

workforce

FINAL REPORT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

STRATEGY PROJECT

executive summary

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Submitted by



Maher & Maher
Investment Advisors for Talent Development

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Mayor Kasim Reed

“Today’s competitive global economy demands a prepared and well-trained workforce,” said Mayor Kasim Reed. “A workforce development agency that can support our city’s economic growth with programs, resources and initiatives that will put our residents on the pathway to employment is critical to our financial well-being. This plan gives us a roadmap to maximize existing opportunities and expand efforts to develop a 21st century workforce.”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

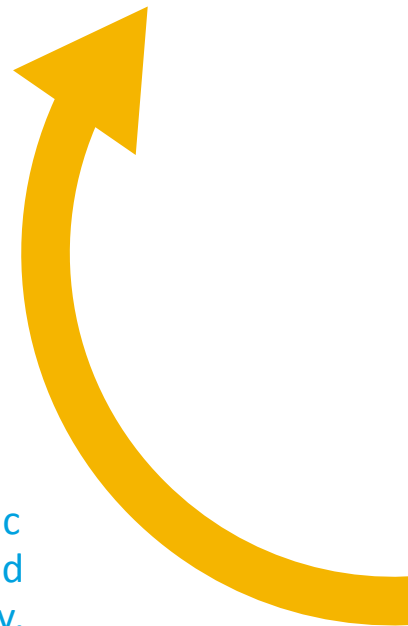
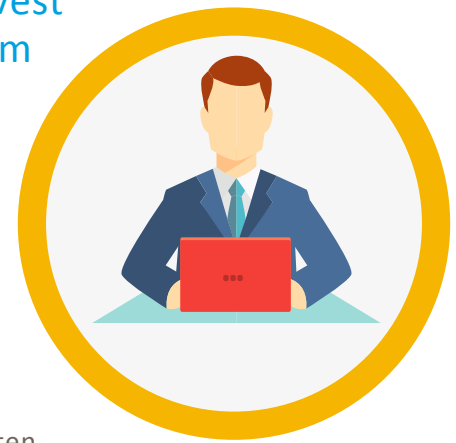
A. Introduction and Project Objectives

In August 2013, after a competitive process, Maher & Maher was awarded a contract by Invest Atlanta for the review of Atlanta’s Workforce Development Agency (AWDA), with the specific objective of identifying a set of recommendations for reforming AWDA and its efforts to meet the workforce development needs of the City and its residents. We were charged with doing research, conducting personal interviews and focus groups, identifying best practice approaches that could make the AWDA more responsive to the needs of the City, and to formulate an Implementation Plan from which our recommendations could be activated.

The overarching objective of this project was to create a plan to align the City’s economic development and workforce development strategies. A foundation of Atlanta’s economic development strategy is to be increasingly globally competitive. As is stated in that Strategy, “The types of industries Atlanta wants to retain and attract require higher levels of training and education. Invest Atlanta should work with the Atlanta Public Schools system and... Workforce Development program, and... team with the City’s workforce investment board and area workforce training institutions to help facilitate what Invest Atlanta’s stakeholders need to be competitive in a local and global competitive environment.”

In our work for the federal government and in states, regions, and cities around the country, we regularly see a significant disconnect between economic development strategy and workforce development systems, a disconnect that often extends to the educational system as well. Therefore this project seeks to address the need to bring educational institutions (K-16) into alignment with workforce and economic development efforts.

While there is certainly some collaborative activity around short-term projects and objectives, our research in Atlanta confirmed that the City’s economic development, workforce development and educational systems are not currently working collaboratively, and in a systematic manner, to set and achieve common, well-defined goals. The recommendations contained in our report provide a framework through which the City can attain this alignment, thereby advancing economic development efforts, bolstering regional economic growth, and improving residents’ chances for current and future prosperity.



Workforce Strategy





B. Organization of the Project and this Report

Working collaboratively with Invest Atlanta representatives, we conceived a three phase process, each of which is detailed more fully in this report:

PART I: RESEARCH AND DISCOVERY

We have summarized the research activities and other actions taken to help us build a thorough understanding of the current state of workforce development in the City. First, we utilized our knowledge of emerging policy directions and best practice approaches from around the country to write a paper describing the elements of an “Ideal” workforce system, entitled “Building a 21st century Talent Development Organization for the City of Atlanta” (see Appendix A).

We then reviewed numerous documents to determine the general state of the City’s workforce system and its current position and role in relation to the larger constellation of economic development and workforce education and training strategies and programs, as well as the regional labor market. We also conducted over twenty formal interviews and had dozens of discussions with regional stakeholders. As a result, we produced the following:

- An analysis of the current state of the performance of the Atlanta Workforce Development Agency (AWDA) entitled “WIA by the Numbers” (Appendix B)
- Our “Workforce Gap Analysis” report, which reported on our economic data analysis of Atlanta’s current labor market and a focus group we conducted on that data (Appendix D)
- A series of “Themes Developed from Interviews, Other Discussions and Performance Research” (Appendix C). These themes were developed from the research and, taken together, define the current state.



