

# ***WCTF Project Coordinators***

Expectations, Challenges & Recommendations for Lead Agencies

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## Introduction

The role of the Project Coordinator is essential to the successful functioning of a sector initiative. There are a number of core functions that Project Coordinators perform and those areas are addressed here. It is important to note that while there are many functions and issues that Project Coordinators share, the role may vary considerably, depending on the needs of a project and sector in which the work takes place. Characteristics such as project lead, project design, target population and staffing pattern may create variations in the Project Coordinator role. For example, while some Project Coordinators may provide more intense participant services, such as case management, career coaching and assessment, others may rely on other staff, partners or vendors to provide these services. That said, responsibility for ensuring that someone is handling those functions competently, does rest on the Project Coordinator. This paper provides an overview of the basic, common responsibilities of the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund Project Coordinator, as well as suggestions for lead agencies in preparing for and orienting new Project Coordinators.

### 1. Primary Liaison Between Project Partners & Partnership Development

Project Coordinators are the liaison between and among all project partners, including instructors, participants, employer partners, site coordinators and managers. Project Coordinators need to establish good working relationships early in the project, with an effort to help partners get to know one another.

#### **Convene, facilitate and ensure engagement of partners on a regular basis**

In addition to day to day communication and coordination of WCTF project partners, the Project Coordinator, in most cases is responsible for overall partnership development including:

- Convening regularly scheduled partnership meetings (notification, agenda, etc)
- Facilitating discussions around common sector training needs
- Providing updates on project barriers, outcomes and progress to assist partners in making necessary adjustments

Partnership meetings offer useful perspective and provide a great opportunity to take stock and see what is working and what is not. The review and preparation for these meetings requires critical reflection on progress and challenges and is an important part of the work of the Project Coordinator.

#### **Maintain continued contact with all partners**

Project Coordinators, in their role as “troubleshooter,” ideally serve as the “point of contact” for all stakeholders/partners in the project so that they are the first to hear of issues and problems that need to be addressed. For example, Project Coordinators facilitate communication between the instructor and the participants, sometimes addressing issues of tardiness and poor attendance with workers or advocating for students who need to make up class time or exams. The Project Coordinator also facilitates communication between vendors/training providers/instructors and employers/WCTF partners regarding employer and participant (employee or pre-employment) training needs, logistics, enrollment, outcomes, etc.

- **Key Challenge:** Serving as a liaison among all partners can be very challenging. Often the Project Coordinator is the only person working entirely on the project and s/he may be new to the lead organization. A new Project Coordinator may need to become familiar with the sector, workforce development issues or the key partners in the initiative. We strongly urge Project Coordinators to take part in peer networking opportunities offered by Commonwealth Corporation.

### **Continually work to create and retain buy-in**

Getting busy supervisors to buy into the project early is key to success. For incumbent training, without the strong support of leadership and supervisors, class attendance may fall off and student learning can be jeopardized. For pre-employment training, lack of early buy-in and support from leadership and supervisors may cause difficulty in placing individuals successfully at employer partners or may result in creating poor retention rates due to misalignment of training and employer needs.

- **Key Challenge:** Project Coordinators may face challenges from various partners, either a lack of buy-in from leadership and supervisors or simply the difficulty of forming new relationships with partners and supervisors. For example, some supervisors of lower-skilled workers fear that if their employees were to participate in training, they will then leave their jobs for other departments or organizations. Project Coordinators can address this issue by working with partners to develop strategies to assure managers that the needs of the organization come first, identify benefits of well-trained employees and be sure that they are included in all phases of the project

### **Specific Recommendations to Lead Agencies**

- In addition to becoming familiar with contracts and the grant proposal, a first step for Project Coordinators should include contacting key project partners and other project staff to introduce him/herself. Establishing good relationships with partners and project staff early on will help establish the framework for a successful partnership and project.
- Projects may want to plan a partnership meeting (coordinated and facilitated by lead) within the first few weeks of the new Project Coordinators hire date. This will give the Project Coordinator an opportunity to meet the partners and provide an opportunity for all partners to meet and review the project goals.
- Assist the Project Coordinator in developing systems to keep all partners updated on project activities and make sure that all partners feel comfortable approaching the coordinator with problems as soon as they arise.
- Work with the Project Coordinator to develop a clear and compelling message about the project, so that it is appropriate for multiple audiences including leadership, supervisors, front-line employees, participants and other partners. Until partners and workers at all levels understand and buy into the project, enrollment and attendance are likely to suffer.

