additionally, the facilitation team is perceived as uniformly representative of the program. Providers should ensure that, not only are they hiring skilled, experienced facilitators, they ensure that facilitators are aware of what is being covered in other training sessions and are apprised of any relevant issues that arise during other sessions.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Seek credentialing for original training content.**

A potential limitation for TechWorks is its reliance on pre-existing curricula like the Certified Business Professional material secured through the International Business Training Association. Despite the material's decontextualized and dated nature, JobWorks uses the curriculum because it offers a certification, and a certification certainly offers value in boosting participant resumes and enticing funders seeking measurable achievements. But the IBTA-backed credential is not particularly widely-sought or recognized, leaving plenty of room in the market for more dynamic curricular offerings.

JobWorks has a robust catalog of training programs; as an organization, it clearly invests in creating innovative training materials. The TechWorks program may be better served by seeking credentialing for its own materials. This could be done either by applying to credentialing bodies directly or by partnering with one of the many colleges in Philadelphia to consider accreditation for the materials. The latter avenue would provide the added benefit of creating a continuum between the discourses of workforce development and higher education; such a move would contribute to a more cohesive training and education ecosystem in Philadelphia. This system, in turn, would be easier to navigate and may enhance learners' growth, development, and career capabilities.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Facilitate learning along with training.**

TechWorks has ample evidence of effective training, as it is clearly succeeding at credentialing its participants. 100% of graduates have received the CBP certificate so far,

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and 99% have received the IT fundamentals certificate. However, TechWorks should scaffold opportunities to activate and advance soft skills in a contextually-relevant way, making clear the connection between classroom topics and communities of professional practice. This approach would accelerate graduates' ability to read a new workplace and effectively contribute to that particular discursive framework. This work would involve understanding learning as the ability to apply new strategies to new environments, and the willingness of facilitators to recognize and enhance the self-constituting work of individual participants. By weaving the reinforcement of soft skills into all aspects of the program, TechWorks may better support the development of communication skills, confidence, and professionalism within participants. TechWorks facilitators are already able to guide participants toward concept application; an emphasis on learning may simply formalize this framing among facilitators.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examines a particular set of discursive practices through the lens of a particular organization during a very particular time period. While this type of study allows for a rich exploration of how systemic issues can shape an organizational context, the topic would be equally served through a comparative analysis examining multiple programs in relation to one another. A similar critique lies in the fact that the program I chose to study is based in Philadelphia and serves Philadelphians; a program embedded in a different geographic and political milieu could surface different socioeconomic, demographic, historical, or educational factors that could affect a workforce development program's design and delivery in any number of ways.

Although the project was launched months earlier, field research for this study transected the first four months of the global coronavirus pandemic and economic shutdown that began in March 2020. Given that JobWorks's programs were hastily translated to an online platform and research access to participants was wholly mediated through program staff, the total number of interviews completed was limited. A follow-up study could explore the participant perspective more broadly, either by increasing the number of individual interviews conducted or by spending more time with each interviewee.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

Research opportunities at the intersection of training and learning, of workforce development and adult education, are numerous and compelling. Future studies could expand the preliminary work done here by sussing out the role of credentialing in participants' career outcomes or in their experience during a program; by comparing online to in-person training programs in terms of participants' sense of personal or professional growth; by conducting a comparative analysis of curriculum content across various programs in the same geographic area or with the same industry focus; or comparing programs like

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TechWorks with those that opt to integrate soft-skills training into technical skills modules. Equally rewarding would be more longitudinal studies that asked participants to reflect on the soft-skills aspect of a training program after more time has passed after program completion. More advanced studies could compare participants who chose to opt into a given program with participants who were required to enroll for one reason or another, or compare the content of soft-skills curricula intended for workforce development programs against curricula designed for executive training, business certifications, college degree programs, or corporate leadership programs, or compare graduate career outcomes of workforce development providers that focus on training versus those that focus on changing hiring and employment practices in partnership with employers.

