

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE

Pathways for Immigrants

PROGRAM



Lessons Learned from the Pathways for Immigrants Program

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From 2019 to 2021 the San Diego Workforce Partnership and Walmart partnered in an innovative initiative to help upskill workers in retail and improve their English fluency, opening pathways for New Americans in customer-facing and management retail jobs. The program seemed well-designed to meet a significant need and initially, retail employers were excited to partner. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting disruption to retail operations and staffing required the Workforce Partnership to pivot and eventually close the program. Despite this setback, our experience with the Pathways for Immigrants program has generated valuable insights into the viability and likely impact of similar efforts in the future.

This report describes the program, reviews its progress and challenges, and presents a logic model for future programs integrating the lessons learned from the Pathways for Immigrants Program.

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1. Background

The San Diego Workforce Partnership developed a program to serve immigrants and English-language learners in the retail sector. Our goal was to help workers gain the English skills they would need in the workforce, and to help retailers gain access to an untapped talent pool for customer-facing and management track jobs. In late 2019 San Diego County's unemployment rate was 3%, and retail employers were struggling to attract workers. Meanwhile one quarter of all San Diego residents were New Americans—immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, many of whom struggled to find work because of limited English proficiency. We saw an opportunity to help New Americans improve their English skills and retail domain knowledge, allowing them to move out of behind the scenes jobs (like inventory, stocking, and janitorial work) to customer-facing and management jobs.

Funded by Walmart, San Diego Workforce Partnership partnered with [Cell-Ed](#), the [National Retail Federation](#) (NRF), and local retailers to create a Pathways for Immigrants, a training immigrants and English-language learners. The program aimed to train retail businesses' incumbent workers to advance their career prospects in the retail industry.

Cell-Ed is a mobile-first training platform that supplies engaging, micro-learning lessons anywhere, anytime and on any device. The Cell-Ed platform can be used on a smartphone app, dial in from any phone, or on a computer.

This pilot took the validated NRF curriculum and transcribed it onto the Cell-Ed platform. This approach helps English language learners improve their English literacy while upskilling in service sector focus areas. The learner receives an NRF industry-recognized certification and a \$125 stipend if they successfully complete the training and exam (regardless of the exam result). The Workforce Partnership planned to measure outcomes to test the efficacy of micro-lesson digital learning as a solution to upskill immigrants and English learners.

The program had five planned outputs:

1. Four participating employers
2. Three Cell-Ed programs customized for retail partners
3. 200 retail employees or prospective employees complete NRF exams
4. 75 participating employees/prospective employees complete customer-satisfaction surveys
5. 75% credential attainment among participating employees and prospective employees

The program had three intended outcomes:

1. Increase by at least one level for literacy skills from 80% of students in program, and career path and industry knowledge, assessed with pre and post test through the Cell-Ed tool (Gathered from Cell-Ed Portal data/Cell-Ed report after project completion)
2. 80% of participants complete the program self-report feeling more qualified to compete in the labor market, feel more empowered to drive their own career progress, and have a better understanding of what to look for in a quality job, when assessed through a survey (80% for each) (measured through post-completion survey by participants)
3. 75% of employer engaged feel more confident leveraging technology-enabled tools to support the growth and development of their learners (measured through post-completion email feedback request from employers)

2. Progress

The Pathways for Immigrants program achieved significant progress.

First, we partnered with Cell-Ed to create a custom training program integrating language learning with content from the National Retail Federation (NRF). The tool allows workers or job-seekers to develop their English language skills, learn domain specific terms, and train for their NRF certification, all on their cell phone. This training does not require a smartphone, meaning that New Americans can learn on inexpensive devices on cheaper phone plans. Cell-Ed also offered customized content for employers, and onboarding, coaching, and support throughout training. Although the partnerships with retailers, our primary plan to recruit participants, were disrupted by COVID-19 (see: Challenges), 12 participants saw enough value in the service to sign up with Cell-Ed. At least two of those participants took and passed the NRF exam. Although this is much lower than the program's initial goal, it illustrates that the pathway to full certification is possible.

Second, large brands (like CVS), a mall operator (Westfield) expressed interest and signed memoranda of understanding. They saw value in training, wanted English language support, and recognized potential repetitional benefits of helping New Americans learn more English and advance in their careers.

Eventually, circumstances required us to pivot from training incumbent workers to pre-employment training (see: Challenges). We recommend that future programs at least include (if not focus on) job seekers in addition to people with jobs. Job seekers have as much or more need to learn English and domain knowledge as those already employed, and some of our retail partners preferred using the tool as pre-employment support.

After the pivot to focus on job seekers, we worked with Westfield to encourage their retailers to consider the NRF certification in hiring. 32 Westfield business agreed to recognize the NRF certification. This reflects interest and willingness among smaller retailers in the certification. We recommend that any future program focusing on job seekers be accompanied with a business engagement component to increase recognition of the certification, thereby improving the prospects of program participants.