### **2. Assist in identifying training needs and corresponding outcomes to measure effectiveness of the project, for all constituents**

Sector initiatives are designed to employer specifications in response to employer-identified needs. Outcome evaluation will measure the attainment of each project's objectives and performance measures and the success of the WCTF as a whole.

Project Coordinators are responsible for:

1. Assisting employer partners in identifying gaps in employee job skills and where business change is needed
2. Assisting employer partners in designing the intervention that has been identified through joint discussions with employers and training providers, including training requirements, career development activities and other supports needed.

3. Facilitating employer discussion on business impacts (i.e. how will employers know when change has occurred & how will they/the project measure and document this change?)
4. Developing systems to measure, collect and report data to evaluate and document participant outcomes and business impacts

Many projects may have already conducted a needs analysis and other assessments to determine employer needs, prior to hiring a Project Coordinator. However, Project Coordinators should be prepared to assist employers in identifying changing needs. Once implementation of the project has begun, employers may articulate a training need that had not previously been identified as necessary to achieving the desired business impact. The Project Coordinator needs to be prepared to, with the assistance of the lead and other partners, work with the employer to continue to identify and respond to needs. Project Coordinators, with the assistance of the project lead, also need to be prepared to assist employers in designing training to meet these changing and emerging needs.

Assisting employers in identifying business impacts and establishing the performance measures to assess whether and to what extent issues are being addressed, is critical to success. Project Coordinators are charged with ensuring that business impacts and key indicators are clearly defined and are reported on, as required by terms of the grant.

#### **Specific Recommendations to Lead Agencies**

- Provide the Project Coordinator with a copy of all needs analysis and assessments that were conducted for preparation of the WCTF Application as well as the Application itself. This information will help him/her understand the basis and framework for the training design. This will also assist them in reviewing progress and monitoring the business impact of the project.
- Encourage Project Coordinators to maintain contact with, and reach out for technical assistance through Commonwealth Corporation. Recommend that the Project Coordinator explore the resources offered at our website at: [www.commcorp.org/sectorstrategy](http://www.commcorp.org/sectorstrategy)
- Recommend that Project Coordinators read and make use of the Commonwealth Corporation's "Business Impact Primer: Speaking the Language of Employers," available from a Commonwealth Corporation representative.

### **3. Coordinate all grant-related training and career development activities**

Project Coordinators are responsible for helping develop and overseeing implementation of all grant related training and career development activities. In order to plan and coordinate these activities successfully, it is vital that the Project Coordinator understand the contract and expectations of the project, despite the fact that the Project Coordinator may not have been part of the proposal or planning stages. With this said, it may be difficult for the Project Coordinator to interpret the grant proposal and understand how to implement the project without this assistance for the project lead.

#### **Scheduling, logistics, ongoing review and troubleshooting of training**

Many Project Coordinators are often surprised by the challenge of adhering to the planned timeline for trainings outlined in the proposal because of the sheer amount of work required before training can start. Project Coordinators need to establish training courses that accommodate the needs of employers, participants, and other partners, while communicating and coordinating the schedule and logistics with the training providers or individual instructors.

Once the training is up and running, the Project Coordinator must ensure that the training is running successfully and that they deal immediately with any issues or concerns that may arise. These issues may involve lack of attendance, instruction quality or content, individual participant schedule or educational needs, and a variety of other “surprises.” The ability of the Project Coordinator to identify potential issues, communicate with partners to develop a strategy and make the necessary adjustments is critical to the success of the project

- **Key Challenge:** Finding the best time to schedule training can be difficult. There are numerous factors that contribute to the difficulty in scheduling courses, including varying schedules of participants, supervisors and training providers. Involving key partner personnel, including those who schedule shift coverage, will help with this responsibility.

