

Mississippi Development Authority

Overview

The Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) is Mississippi's leading economic and community development agency. MDA recruits new businesses, retains and expands existing industries and businesses, provides technical assistance to entrepreneurs and small-business leaders, and oversees programs that support Mississippi's minority and women-owned businesses. In addition, the 300-employee agency offers export assistance, manages the state's energy programs, and oversees initiatives that help local sectors become more competitive. MDA operates with the belief that incumbent worker training is one of many ways to keep and attract new employers in Mississippi.

Training and Employer Engagement

Community colleges that are using the WET Fund work directly with employers to develop a project request for MCCB. If approved, the college helps the employer develop a customized training curriculum, and classes are generally offered through the college. The WET Fund covers the costs for the colleges, and the employers cover wages during the trainings. In most cases, MDA requires the trainings to be certificate-based and recognized by the industry. In cases where the colleges do not have expertise in an area, employers can receive funds to provide the training themselves or through an outside vendor.

After the trainings are completed, MDA tracks key indicators of success. Michael Curran, a workforce specialist at MDA, says, "The main things that we are looking at are wage increases and retention. Then we also look at things like advancement in an individual's career pathway or the success story of a struggling company that received training through the community college. We track specific data and then we also try to get as much anecdotal information [as we can] to tell the full story."

Curran has developed flyers and promotional materials for both funds to give directly to employers, and is hoping to revamp MDA's website to make it easier for employers to find funding opportunities. MDA has also retained a marketing company to assist in a rebranding effort for its entire workforce system.

The colleges also have relationships with industries within their regions. They host quarterly industry council meetings and will regularly discuss with employers the quality and relevance of the trainings offered by the colleges. A few years ago, MCCB created a consortium enabling MDA partners and grantees to meet regularly and share resources and curricula, as well as ideas for making the funding process more efficient.

Funding

MDA has two sources of funding established by the state legislature. The first fund is the Workforce Enhancement Training (WET) Fund (annual revenue of about \$20 million) to enable community colleges to partner with companies to develop a skilled and productive workforce at reduced cost. It is administered by the Mississippi Community College Board

(MCCB). MCCB colleges work directly with employers to design customized training programs paid for in part by the WET Fund. The WET Fund is used primarily for short-term, certificate-based trainings.

The second fund is the Mississippi Works Fund (MWF), which supplements the WET Fund and is more flexible. MWF provides training resources for new jobs created by most economic development initiatives in the state, including talent recruitment and employed worker training. This fund is authorized at \$50 million over the course of several years and utilizes unemployment insurance tax revenue paid by employers. Community colleges, universities, and local workforce boards can also use MWF in their work with employers.

Goals, Achievements, and Lessons Learned

Streamlining the application process has been critical to MDA's success. While it was administering on-the-job training funds through WIA and WIOA, MDA experienced employer resistance to gathering information. In response, MDA has kept the employers' requirements to a minimum and obtained information through other sources, such as colleges or the state databases. According to Curran, "When we are working with the businesses, we don't want to drown them in bureaucracy. Our grants are given to a college, local workforce board, or other intermediary to administer the grant. The company will need to provide only basic information, because the intermediary will get the details directly from the individuals when they begin the training."

MDA has learned the value of meeting directly with senior-level employees of businesses to discuss economic development. Curran says, "When we work with those at a higher level—because they are looking at expansions or to locate in the state—we can sell them on incentives such as the training funds. They are looking more at the bottom line than focusing on the paperwork. If we recruit the business, we often don't even have the college or company apply. Instead, we commit to the funds and then work with the college to develop a training plan and implement the agreement."

Finally, all partners—colleges, universities, and WDBs—need to continue to communicate and be proactive with employers, reaching out to them when they have a new product line or new software to use, or when they need to upgrade their employees' skills for any reason. The partners also need to let MDA know when they see workforce patterns that might call for a larger-scale initiative, such as an academy for a specific industry.



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