## CONCLUSION

TechWorks provides a helpful opportunity to understand the polyvalent discourses at work in a modern workforce development program. Although a close analysis of texts internal to the program yields key suggestions for creating a high-impact program, attending to the larger contextual discourses is equally vital. Context matters, both for the architecture of a program and for the employment-oriented content delivered to participants. Program designers should continually seek clarity about what kind of program they have, how skills are being cultivated through program design, how participants are experiencing the program as a whole, how participants are able to engage in learning, and what type of content might be relevant and useful for specific participants and specific employer partners. Programs would do well to draw clear connections between classroom-based content and real-world applicability, while also equipping participants to manage careers in shifting, uncertain, and responsive environments. Programs would do even better to focus on addressing inequities in hiring and employment in dialogue with employer partners.

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# Appendix A: TechWorks Schedule, Spring 2020

Text in light blue denotes soft-skills trainings. Those sessions marked with an asterisk are focused on the “Certified Business Professional” certificate.

Week 1				
NO CLASS (Holiday)	<b>Orientation</b> Orientation, Team Building & Intro to Technology Careers	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 1: Core Hardware Components Lesson 2: Peripherals	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 3: Computing Devices and the Internet of Things Lesson 4: OS
Week 2				
<b>Business Communication</b> Effective Business Communication I*	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 5: Software Applications Lesson 6: Software Development	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 7: Database Fundamentals Lesson 8: Networking Concepts
Week 3				
<b>Business Communication</b> Effective Business Communication II*	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 9: Security Concepts & Threats Lesson 10: Security Best Practices	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> Lesson 11: Business Continuity and Computer Support
Week 4				
<b>Business Communication</b> Effective Business Communication III & Exam*	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i>	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>IT Fundamentals</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i> Certification Exam
Week 5				
NO CLASS Presidents' Day	<b>Mac Integration Basics</b> Part 1	<b>Mac Basics</b> Part 2	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>Mac Integration Basics</b> Part 3 & Exam

<b>Week 6</b>				
<b>Math for IT Support Professionals</b>	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 1: Troubleshooting Lesson 2: Motherboards/CPU	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 3: Computer power supplies Lesson 4: Memory
<b>Week 7</b>				
<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 5: Computer expansion Lesson 6: Storage	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 7: IO Devices Lesson 8: Display Devices	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 9: Network Basics Lesson 10: Network cables & connectors
<b>Week 8</b>				
<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 11: Network Protocols Lesson 12: Wireless Networking	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 13: Virtualization and cloud computing Lesson 14: Mobile Devices	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> Lesson 15: Printers and multi-function devices Lesson 16: Custom Computers
<b>Week 9</b>				
<b>A+ 1001</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i>	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1001</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i>	<b>Job Search Strategies</b> Job Search Boot Camp & Resume Consultations	<b>A+ 1001</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i> <b>A+ 1001 EXAM</b>
<b>Week 10</b>				
<b>A+ 1002</b> Lesson 1: Operating systems Lesson 2: Windows Management	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1002</b> Lesson 3: Windows Networking Lesson 4: Security principles	<b>Job Search Strategies</b> LinkedIn Profile Optimization	<b>A+ 1002</b> Lesson 5: Security Technologies Lesson 6: Securing devices and data
<b>Week 11</b>				
<b>A+ 1002</b> Lesson 7: Operational procedures Lesson 8: Safety and professionalism	Independent & Group Study No Classroom Training	<b>A+ 1002</b> <i>Lab Day &amp; Review</i> <b>A+ 1002 EXAM</b>	<b>Job Search Strategies</b> High-Impact Interview Strategies & Mock Interviews	<b>Graduation</b> <b>A+ 1002 EXAM RETAKE</b>

# Appendix 2: JobWorks Soft Skills Courses

*Unless otherwise indicated, each course lasts one day.*

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## COMMUNICATION

- 50 Minutes to Better Software Demos
- 50 One-Minute Tips to Better Communication
- Better Business Writing
- Body Language Basics
- Business Acumen
- Business Communication
- Business Etiquette
- Business Writing
- Collaborative Business Writing
- Communicating with Employees
- Communication Skills for Leaders - Delivering a Clear and Consistent Message
- Communication Strategies
- E-Mail Management
- Face-to-Face Communication
- Facilitation Skills for Team Leaders
- Facilitation Skills
- Fat-Free Writing
- Getting Your Message Across
- Influencing Others
- Interpersonal Skills
- Presentation Skills
- Proposal Writing
- Public Speaking
- Technical Writing in the Corporate World
- The Building Blocks of Business Writing
- The Business of Listening
- Vocabulary Improvement
- Writing Business Proposals and Reports
- Writing Effective E-Mails
- Writing Fitness