### **Promotion**

The Project Coordinator is responsible for promoting the project and specific training courses, to internal and external stakeholders including incumbent workers, the unemployed, and other worker populations, as well as managers at various employer partners, and partnering organizations. This promotion work requires good relationships, open communication lines, and effective marketing strategies.

In addition to promoting specific training courses to potential participants, Project Coordinators also need to build support for the project among partners, so that employees will be motivated and able to participate. The Project Coordinator’s task is to develop a clear message about the WCTF project, its goal, and its value to participants, supervisor, employers and the sector as a whole. Lead organizations will need to repeat this message many times and to many different audiences, including to project partners, to ensure that everyone fully understands the project’s goals and requirements.

- **Key Challenge:** Sometimes Project Coordinators are based off-site or at a partner agency not directly providing services; this increases the challenge of promoting the project. Project Coordinators will need to rely on both formal and informal site coordinators to help communicate the project’s message at various employer and other partners.

### **Recruitment, assessment, selection, enrollment & participant support**

One of the most concrete functions of Project Coordinators is to enroll employees in training and educational programs. Implementing effective promotion and marketing strategies to publicize and gain buy-in for the training courses, as well as scheduling and offering appropriate training to meet both employer and participants need, as discussed above, will help lead to successful recruitment.

Given that, in many cases individuals are being referred from a variety of sources and employers, Project Coordinators will need to develop processes, along with all partners, to plan a fair and effective enrollment process. Eligibility, assessment requirements and selection processes need to be determined and agreed upon in advance. Project Coordinators are also charged with troubleshooting course enrollment, including “drumming up business” for courses by conducting additional partner and participant outreach efforts to increase enrollment, as well as identifying and communicating to partners, the potential causes for the low enrollment.

- **Key Challenge:** It is often challenging to meet targets for employee enrollment in training because of the extent of employee skill deficits and needs. English language proficiency and basic academic abilities may fall below the expectations of those who

crafted the proposal and project. Employees themselves may not know their own academic limitations until they are assessed. Sometimes, the planned training may not be appropriate for the educational levels of many of the employees. It may be difficult to accommodate the many different educational levels and needs of employees in a single course or training.

### **Develop and hold vendors accountable to contract specifications**

Many projects will collaborate with training providers and project partners to provide necessary training and career development supports for participants. This may include development and instruction of training courses, assessment, career coaching, job placement and case management. It is critical that project leads and Project Coordinators understand that even though a partner or vendor is providing a service, it is still the responsibility of the lead and Project Coordinator to ensure that vendors are held accountable and are delivering services appropriately, to ensure the overall outcomes and success of the project. The Project Coordinator is charged with developing systems to establish vendor specifications and to monitor performance of all vendors providing services through this grant.

- **Key Challenge:** Many times formal agreements or contracts are not established between leads and various partners/vendors providing services. This is very challenging for a Project Coordinator, creating uncertainty of what the actual services are (time, duration, number to be served, etc) and leaving them with out backup to hold vendors accountable. These items need to be explicitly outlined and agreed upon for accountability.

### **Oversee the development and implementation of integrated curricula**

Many projects have identified customized curriculum as a need for their project. Though a Project Coordinator may be relying on a consultant or training vendor to develop this curriculum, it is the responsibility of the Project Coordinator to ensure a clear timeline has been developed and is adhered to. Since the development of curriculum delays the actual training of participants, it is important that this process be done efficiently and in accordance with the project timeline.

Project Coordinators are also responsible for ensuring the integration of employer and other partner needs into the development of the curriculum. Curriculum development committees and focus groups can be used to establish clear learning objectives. These should be determined prior to the development of the curriculum. All partners should have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the curriculum, (learning objectives, etc.), to ensure it meets the employer and sectors needs.