3. Challenges

The biggest challenge we faced was the unexpected onset of COVID-19. Across the economy, people were leaving the workforce to avoid exposure to the virus and employers were shifting to remote and hybrid schedules. The labor market was tight before the pandemic and, after a disruptive shock of unemployment, rebounded. Retail put workers at high risk of exposure to the airborne virus, and growth in safer, related occupations (like e-commerce and delivery) may have made retail an unappealing choice for workers in a job market where job seekers had options. Between the consumer behavior changes, public health measures, and job market, retail employers struggled to keep up with business demands.

Retailers felt under pressure being short-staffed. They felt they did not have enough staff to spare time to coordinate training with workers nor to allow workers to train during their shifts. They were

more open to using training to prepare otherwise unprepared prospective employees, an option which was lower cost for them, but which was limited by the scarcity of prospective employees.

For example, one major retail partner, CVS, did not have the internal bandwidth to coordinate trainings with incumbent workers as initially planned. Instead, CVS shifted to using this tool for pre-employment support for English language learners and asked that Workforce Partnership direct learners there if they did not pass hiring tests.

Another major partner, Westfield, had difficulty getting their retailers to sign up, because they were hyper-focused on filling staffing needs during COVID-19. In an attempt to adapt, 32 Westfield retailers agreed to recognize the NRF certification, and SDWP hosted a job fair with extra incentives for NRF learners—stipends, Westfield gift cards, and an exclusive hour at the hiring event. Unfortunately these efforts did not result in a single job seeker attending or participating in NRF trainings. COVID-19 wreaked havoc on this event.

Other businesses we attempted to partner with (Manolo Foods, Vons and Albertsons, and other smaller brands) declined to participate and offered feedback about their decision. They indicated that like CVS, they did not have internal bandwidth during shifts to coordinate and train incumbent workers; like the Westfield retailers they were scrambling to meet staffing needs; and they were concerned that if workers spent time in addition to their shifts completing a project for pay (even via stipends), it could be considered overtime.

4. Lessons Learned

The most obvious lesson learned may have been not to start an innovative new program right at the onset of a global pandemic. But aside from that unpredictable, external challenge, there were program design elements that we would do differently based on our experience with Pathways for Immigrants

First, the Cell-Ed platform was a success in terms of usefulness, usability, and service. Micro-lessons delivered on mobile phones supported by coaches and wrap-around services were perceived as useful by participants and employers. One technological difficulty we encountered was that, although Cell-Ed has the capability to host the NRF certification exam, NRF did not allow Cell-Ed to administer it. Although we did not get to this stage, we expect that it would be easier to convince participants to take the certification exam if it were on the same platform as the training and did not require in-person attendance. However, it's understandable that a certifying body would be reticent to lose control of their exam or allow people to take the exam in an uncontrolled environment, where they might cheat. In lieu of allowing Cell-Ed or a similar provider to control the exam, a future similar program could actively support a bridge for participants between the online training and the exam, for example, helping participants sign up, giving them time off to complete the exam, or offering travel support to an in-person exam.

Second, when designing training for incumbent, hourly employees, it's important to consider that stipend payments may be perceived as overtime. A future program can work with employers, when possible, to continue to offer incentives without creating liabilities for the employer. For example, payments could be framed as bonuses, spiffs, or another type of payment already offered by the employer that is explicitly not attached to time in attendance.

Third, if a future program is initiated during a similarly tight job market, program managers can design and present the program as a means of expanding the worker pipeline for the employer, rather than adding tasks to an already-thinly-stretched staff. For example, offering the course to prospective employees with some commitment from the employer to hire or pay NRF-certified employees more. Alternatively, employers could be encouraged to offer the course to employees in positions where fluent English or retail content knowledge is not essential (for example, stocking or janitorial staff) creating a pipeline to higher-skilled, higher-wage work for current employees, filling key customer-facing roles with qualified workers, and shifting hiring to jobs that a larger pool of prospective employees are qualified for. If the organization managing the program is a workforce development agency, it could offer to connect retailers with qualified workers (through career centers, job fairs, or other means) to fill their open positions and give them the schedule flexibility to coordinate and train during work hours.

Fourth, if the opportunity to work with employers and their incumbent employees remains limited, a future program may want to take a two-pronged approach: reaching out to employers to convince them of the utility of the certification and recruiting prospective and incumbent retail employees (regardless of employer). Although this approach doesn't fully take advantage of the business-specific customization available, it doesn't require managing employers' restrictions and incentives, opens participation to more workers, and creates options for mobility for certified workers.

In summary, while this project was negatively impacted by external factors—especially the retail staffing shortage associated with COVID-19—we learned a lot about what did and didn't work from this pilot that can be used in future similar programs.

Based on the results of this pilot program, we expect that a program that integrates these lessons and is less impacted by acute public health concerns could build skills in our retail workforce and build pathways from entry level positions to higher-paying careers in the industry.

5. Proposed Logic Model and Budget for an Improved Intervention

In this section, we describe a new logic model integrating the insights from the Pathways for Immigrants program. This model adds a focus on job seekers so that the program can offer additional options to current retail workers, expanded opportunity to job seekers, suit some employers' preference for pre-employment training, and mitigate risks from volatility in the retail sector. We made several targeted changes to the program design to add and support the new focus on job seekers: these changes are emphasized in italics.

