SUPPORTING APPRENTICESHIP GROWTH

Insights from Wisconsin employers

Our survey of Wisconsin employers shows that apprenticeships are widely valued as a means of developing skilled workers, and that many employers see roles within their companies that could benefit from an apprenticeship position or pathway. However, persistent gaps in program awareness, along with cost and capacity barriers – particularly among smaller businesses and those in northwest Wisconsin – suggest a need for expanded employer support and partnership development.

Although apprenticeship participation in Wisconsin is at a record high, many employers have limited or no familiarity with state apprenticeship programs, and many say they face barriers to creating apprenticeship positions. These are among the key findings of a recent Wisconsin Policy Forum survey of employers designed to identify common challenges and potential opportunities to further expand apprenticeships throughout the state.

Given apprenticeship pathways and positions are created based on industry needs and employer interest and capacity, understanding employer perspectives and experiences is critical to any expansion effort. This report draws on 67 employer survey responses, which were collected through outreach by regional and state workforce development partners, including the Northwest Regional Planning Commission, the Governor's Council on Workforce Investment, and New North. Our survey targeted northwest Wisconsin employers in particular (41 responses were from that region) based on our previous finding that apprenticeship participation lags in that area of the state.

Overall, respondents expressed interest in apprenticeships but said that expanding participation would require stronger partnerships and targeted support, especially in industries where the apprenticeship model is newer and in certain regions of the state like northwest Wisconsin, where employers tend to be smaller and more dispersed and apprenticeship programs are less established.

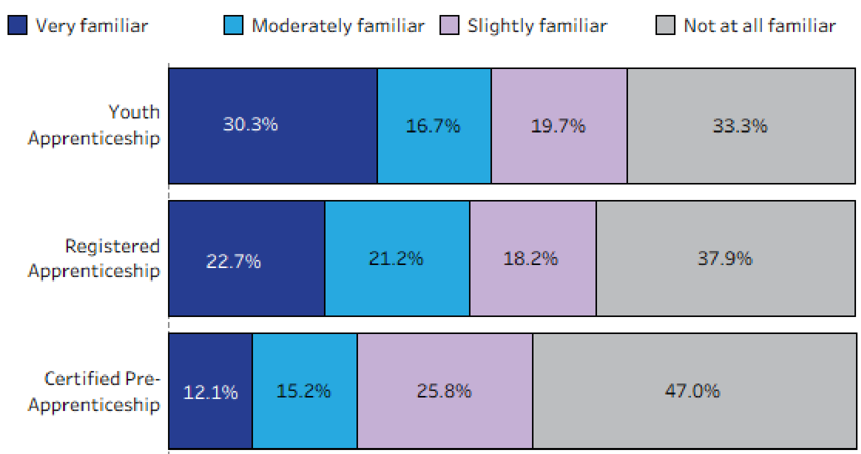
WRTP | BIG STEP's Apprenticeship Pathway Initiative

This is the third in a series of reports we will produce in the coming years on apprenticeship pathways in Wisconsin for an initiative led by WRTP | BIG STEP, a nonprofit workforce development organization. That initiative, and our associated research, is supported by a generous grant from the Madison-based Ascendium Education Group.

LIMITED APPRENTICESHIP AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE

Despite strong and growing participation statewide, a majority of the employers we surveyed remain unfamiliar or only slightly familiar with each of Wisconsin's three apprenticeship programs (Figure 1).

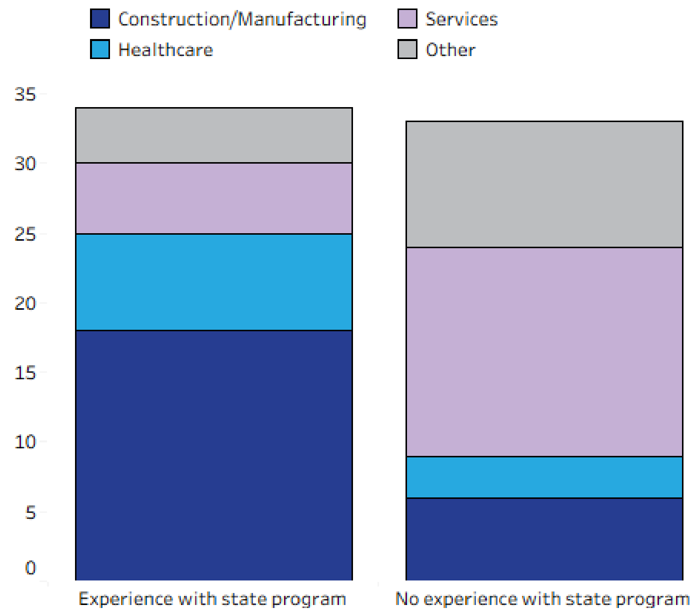
Figure 1: Many Employers Unfamiliar with State Apprenticeship Programs
Share of respondents reporting familiarity with each state program