### **Assist organizations in designing and implementing strategies to assure transfer of learning by trainees on the job**

Not only are Project Coordinators charged with overseeing the day to day training and career development activities, they should be prepared to assist in ensuring the transfer of learning from the training courses to on the job functions. Potential ways that Project Coordinators can integrate this into the project design include:

- Be sure that training is being designed in response to the specific outcomes (behavioral changes, new or improved processes, etc.) identified by employer partner(s) and that new skills are built into the jobs that participants will be doing after training.
- The use of departmental forums for classroom instruction helps students learn in context and increase flow of information across levels in the facility.

- Be sure that training providers understand the needs and culture of the workplace and the workforce. Work with employers and training providers to help design training that is integrated into the workplace and possibly set up courses in the work setting, where feasible.
- Integrate supervisor training and overviews into the training design, to ensure supervisors are clear on the skills employees will learn through the training and how to support them during and after the period of training. Additionally, supervisors could be asked to develop goals based on the curriculum overview and connect these to the job responsibilities. Therefore, the training that participants receive will be implemented and not forgotten.

#### **Specific Recommendations to Lead Agencies**

- Assisting Project Coordinators in developing open communication that supports feedback and allows modification, to accommodate feedback, is the key to keeping coordinators “in the loop.”
- Develop processes with the Project Coordinator to ensure that training and career development services are provided according to the contract. This will include processes to recruit, assess, select, enroll and support participants.
- Assist Project Coordinators in developing subcontracts, with all partners or vendors providing services under this project.
- Provide any initial needs assessment, most likely conducted during the proposal stage, to Project Coordinators. Understanding the target population intended to be served through this project will help to develop appropriate marketing strategies.
- Build into the training design activities and strategies to ensure the transfer of learning.

#### **4. Develop & Implement Tracking & Documentation**

Project Coordinators must always have a handle on the current status of the project. In addition to meeting the requirements of Commonwealth Corporation (budgetary, project results, data entry, etc), Project Coordinators will also need to report project status to the lead organization, employer partners and other project partners on an on-going basis. This information will be the foundation to determine modifications in the training design, the need for additional supports and the success toward which the intervention is working. Keep in mind that although this project is usually the coordinators primary responsibility, it is only one piece of the responsibilities of the employers, supervisors and other partners. Try to design reporting processes to accommodate the needs and schedule of project partners-this will increase the level of response from partners.

#### **Specific Recommendations to Lead Agencies**

- Work with the Project Coordinator to develop clear processes and expectations of partners for reporting project data and information. This may include the development of reporting templates, setting deadlines, and establishing protocol for non-responsive partners.
- Provide ongoing support for the Project Coordinator, ensuring that information is being reported to them in a timely manner. Many times a lead organization may need to step in to speak with other project partners on the importance of this information and to remind partners of their expectations.

#### **5. General Recommendations**

- Organization is crucial! Dealing with many people’s schedules, planning course offerings to maximize potential enrollment, and communicating with many partners requires excellent

organization and work habits. Finding a Project Coordinator with strong organizational skills is critical to the success of the project

- First steps for Project Coordinators invariably require becoming familiar with contracts, the grant proposal and contacting key project partners.
- Encourage Project Coordinators to get to know other Project Coordinators, through quarterly meetings, peer networking opportunities, or a mentoring relationship to share problems and solutions and receive support.
- Encourage Project Coordinators to use meetings with other Project Coordinators and the technical support offered by Commonwealth Corporation to gain new insights and jointly problem-solve.
- Many lead organizations have been involved with similar sector initiatives in the past. Provide the new Project Coordinator with access to the resources you may have including computer files, documents and templates created in the past and any other resources that may provide some insights as to what has and has not worked in the past.

#### **Resources for Project Coordinators**

- Technical assistance through Commonwealth Corporation  
[www.commcorp.org/sectorstrategy](http://www.commcorp.org/sectorstrategy) website
- **Business Impact Primer: Speaking the Language of Employers** (available from Commonwealth Corporation representative).
- **WCTF Project Coordinator Peer Network**