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Beyond Customer Service
- Call Center Success
- Calming Upset Customers
- Customer Satisfaction
- Customer Service
- Customer Service in the Information Age
- Customer Service Nightmares
- Handling a Difficult Customer
- Handling Difficult People and Situations
- Quality Customer Service
- SuperSTAR Customer Service: It's all about C.A.R.E.
- Telephone Etiquette
- Telephone Skills that Satisfy Customers

## FINANCE

- Accounting Essentials
- Basic Bookkeeping
- Basics of Budgeting
- Budgets and Financial Reports
- Financial Analysis
- Personal Financial Fitness
- The Accounting Cycle
- Understanding Financial Statements
- QuickBooks Certified User Certification Course (4 Days)



## GENERAL BUSINESS

- Basic Business Math, Revised Edition
- Basics of Inventory Management
- Basics of Manufacturing
- Benchmarking Basics
- Business Etiquette and Professionalism, Third Edition
- Change Management
- Disaster Preparedness
- Entrepreneurship
- Event Planning for Everyone
- Graphics for Presenters
- ISO 9000
- Keyboarding A-Z
- Project Management
- Risk Assessment and Management
- Supply Chain Management
- Telework and Telecommuting
- The Administrative Assistant
- The Internal Consultant
- Tourism and Hospitality
- Basic Business Math

## HUMAN RESOURCES

- 50 One-Minute Tips for Retaining Employees
- 50 One-Minute Tips for Trainers
- A Manager's Guide to OSHA
- About Pay
- Coaching and Counseling
- Coaching and Mentoring
- Coaching for Development
- Coaching Skills for Leaders
- Conducting Annual Employee Reviews
- Conflict Resolution
- Connecting Generations
- Coping with Workplace Grief
- Delivering Constructive Criticism
- Delivering Effective Training Sessions
- Dynamics of Diversity
- Effective Recruiting Strategies
- Emotional Intelligence Works
- Employee Motivation
- Employee Onboarding
- Employee Recognition
- Employee Recruitment
- Employee Suggestion Systems
- Employee Termination Processes
- Generation Gaps
- Handling the Difficult Employee
- Health and Wellness at Work
- High Performance Hiring
- Hiring Strategies
- Human Resource Management
- Learning Essentials
- Life Coaching Essentials
- Making Humor Work
- Making the Most of Being Mentored
- Manager Management
- Managing Workplace Anxiety
- Measuring Customer Satisfaction
- Measuring Results from Training
- Mentoring
- Millennial Onboarding
- Office Politics
- Office Politics for Managers
- On-the-Job Training
- Organizational Vision, Values, and Mission
- Performance Management
- Personal Counseling
- Preventing Workplace Violence
- Putting Diversity to Work
- Retaining Your Employees
- Risk Management - Safeguarding Company Assets
- Safety in the Workplace
- Sexual Harassment in the Workplace
- Social Media in the Workplace
- Talent Management
- Train-The-Trainer
- Wellness in the Workplace
- Winning at Human Relations
- Workplace Diversity
- Workplace Harassment

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## JOB-READINESS

- Behavior-Based Interviewing
- Designing Creative Resumes, Revised Edition
- Job Search Essentials (Bundle)
- Job Search That Works
- Preparing for the Behavior-Based Interview
- Preparing for Your Interview
- Quality Interviewing, Third Edition
- Strategic Resumes Writing for Results

## LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

- Achieving Supervisory Excellence
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Becoming a Successful Supervisor
- Being a Likeable Boss
- Business Improvement Series
- Business Management
- Business Succession Planning
- Creating a High-Performance Team
- Delegation Skills for Leaders
- Developing a Lunch and Learn
- Developing New Managers
- Excellence in Management
- Feedback Skills for Leaders
- High Performance Teams
- Leadership
- Leadership Skills for Women
- Leading Honorably
- Lean Process and Six Sigma
- Learning to Lead
- Managing Differences
- Managing Negative People
- Managing Upward
- Meeting Management
- Meeting Skills for Leaders
- Middle Manager
- Motivating at Work
- Motivating the Millennial Knowledge Worker
- Office Management
- Open-Book Management
- Partners in Performance
- Performance Management
- Process Improvement
- Project Management
- Quality at Work
- Risk Taking
- Starting Your New Business
- Stepping Up to Supervisor
- Stress That Motivates
- Successful Strategic Planning
- Supervising for Success
- Supervising Others
- Supervising Part-Time Employees
- Team Building for Managers
- Team Building
- Teamwork and Team Building
- The New Supervisor
- Understanding Leadership Competencies
- Understanding Organizational Change
- Virtual Team Building and Management
- Women in Leadership
- Your First Thirty Days

