



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

Contact: Mark Sommerhauser, Communications Director & Researcher
(608) 982-0324 or msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org

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Supporting Apprenticeship Growth: Insights from Wisconsin Employers

Survey finds employers value apprenticeships, but for many, awareness gaps and barriers remain

Even as apprenticeship participation in Wisconsin is at record highs, many employers still have limited or no familiarity with state apprenticeship programs, a new [Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) finds. Many also face barriers to creating apprenticeship positions – particularly smaller businesses and those in northwest Wisconsin, where apprenticeship participation lags the rest of the state.

Our survey of Wisconsin employers finds that apprenticeships are widely valued as a means of developing skilled workers, and many employers identified roles within their companies that could benefit from an apprenticeship position or pathway. But persistent gaps in apprenticeship program awareness, along with cost and capacity barriers, suggest a need for stronger employer support and partnership development.

Regional differences are evident in the 67 survey responses. Employers in northwest Wisconsin reported lower levels of apprenticeship awareness, greater recruitment challenges, and stronger interest in financial incentives to support apprenticeship programs than employers in other parts of the state.

“These findings suggest that state and regional partners could prioritize northwest Wisconsin,” the report finds.

Employer experience limited outside of manufacturing, construction

Our survey finds that employers view the primary benefits of apprenticeship programs to be developing skilled workers and filling hard-to-staff positions. Many also indicate that apprenticeships can strengthen internal talent pipelines, improve employee retention, and support long-term workforce stability.

Despite [strong and growing participation](#) statewide, a majority of the employers we surveyed said they were only “slightly familiar” or “not at all familiar” with each of Wisconsin’s three apprenticeship programs.

These include Registered Apprenticeship (paid, on-the-job training for adults coupled with classroom instruction), Certified Pre-Apprenticeship (unpaid training programs that provide foundational training and can serve as “on ramps” to registered apprenticeships), and Youth Apprenticeship, which offer high school students one or two years of paid, work-based learning in a range of occupations.

Employers experienced with at least one of the state’s three apprenticeship programs were concentrated in the construction and manufacturing industries, which include many occupations with well-established registered apprenticeship pathways. Outside of those two industries, experience was less common, reflecting more limited apprenticeship opportunities in those fields.

Time, cost, and availability are barriers

While employers see clear benefits to apprenticeships, many reported lacking the capacity or support needed to create or maintain apprenticeship positions. The most commonly cited barriers were time, cost, and the availability of experienced mentors.

Employers outside of the construction and manufacturing industries (where apprenticeship programs are most established) and in certain regions of the state may face additional barriers. Roughly one-quarter of survey respondents reported being unsure whether an apprenticeship pathway exists for the occupations for which they are recruiting. Most of these employers were outside of construction and manufacturing or located in the northwest region of the state.

While we surveyed employers statewide, over 60% of our responses came from businesses with headquarters in the state Department of Workforce Development's Workforce Development Area 7 in northwest Wisconsin, which includes Ashland, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Iron, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Taylor, and Washburn counties. We emphasized this region in our survey due to its lower apprenticeship participation levels relative to the rest of the state.

Our survey finds that employers in northwest Wisconsin face distinct challenges, and have less awareness of apprenticeship programs, than their counterparts elsewhere. This is despite the fact that employers in this region might benefit more from apprenticeship programs, as they are much more likely to report that they face severe difficulties in worker recruitment.

Considering possible action items

The report identified several actions that state and local workforce development stakeholders may wish to consider to boost apprenticeship participation:

- **Investing in intermediary organizations** to support recruitment and pathway development in underserved areas or in occupations that do not currently have a registered apprenticeship program. Intermediaries can also support **joint employer programs/group sponsorship models** to reduce administrative and financial burdens, especially for small employers.
- **Strengthening connections between youth and registered apprenticeships**, particularly in high-demand occupations like nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians. Another possibility would be **developing pathways in occupations with strong youth participation** but no registered apprenticeship program in the state, such as bookkeeping, marketing, hospitality, and tourism.
- Offering **financial incentives, such as grants or tax credits**, which could be modeled on programs in states that have successfully done so. In Mississippi, for example, state grants of up to \$1,500 per apprentice are offered to smaller employers. Some states also offer incentives to intermediaries or educational partners such as technical colleges. Notably, financial incentives emerged as a **higher priority for employers in northwest Wisconsin**, which may reflect, in part, the region's greater representation of small employers.

[Click here](#) to read the report, which was commissioned and supported by WRTP|BIG STEP using a grant from Ascendium Education Solutions. Gilbane also contributed financial support for this research.

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