Problem Statement

Retail careers have limited pathways for workers out of entry-level positions into higher-paying careers, especially for workers with limited English skills. Further, many of the employees who can benefit most from this help have limited time to complete in-person courses and limited access to computers that may be necessary for online courses. Retail employers want to hire and retain more qualified and knowledgeable workers, but are struggling with being short staffed and hiring in a tight labor market.

Goals

Support current and prospective retail workers with domain knowledge and English-language acquisition to broaden their career prospects. Help retailers recruit workers qualified for customer-facing and management-track work.

Resources

To successfully run this program, an organization needs the following four resources:

1. A partnership with a mobile phone education platform, like Cell-Ed. *Staff and promotional budget to directly recruit retail workers and job seekers to participate.* This is a new feature. It will allow us to mitigate the risk of employers' changing priorities and concerns about training being considered overtime. It also allows current workers to improve their value on the job market independently from their current employer.
2. *Staff and budget to promote the NRF certification and program to retail employers.* Encouraging employers to consider the NRF certification in hiring is an addition inspired by the post-COVID pivot to job seekers. We anticipate that this will improve the value of participation for job-seekers by setting them apart from other applicants, and perhaps jumpstarting their eligibility for management track positions.
3. Budget for stipends (approximately \$125 per participant completing the NRF certification exam)

Key Activities

1. Training workers and prospective workers in English fluency and NRF certification preparedness
2. Recruiting retail employers to engage their employees in training
3. *Helping retailers recruit new employees in exchange for support with the program.* Taking advantage of our added focus on job seekers, this will allow us to offer more value to program participants (by connecting them with hiring businesses who value their certification) and for retail employers (who seek a source of qualified new employees. For example, if an employer agrees to recognize the certificate, offer a pay incentive for certified applicants, or permit current workers some time to work on training during their shift, we can connect them with recently NRF certified job seekers.
4. Supporting trainees in completing the certification exam, for example with support registering for the exam or bus passes to exam locations
5. *Placement assistance for employees seeking retail careers, preferring employers who are familiar with and value the NRF certification.*
6. *Helping employers build pathways from entry level positions to higher-paying careers within retail.* When the program focused on incumbent workers, our value proposition to the employers was promotable employees. With a focus on job seekers, we offer connection to new employees. However, promotion pathways are key to the value proposition for prospective workers. To ensure we don't lose that benefit for certified workers, the business engagement component should support employers as they build advancement pathways that leverage the benefits of the NRF certification.

Outputs

1. Workers completing the Cell-Ed training improve their English language skills
2. Workers completing the Cell-Ed training acquire retail-specific knowledge and language
3. 75% of workers completing the NRF certification exams pass those exams
4. Workers completing the Cell-Ed training are satisfied with their experience
5. Employers hiring certified workers are satisfied with their hires
6. Employers supporting training for their incumbent employees are satisfied with their results
7. Employers perceive applicants certified through the program to be more qualified for hiring, pay increases, and promotion than that employee would have otherwise been

Outcomes

1. 80% of workers in program Increase by at least one level for literacy skills and career path and industry knowledge, assessed with pre- and post-test through the Cell-Ed tool
2. 80% of participants completing the program self-report feeling more qualified to compete in the labor market, feel more empowered to drive their own career progress, and have a better understanding of what to look for in a quality job, when assessed through a survey (80% for each)
3. 75% of supervisors using workplace-based training programs are satisfied with their results and give at least one raise, promotion, new job title, or expanded responsibilities to a worker within 9 months of completing the Cell-Ed training
4. Employees in charge of hiring at 75% of stores contacted by program staff (e.g. hiring managers, HR specialists, or store managers) have a positive view of workers who have completed the program, measured through a survey at least 6 months after contact with program staff.

Impact

1. Entry-level workers or applicants who are English-language learners have expanded career opportunities in the local retail industry
2. Retail employers have a larger pool of knowledgeable, bi-lingual workers.

Budget

Item	Cost
4 FTEs—Program Specialists/Case Managers	\$380,000
Website and Marketing Collateral Translation	\$100,000
Training Program Design & Evaluation	\$145,000
Language and Basic Skills Certification Training	\$500,000
Participant Stipends	\$100,000
Certification Training Costs	\$145,000
Training Materials & Equipment	\$75,000
Business Education & Engagement	\$50,000
Outreach Events	\$45,000
Supportive Services Costs	\$45,000
TOTAL	\$1,585,000

6. Conclusion

Pathways for Immigrants was an ambitious and innovative project that was disrupted by COVID-19, but still rendered insights that will improve future projects. Based on those insights, we recommend adding a focus on job seekers by directly recruiting workers, getting buy-in from retail employers on the NRF certification, connecting certified job-seekers with those employers, and working with employers to build pathways for promotion leveraging the benefits of the certification. We believe this approach can offer additional options to current retail workers, expanded opportunity to job seekers, suit some employers' preference for pre-employment training, and mitigate risks from volatility in the retail sector.

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