## MANUFACTURING

- Advanced Manufacturing Boot Camp (3 Day)
- Applied Math
- Working in Teams
- Lean Overview
- Blueprint Reading
- Precision Measurement
- AutoCAD – Autodesk Certified User Certification Course (10 Days)

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## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- Project Management Professional (PMP) Certification Course (6 Days)
- Certified Associate in Project Management Certification Course (6 Days)
- Risk Management Professional (PMI – RMP) Certification Course (5 Day)
- Scheduling Professional (PMI – SP) Certification Course (4 Day)

## SALES AND MARKETING

- Building and Closing the Sale
- Building Trust
- Creating a Great Webinar
- Direct Marketing Techniques
- Event Planning
- Internet Marketing Fundamentals
- Marketing Basics
- Media and Public Relations
- Motivating Your Sales Team
- Negotiation Basics
- Networking (Outside the Company)
- Networking Within the Company
- New Product Introduction
- Overcoming Sales Objections
- Personal Branding
- Professional Selling
- Prospecting and Lead Generation
- Sales Fundamentals
- Sales Training Basics
- Trade Show Staff Training

## SELF-MANAGEMENT

- Accountability
- Achieving Job Satisfaction
- Achieving Results
- Anger Management
- Assertiveness and Self-Confidence
- Attention Management
- Attitude
- Balancing Home and Career
- Be Your Own Coach
- Clear and Creative Thinking
- Comfort Zones: Planning a Fulfilling Retirement
- Conflict Management
- Creating Your Skills Portfolio
- Creative Decision Making
- Creativity in Business
- Critical Thinking
- Developing as a Professional
- Developing Corporate Behavior
- Developing Creativity
- Developing Positive Assertiveness
- Developing Self-Esteem
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empowerment
- Ethics in Business
- Finding Your Purpose
- Goals and Goal Setting
- Improving Mindfulness
- Improving Self-Awareness
- Increasing Your Happiness
- Knowledge Management
- Managing Anger
- Managing Personal Change
- Memory Skills in Business
- Organizational Skills (with eLearning)
- Organizing Your Work Space
- Personal Productivity
- Plan Your Work/Work Your Plan
- Practical Time Management
- Preventing Job Burnout
- Professionalism in the Office, Revised Edition
- Self-Empowerment
- Social Intelligence
- Social Learning
- Stress Management
- Study Skills Strategies
- Successful Lifelong Learning

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- Successful Self-Management
  - Surviving Information Overload
  - Time Management
  - Twelve Steps to Self-Improvement
  - Wake Up Your Creative Genius
  - Working Together
  - Work-Life Balance

#### PUBLIC WORKFORCE SYSTEMS | Participant Certification Courses

- Leadership Certification, International Business and Training Association (3 Days)
- Business Management Certification, International Business and Training Association (8 Days)
- Young Business Professional Certification, International Business and Training Association (18 Days)
- Business Communication Certification, International Business and Training Association (3 Days)
- Project Management Certification, International Business and Training Association (8 Days)
- Customer Service Certification, International Business and Training Association (3 Days)
- Sales Certification, International Business and Training Association (3 Days)
- Tourism and Hospitality Certification, International Business and Training Association (8 Days)
- Computer Technology Specialist Certification, International Business and Training Association (8 Days)
- Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC3) (5 Days)
- Administrative Assistant Certification (14 Days)
- Office Administration Certification (14 Days)
- Basic and Advanced Customer Service and Sales Certifications, National Retail Federation (15 Days)
- Retail Management Certification, National Retail Federation (9 Days)
- Loss Prevention Qualified Certification, Loss Prevention Foundation (20 Days)

