**What Works Cities
Economic Mobility Initiative
CINCINNATI**

Cincinnati: Tackling business challenges by adopting inclusive practices

The City of Cincinnati and its business community are determined to lift children and families out of poverty. The City is aiming to address the structural causes of working poverty, in part by encouraging employers to offer more high-quality employment opportunities. Through an initiative of the Workforce Innovation Center, housed at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, 15 companies based in the Cincinnati region received data-driven consulting on their workforce-related practices. As part of the What Works Cities (WWC) Economic Mobility Initiative, this program was supported and evaluated by the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT). This memo encompasses our high-level findings along with some recommended next steps.

⚠ Issue Motivation

Many Cincinnati residents are battling working poverty. As recently as 2020, Cincinnati had a poverty rate that was almost double the national average, despite having an above-average level of employment. Cincinnati companies were also facing challenges, often reporting extremely high turnover and low rates of advancement. Perhaps surprisingly, high turnover and working poverty have many of the same underlying causes. Issues such as unaffordable childcare, inaccessible transportation, and unstable housing can lead to absenteeism and tardiness, which in turn can cause terminations. For employers, these challenges negatively affect their financial sustainability. For employees and job seekers, job instability and poor job quality hinder economic advancement.

⛶ Our Approach

The City of Cincinnati partnered with the   (the Center), which set out to address the issues of job instability and poor job quality by establishing a consulting practice that helps companies.

1 identify underlying issues that influence their key workforce-related challenges, and

2 adopt tailored data-driven policies and practices that will directly address them.

Through this initiative, the Center, housed at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, aims to solve workforce issues for employers and improve the workforce environment for employees by encouraging companies to adopt "inclusive practices," such as predictable scheduling or extending paid family and medical leave. BIT helped the Center develop its consulting practice by co-creating some of the tools used to identify employer challenges, and developing a robust database of evidence-informed employer practices that the Center uses to customize recommendations to client companies.

☼ COVID-19 Modifications

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic (and the related economic recession), several changes were made to the approach and delivery model:

✳ The Center adapted its approach to lean more on the moral case for promoting inclusive practices, while continuing to advocate that such practices make "business sense."

✳ The Center adapted its approach to make engaging with the Center's services easier for companies. Instead of requiring that companies complete all three of its services together, the Center created a menu of offerings, lowering the barrier to entry to encourage employers to participate, even if they selected only one service.

✳ The Center also expanded its database by adding practices related to supporting low-wage frontline workers affected by COVID-19. On the client side, several employers—and particularly their Human Resources (HR) departments—temporarily shifted their resources and attention away from their engagement with the Center in order to deal with COVID-19-related challenges.