PART II: IDENTIFY CHALLENGES AND DEVELOP HIGH-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking the findings (“Themes”) developed during the first phase and comparing them to the “Ideal,” we identified a list of serious challenges for the City’s workforce system. These “challenges” constitute the bridge between our findings and the series of High-Level Recommendations developed to meet the challenges and thereby provide a roadmap to transform Atlanta’s system into one that would be focused on understanding and meeting the needs of the City’s residents and businesses now and in the future..

The recommendations are built around transforming AWDA and the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) into the foundation of a workforce development system that views WIA resources as “seed funding” for implementing an integrated plan that would develop a continuous talent pipeline to drive regional economic prosperity. Further, aligning AWDA functioning with the City’s economic drivers will enable the formation of family-sustaining career pathways that will better serve the City’s job seekers.

PART III: COLLABORATE TO “TEST” RECOMMENDATIONS AND DEVELOP A HIGH-LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

We then formed a Strategic Workgroup comprised of leaders from the broader community, including business, educational leaders, community organizations and more. This Workgroup validated the recommendations and worked together with members of our project team in formulating implementation plans by which they could be achieved. The separate plans appear in Appendix F, and the more clearly stated integrated plan is in Part III of this report.

The following sections summarize the content of the three phases of the project, and therefore each of the three Parts of this report.

C. PART I: Research and Discovery

The Ideal “21st Century” paper, included in the report as Appendix A, revealed the following key themes that guided much of our work and subsequently evolved into specific recommendations:

THE ROLE OF THE AWDA SHOULD BE ONE OF TALENT PIPELINE DEVELOPMENT – That theme became encapsulated in the following workforce development vision:

“A workforce system with goals, policies, strategies, processes and activities that are fully aligned with those of the K-16 education systems and local and regional economic development organizations, including Invest Atlanta. By effectively connecting Atlanta residents with career opportunities and related supports, the system provides a talent pipeline that meets the human resource needs of high growth industries in the Metro Atlanta area. The strategic foundation for the system lies with the Workforce Investment Board, and AWDA’s continuing mission is to ensure that Atlanta’s residents are connected to career pathways that lead to family-sustaining employment opportunities.”

THE TWO PRIMARY PRODUCT LINES FOR AWDA WERE IDENTIFIED AS FOLLOWS:

- Business and Industry Workforce Development – Evolved into the recommendation to pursue a Sector Strategy operating framework
- Job Seeker and Worker Career Development – Evolved into the recommendation to develop Career Pathways within the targeted sectors

THE STRUCTURE AND STAFF QUALITIES IDENTIFIED AS TYPICAL OF “BEST-IN-CLASS”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS actually evolved into the recommendations to transform Atlanta’s workforce system through significant reorganization, as follows:

- The Atlanta Workforce Investment Board (WIB) must be a strategic and visionary body composed of respected leaders and active champions. The current opportunity to appoint a new WIB Chair should recognize the need to install new private sector leadership with the standing and capacity to lead transformational change. A WIB Executive Director should be hired to focus on implementing the Board’s vision, among other strategic leadership functions. (Appendix D contains “Recommended Leadership Characteristics” of the new Chair.)
- A Chief Operating Officer or similar staff member would report to the WIB Executive Director, and would be charged with overseeing day-to-day program operations and service delivery.
- AWDA staff should be organized according to product lines (employer or job seeker services) and function (e.g., assessment, job placement) – not by individual program silo or funding stream. This facilitates alignment and coordination across the organization and its partners and reduces silo thinking.

The following reports produced during the discovery phase described the current labor market environment and workforce system operation in Atlanta:

“WIA BY THE NUMBERS” – The overarching finding of this analysis of AWDA performance is that the agency is managing to externally imposed performance standards, rather than to meet customer needs. This also results in misrepresenting actual outcomes and the failure to take advantage of program resources that could bring better value to the City, its residents and businesses.

LABOR MARKET DATA-Based Gap Analysis & Focus Group – In addition to providing a snapshot of the Atlanta region’s capacity to meet current and future workforce needs in each key industry sector, this Gap Analysis Report highlighted the need to create an ongoing, regionally-based data team to reduce costs, improve timeliness of data and thereby increase its utility, and continuously re-assess the focus on growth industry sectors in Atlanta’s regional economy.

Taken together with over twenty formal interviews and dozens of less formal discussions, our findings from this research were compiled into a series of **“Themes Developed from Interviews, Other Discussions and Performance Research”** (Appendix C). Overall, we found that:

The organization, operations and performance of the current Atlanta workforce system stand in opposition to the “Ideal” system qualities laid out early in the project.