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# Appendix C: Participant Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to join this program?
2. Please define the term “soft skills.”
3. Which soft skills were covered in the JobWorks program?
4. Why do you think these topics were included in this program?
5. Would you sign up for a soft-skills training program if it were not a mandatory part of a technical skills program?
6. Have you already been able to use any of the concepts that were presented in your day-to-day life?
  - a. Tell me more about that. Have you used these ideas more at work or at home? Why?
  - b. Were you already using these concepts before the program, or would you say that you were introduced to these tools through this program?
  - c. Can you share a recent story about how you used one of these concepts in your life?
7. What was missing from this program? What other topics do you think would have been useful to you in taking the next step in your career?
8. Which was the best workshop, in your opinion? Why? Which was the worst? Why?
9. Did you have any expectations about these workshops before you started?
  - a. If so, tell me about whether/how the workshops aligned with those expectations.
  - b. If not, why do you think you didn’t expect much from these workshops?
10. Tell me about the trainers you worked with in this program.
  - a. Did you like them?
  - b. Did you feel connected to them on a personal level?
  - c. Were you comfortable asking questions?
  - d. Did you feel like they were invested in your career success?
11. Do you view the soft-skills workshops in this program as more or less valuable than the technical training you received? Why?
12. Could you summarize what you learned in the soft-skills workshops in 3 sentences?
13. Is there any other information you’d like to share that you think would be helpful to this study?

# Appendix D: JobWorks Program Evaluation

Twenty-nine participants across three different cohorts were surveyed (in October 2019, April 2020, and June 2020); responses were received from 21 program graduates.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable – I have not attended class
I was highly satisfied with the performance of my expert technical trainer.	90.5%	9.5%				
I was highly satisfied with my one-on-one coaching sessions with the trainer (if applicable).	90.5%	9.5%				
The instructor cares about my success in this program.	100%					
I consistently completed all of the reading material and team projects.	57%	33%	5%	5%		
The trainer is highly knowledgeable about the subject matter.	100%					
The instructor stays on track while facilitating the sessions.	81%	19%				
I am satisfied with the trainer's responses to questions.	86%	14%				

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable – I have not attended class
I am highly satisfied with the amount of hands-on demonstrations in the classroom.	38%	33%	29%			
I am highly satisfied with the Business Communication component of the curriculum.	76%	14%	10%			
I highly enjoyed working with the Business Communication trainer.	76%	14%	10%			
The IBTA Business Communication certification is a valuable asset for my resume and career.	76%	24%				
I am highly satisfied with the Job Search, Resume Writing, and LinkedIn components of the curriculum.	90.5%	9.5%				
I am highly satisfied with the guest speakers that participated within this program.	90.5%	9.5%				
I am highly satisfied with the contributions of the program director.	100%					

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable – I have not attended class
I am highly satisfied with the level of interaction I had with the program director, as well as their availability to me throughout the program.	100%					
I enjoyed working with most of the other students in this class.	85.5%	9.5%	5%			
I highly enjoyed my experience with TechWorks.	100%					
What was the best thing about TechWorks?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Everything is wonderful</li> <li>2. focus on getting a career path started</li> <li>3. Help from the instructors</li> <li>4. The One-on-One goal setting with the Instructor. Access to the Instructor whenever needed. The video component.</li> <li>5. The career development aspect. Job searching tips, interview tips, LinkedIn tips.</li> <li>6. The platforms we used to learn the tools needed to be successful</li> <li>7. great environment</li> <li>8. The resources provided to use for studying, the communication and job search and resume workshops. I enjoyed having a knowledgeable instructor. I enjoyed having speakers come in to speak to us about field of work.</li> <li>9. I enjoyed my classmates and interacting with everyone as well as the material that I got to learn. I learned loads of new material that I can now apply to new jobs and my daily life.</li> <li>10. interview readiness from different employers, knowing what they are actually looking for hiring entry level IT techs was very valuable.</li> <li>11. Access to resources</li> <li>12. The connections and network that I have built, and being able to gain life changing knowledge and certifications.</li> <li>13. Having someone like Walter the Lead Trainer continue to give and build relationships with all; recognize that no matter who we are you can be all and do all successfully.</li> <li>14. The positive and thorough immersion into the IT field</li> </ol>					