✊ Black Lives Matter

George Floyd's death in May 2020 and the furtherance of the Black Lives Matter movement led to a significant shift in the priorities of local and national employers. Sustained calls for racial equity in the U.S. prompted companies to think more critically about racial equity. In response, the Center expanded its practices database and broadened the emphasis of its recommendations to more directly address diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.
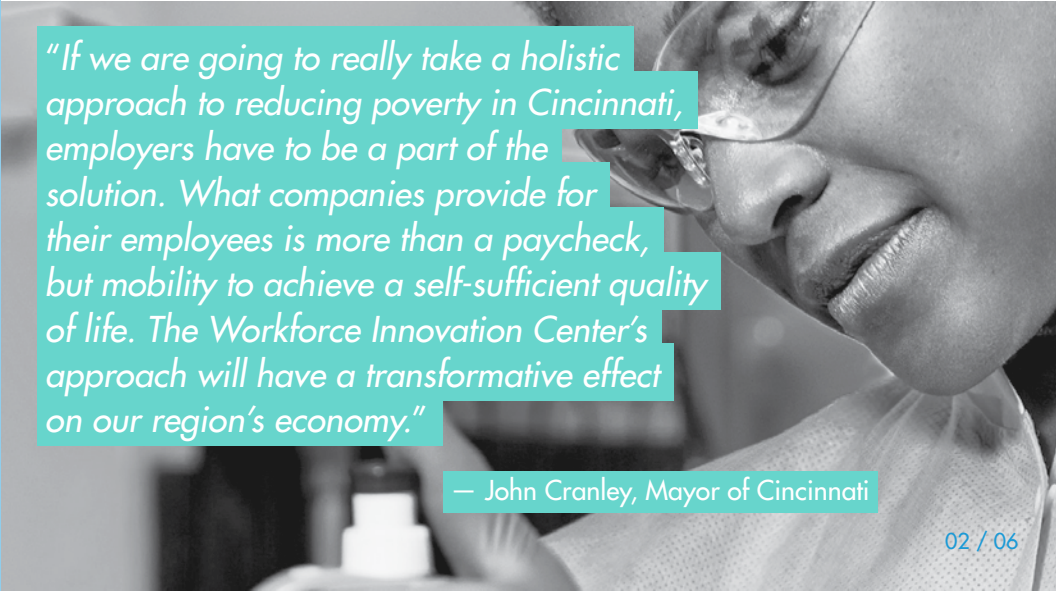
⊗✓ Evaluation Methodology

We conducted a formative evaluation of the new consulting practice to understand how it worked and employers' experiences participating. The intent of the evaluation was to inform whether or not this consulting practice should be scaled, and if so, what types of modifications should be made.

We aimed to answer seven research questions:

1 What types of companies engaged with the Center?
2 What issues are employers interested in working on?
3 How long does it take companies to complete the engagement process with the Center?
4 Which practices have been recommended and selected for implementation?
5 What do clients think about the Center's recommendations?
6 Overall, how do clients feel about the Center's work?
7 In what ways do clients think the Center's process could be improved?

Additionally, we conducted qualitative interviews with five participating employers that further informed our understanding of employer's attitudes and expectations with respect to the Center.

"If we are going to really take a holistic approach to reducing poverty in Cincinnati, employers have to be a part of the solution. What companies provide for their employees is more than a paycheck, but mobility to achieve a self-sufficient quality of life. The Workforce Innovation Center's approach will have a transformative effect on our region's economy."

— John Cranley, Mayor of Cincinnati

📄 Results

We found that the 15 participating employers from a diverse range of industries had positive experiences, and most would recommend working with the Center. Many employers shared the Center's philosophy that inclusive practices can be win-win for both employers and employees, and believed in the Center's ability to move them toward this vision.

Addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) related issues was a particularly strong motivator for company participation, and a large share of the practices the Center worked on with companies was related to DEIB. Indeed, about 30% of the Center's recommendations consisted of the same five practices, four of which are DEIB-related.

Participants felt their value for time spent with the Center was high and appreciated the Center's responsiveness, although there may be opportunities to better clarify expectations for clients. Based on these findings, we think that the Center's model holds promise, that there is company demand for it, and that the Center should continue to work toward greater scale.

Although no participating companies finished their engagement with the Center during the period of our evaluation (see Figure 1 for progress and timeline), at our last point of data collection nine companies had selected a total of 28 of the Center's inclusive practice recommendations that they planned to implement. Ultimately, the social impact of this model depends upon employers following through and changing their practices and policies. While we feel confident that many employers will do so, based on their trajectory to date, the Center should continue to prioritize completion and explore ways to support companies in implementing practices successfully.

Figure 1. Company Progression
Ordered by start date and last updated on 7/15/21

1. Data Gathering   2. Recommendations   3. Implementation   4. Measuring & Monitoring

⬈ Scaling Opportunities & Recommendations

Include HR, or the anticipated project lead, in the employer interview and early scoping conversations

Through our interviews with the engagement leads at client companies we learned that senior executives—who often have a strong connection with the Cincinnati Regional Chamber—occasionally appoint their head of HR to lead their firm's engagement with the Center without soliciting the HR lead's input. We suggest deliberately including HR and the anticipated engagement lead on the employer's side in initial scoping conversations. Involving this person early will help ensure buy-in, which may make it more likely that practices will ultimately be put into effect.