D. PART II: Challenges and Recommendations

Comparing the themes with the ideal led to development of a lengthy list of challenges, and corresponding recommendations were assembled in response. The overarching challenge is clear: No significant aspect of the WIB's/AWDA's workforce development policy process, operational structures, program design, or partner relationships reflect the realities of operating a value-added workforce system in the context of a global or even a regional economy.

The WIB and AWDA are at a crossroad where a new structure, new leadership and enhanced accountability are vital. The current vacuum in leadership of the WIB and within AWDA must be filled before alignment with economic development and education or enhancement of services can be achieved. If there is full commitment to the vision and system of services described in the final four recommendations, then implementation of the first two recommendations is absolutely essential simply to begin to make the major cultural shift needed. Only then can the City realistically seek non-WIA funding to finance its broader strategic objectives.

In depth discussions of challenges and recommendations is presented in Part II of the report; the following Chart is a very brief summary.



Challenges

#1 and #2: The foundations for the workforce system – the WIB and AWDA – are neither organized nor led to address the challenges and recommendations in this document. The WIB has not considered the potential for an integrated, demand-driven workforce system that is regionally-based and sector-driven. As a result, AWDA manages its resources strictly to achieve performance standards, rather than to compile, understand and meet customer needs.

#3 and #4: AWDA currently operates a number of disconnected, non-aligned programs. There is no perceivable foundational service philosophy, principles or framework; little strategic thinking about or attempts to fully assess and meet aggregated customers' needs; and programs are administered without systematic leveraging of relationships with key partners, even though partnership opportunities appear to be plentiful.

#5 and #6: The five WIA programs in Metro Atlanta do not currently share industry information or employer data, yet they all seek to provide services to employers and place their participants in jobs within the region. This results in duplication of effort, lost opportunities and less than optimum services to regional business customers.

Recommendations

#1 and #2: Reconstitute and reorient the WIB to fulfill its strategic policy role. Institute new leadership by appointing a WIB Chair and filling a new WIB Executive Director position with individuals eager and capable of leading the needed change. Adopt a formal vision and strategic plan as included herein to drive Implementation of the recommendations. Reorganize AWDA to utilize a functional rather than program-oriented approach to service delivery and provide for accountability through the WIB and its Executive Director.

#3 and #4: Atlanta should establish a guiding principle of building the City's talent pipeline in alignment with regional growth industry sectors, and in partnership with key employers and education and training providers. AWDA's operations would then be organized around a sector-based service delivery strategy and driven by training solutions creating career pathways for AWDA customers.

#5 and #6: The City should spearhead development of a system to share real-time economic, occupational and industry information, and organize business services, according to sector, across the five Metro Atlanta regional workforce areas.



Build Support

Benefiting

The business community, job & career seekers

Collaborate

E. PART III: Collaborate to Implement Recommendations

In order to build support and gain insights from key regional leaders for our recommendations, we formed a Strategic Workgroup to collaborate with our Team in developing our final recommendations. A full-day Strategic Work Group meeting was attended by approximately forty stakeholders in April, and a second meeting was held in June. After being briefed on our Draft High-Level Recommendations, stakeholders from across the region contributed their knowledge and guidance by providing substantial input in developing an implementation plan to achieve each of the recommendations. The process each group followed, the key perspectives gained in the sessions, and a plan matrix tied to each recommendation are included as Appendix F, and a more cogent Integrated Plan is presented in Part III of this Report.

Achievement of recommendations to re-organize and re-focus the Atlanta WIB and AWDA will allow the new WIB and AWDA leaders to work effectively with this Plan. However, our other recommendations (numbers 3 through 6) are all very closely related and interdependent, and all require working closely with partners from across the region to create regional approaches to talent development. Given the interdependencies and regional focus, there is a need for a regional consortium to be built around the foundation of the Work Group convened by the project in April and again in June. Support, engagement and leadership will be required from these stakeholders to fully implement the recommendations advanced here, and a strong, regional collaborative with this group as its core is, in our opinion, the best way forward. It is, we believe, a critical initial step toward achieving the world-class workforce system the City of Atlanta desires.

It is important to recognize that the recommendations in this report were shaped by the briefings, consultations and other research conducted, and therefore represent not only our recommendations, but the considered opinions and values of the broader regional community – business, education, workforce and political leadership in and around Atlanta. It is our hope and intention that such a broad, consultative process offers the City of Atlanta and its residents the best opportunity to attain transformation and change – and gain the benefits it needs and desires from this initiative.

To achieve the system recommended in this report, it will be vital to engage business-oriented groups like the Metro Atlanta Chamber, Invest Atlanta, and the Atlanta Committee for Progress –as well as the WIB itself – to bring enough influence and expertise to bear to make the substantive changes that will benefit the business community as well as job and career seekers. Implementation will also require marshaling the political capital necessary to focus seriously on achieving the largely regionally-based solutions offered in this report.