	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. my classmates, obtaining certifications, our instructor and director.</li> <li>16. The best thing about TechWorks was the environment, classmates and instructor. My instructor explained and gave great examples of complicated material. My Director was always encouraging and relatable.</li> <li>17. The knowledge I have attained, the skill I have learned in such a short time and the bonds made in the course.</li> <li>18. the amount of information and resources I received as well as the hands-on experience.</li> <li>19. That it made me a marketable person in the IT Job community</li> <li>20. the support and knowledge.</li> <li>21. hands on training</li> </ol>
<p>What would you change about TechWorks?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A platform for us students to interact since its virtual</li> <li>2. more links to research material</li> <li>3. hands on training</li> <li>4. Add more hands-on materials and labs.</li> <li>5. shorter classes 5 days a week</li> <li>6. I would have more virtual classes for certain things, also to have more hands-on labs in class, and hands on experiences with hardware.</li> <li>7. I would incorporate a day or two of internship at a CareerLink for each student gain exposure to life as an IT Support Specialist. I would like to have more speakers speak to us who work in Networking and Cybersecurity.</li> <li>8. There isn't much I would change about TechWorks EXCEPT add in a little bit more hands-on material into it.</li> <li>9. I would make the course longer also include Microsoft or Excel certifications</li> <li>10. N/A</li> <li>11. At this time, I would not change the foundation of this education &amp; training.</li> <li>12. More hands-on exposure and practice</li> <li>13. The location, one with a possible parking lot, same classroom set up with the same tech availability. Also, maybe a day or two in the field overseeing how an entry level tech person works.</li> <li>14. The location</li> <li>15. better reading material, as well as more labs in class.</li> <li>16. Pearson Reading Materials</li> <li>17. more hands on with lab work</li> <li>18. Nothing</li> <li>19. Nothing</li> <li>20. Nothing</li> </ol>