Set up occasional "recommendation debrief" meetings to reflect as an organization on which practices are being recommended most often and why

While the most commonly recommended practices may be the best fit for clients, it's also possible that the current process for selecting practices leads the Center to reuse previous practice recommendations out of familiarity. We recommend hosting internal "recommendation debrief" meetings to reflect on whether practices are being recommended out of inertia and familiarity with the content, or with regard to their expected impact and empirical basis. A good place to start is by considering which practices are 1) most frequently recommended, and 2) infrequently recommended despite having high impact and evidence scores.

Conduct occasional evidence reviews for top practice areas

In order to stay up-to-date on the evidence around effective employer practices and maximize social impact, we suggest that the Center should review and update the evidence behind its most recommended practice areas on an annual or biannual basis. The Center could accomplish this by: 1) training someone within their team to perform the review, 2) periodically bringing on a dedicated contractor, or 3) outsourcing this task to an academic or research partner.

Provide flexible options for implementation support and accountability

Clients appreciated the sense of accountability that the Center provides, but not all companies felt that they needed the same level of accountability and support once they reached the implementation stage. Consider giving clients several different options for the cadence of check-ins after the implementation meeting. Additionally, based on positive client feedback in our interviews, we support the Center's intention to create cohorts of companies that share advice and work together through the implementation stage of their work. Overseeing implementation support cohorts could even be a separate service, allowing companies to participate that were not previously engaged in work with the Center.
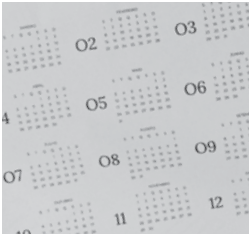
Invest in a shared tool that enables the Center and clients to see each other's action items and live progress

A visual tool for tracking progress and deliverables relative to certain pre-specified deadlines, that can be accessed by both the Center and the client, would ensure that both the Center and the client are aware of what the next steps are at any given point and that both parties have a shared understanding of which add-on services have been selected and which deliverables have been completed. This tool might also speed up the engagement process by reducing idle time.

Follow-up with clients in early 2022

Because our evaluation occurred before clients had the opportunity to fully implement the Center's practice recommendations, we strongly encourage the Center to follow up with clients in early 2022 to gather data once more companies have progressed with implementation. We suggest sending one final evaluation survey to all participating employers to understand whether the positive experience we documented in our evaluation report is driven by a few motivated companies that are leading the pack or are reflective of the views of all fifteen participating employers. In addition, this would be a good opportunity to survey clients' employees and explore whether employees have experienced changes in their benefits or work environment due to practices that their employer has implemented.

ⓘ About this Initiative

The   is a program that aims to help nine participating cities identify, pilot, and measure the success of local strategies designed to accelerate economic mobility for their residents. Through the expertise of the What Works Cities' network of   and the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Ballmer Group, this initiative puts data and evidence at the center of local government decision-making. The Initiative launched in April 2019, with an 18-month timeline, but was extended to 30 months as a result of COVID-19. In each city, a project was selected in collaboration with the city leaders that met the following five criteria: evidence base, mayoral priority, scalability, feasibility, and stewarding taxpayer resources.

Launched in 2015,   helps local governments use data and evidence to tackle their most pressing challenges and improve residents' lives. Learn more at   .

⬡ City Partners

The City of Cincinnati partnered with the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber's Workforce Innovation Center to design and carry out this pilot program to help local businesses tackle their workforce-related challenges. The partners below also provided key support.

WORKFORCE INNOVATION CENTER

city of CINCINNATI

Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber

Working Metrics

gizra

Cincinnati

Dayton

Detroit

Lansing

Newark

New Orleans

Racine

Rochester

Tulsa