<p>What are the 3 most important things that you took away from this class?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consistency, trust myself, don't let anxiety win</li> <li>2. continue educating myself, be confident and work as a team</li> <li>3. work hard, study and BELIEVE in myself</li> <li>4. That it definitely is possible to have a career in Technology. I feared I didn't have the knowledge or experience and it wasn't an option. But this course showed me it is!</li> <li>5. how to sell myself, how to back up skills with data, how to better search for "hidden" jobs</li> <li>6. Being highly self-motivated to achieve goals, using the best communication channels in everyday life, have confidence in my abilities.</li> <li>7. certifications</li> <li>8. I can accomplish anything I want with dedication. I learned to dream big and to believe in myself because I'm worth it. I'm walking away knowing that there is so much possibilities in IT.</li> <li>9. The troubleshooting method, the physical make-up/components of a computer, and the port numbers and wire connections.</li> <li>10. working toward my goals, learning to find answers, just seeing a brighter future.</li> <li>11. Knowledge, skills, confidence</li> <li>12. Fail faster, never feel like you aren't good enough, and be confident in what you know and don't second guess yourself.</li> <li>13. Success is achievable in this field even if you had no prior knowledge regarding "IT Field." The level of professionalism given daily day and night Michael, Walter, Eleanor. Even if you are older it is possible to achieve success.</li> <li>14. Affirmation, achievement and acceleration of career goals</li> <li>15. certifications, confidence and amazing knowledge. Also, guidelines on professional resumes and professional LinkedIn account. networking knowledge</li> <li>16. Never be scared to let someone know you don't know certain things when you're at a job site. Always be prepared to research problems you have. ALWAYS have confidence even if you first don't know what you are doing.</li> <li>17. Customer Service is King, Tech should become a hobby to further learn it and keep a positive attitude.</li> <li>18. tech is a field full of opportunity, growth, and job opportunities</li> <li>19. 1 enhancing my Confidence, 2 being Successful 3 being Appreciated for this opportunity.</li> <li>20. motivation, knowledge and network</li> <li>21. how to build a computer, operating systems, communication</li> </ol>
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<p>What are 2 things you want to hear more about?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. IDK what this means</li><li>2. recommended certifications to get that build on these</li><li>3. mobile phone technology</li><li>4. Other certifications, especially programming languages.</li><li>5. future classes or trainings that are available, even if they cost.</li><li>6. I would like to hear about Jobs and opportunities for furthering my education.</li><li>7. job opportunities</li><li>8. How to obtain other Certifications and about more career options in IT.</li><li>9. I would love to hear more about physically working with the hardware components of a computer and how to put together a computer.</li><li>10. That JobWorks continues this amazing training, and having a night time class for previous students</li><li>11. Potential jobs opportunities</li><li>12. Alumni vouchers/advancement opportunities</li><li>13. How to become a trainer helping others to become part of this wonderful movement. More about additional certifications.</li><li>14. NA</li><li>15. nothing</li><li>16. When the Network+ class will start up. When Security+ class will start up.</li><li>17. Career Exploration and places to go to immerse in tech.</li><li>18. salesforce and the different paths you can take within the information technology field.</li><li>19. How Successful this Program in the Future</li><li>20. nothing</li><li>21. Salesforce, networking</li></ol>
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<p>What's 1 thing that you did not expect about this program?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That I would get so much positive reinforcement, not just about the program but as a person</li> <li>2. working with the local businesses that are hiring</li> <li>3. for me to find success</li> <li>4. To learn so much in so little time. To receive all of these certifications and skills</li> <li>5. practice test requirements</li> <li>6. I didn't expect to change my mind and outlook in such a short period of time.</li> <li>7. n/a</li> <li>8. That I would experience a lot of personal growth. I would meet so many wonderful people. I also didn't expect to get the level of job development assistance that we did.</li> <li>9. I did not expect to love this program so much and make the connections with everyone the way that I did.</li> <li>10. I didn't expect the class to be so valuable with many platforms of resources</li> <li>11. Convenience</li> <li>12. I didn't expect the instructors to be so innovative and amazing.</li> <li>13. To receive so much valuable real-life experience.</li> <li>14. The personal relationships and unity developed throughout the semester. Very nice.</li> <li>15. That I would be able to learn all that I did in a 11-week program.</li> <li>16. How fast the 12 weeks went by.</li> <li>17. The unity.</li> <li>18. that I was going to be able to retain so much information and attain the certifications I have in such a short time period.</li> <li>19. That It would push me to be a better student</li> <li>20. receiving four certs in a short period of time</li> <li>21. being able to learn CompTIA A+</li> </ol>		
<p>BEFORE attending this program, what were your skills and knowledge of the course material?</p> <p>1-10 scale (1 low, 10 high)</p>	<p>1: 5 responses 2: 4 responses 3: 6 responses 4: 2 responses 5: 2 responses 7: 1 response 10: 1 response</p>	<p>AFTER attending this program, what were your skills and knowledge of the course material?</p> <p>1-10 scale (1 low, 10 high)</p>	<p>7: 4 responses 8: 9 responses 9: 6 responses 10: 2 responses</p>

<p>Is there anything else you'd like us to know about your experience in this program?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Extremely grateful, I know this is wonderful opportunity</li> <li>2. the instructors were very supportive</li> <li>3. I would highly recommend this course to anyone. Walter and Michael, you did an amazing job! Thank you so much for helping to build my confidence!</li> <li>4. I truly appreciate you guys. I had no idea where to start in building a career. Now I feel prepared for the future and now confident I can provide for my daughter (without going back to school and racking up even more debt). Thank you!</li> <li>5. My experience was challenging at first, but once I applied myself 100%. Things starting connecting and I was able to learn so much in 12 weeks. It gave me the necessary skill sets and knowledge to handle working in a fast-paced environment, which is the IT industry. I have grown so much since introducing myself to Michael at CareerLink.</li> <li>6. more guest speakers</li> <li>7. The director Michael and instructor Walter provide so much encouragement that makes the experience that much better.</li> <li>8. It was great! Keep it up.</li> <li>9. Tech work is such great training program and if you stick with it you reap the benefits of a bright and hopeful future. Walter and Michael are phenomenal.</li> <li>10. It changed my life and outlook.</li> <li>11. Having this training experience was GREAT my educator was very informative and taught me so much information that I will be able to take with me in the career field.</li> <li>12. YES</li> <li>13. I feel as though I can grow in this career.</li> </ol>
<p>Optional – What's your name?</p>	<p>76% of respondents answered this question</p>