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

Fig 2: Apprenticeship Experience Concentrated in the Trades

Number of respondents with and without apprenticeship experience



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

Those 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 wide range of occupations.

More than one-third of respondents (37.9%) said they were not at all familiar with Registered Apprenticeship, which is the largest and oldest of the three programs. Another 18.2% said they were only slightly familiar with it, meaning they were aware that the program existed locally.

Certified Pre-Apprenticeship is the least recognized of the three programs, which is unsurprising given its limited geographic reach. Our previous research found that these programs were only available in a small number of Wisconsin counties, including Milwaukee, Dane, Racine, and Brown. Nearly half (47.0%) of our survey respondents said they were not at all familiar with Certified Pre-Apprenticeship.

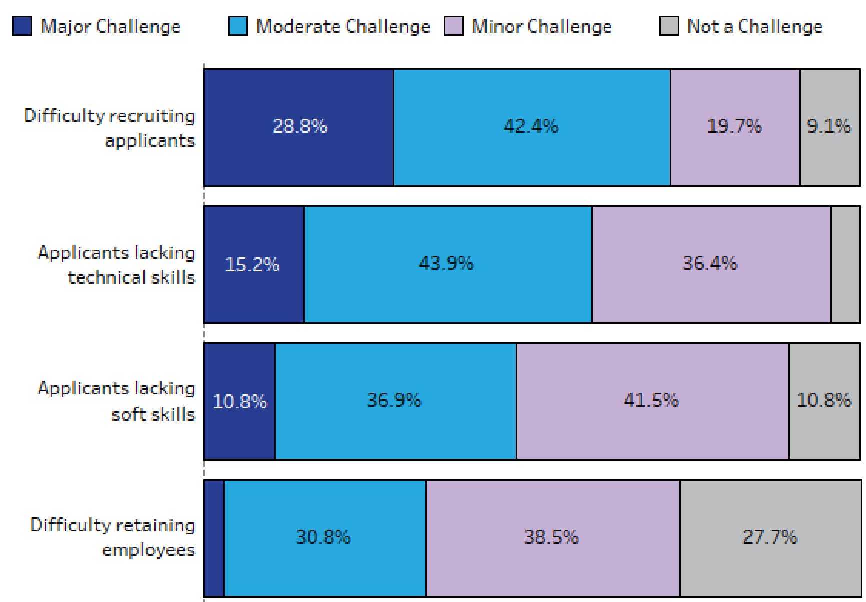
Youth Apprenticeship is the most widely recognized program, likely reflecting strong statewide availability across a wider range of industries. Although one-third (33.3%) of employers reported being not at all familiar with Youth Apprenticeship, 30.3% said they were very familiar with it — the highest share across the three programs. Those who are very familiar with these programs have deeper knowledge or direct experience with them.

Roughly half of all surveyed employers reported having experience with one of the state's three apprenticeship programs, with Youth Apprenticeship accounting for the largest number of experienced employers followed by registered apprenticeships. Only a few respondents reported experience with a Certified Pre-Apprenticeship program.

When broken down by industry, employers experienced with at least one of the state's three apprenticeship programs were concentrated in construction and manufacturing, which include many occupations with well-established registered apprenticeship pathways (Figure 2). Outside of those two industries, experience was uncommon, reflecting more limited apprenticeship opportunities in those fields. Employers in sectors other than construction and manufacturing primarily reported experience with youth apprenticeships, though some health care employers also have registered apprenticeship experience. Service industry employers were largely retail and hospitality businesses, including

Figure 3: Recruiting Applicants a Key Workforce Challenge

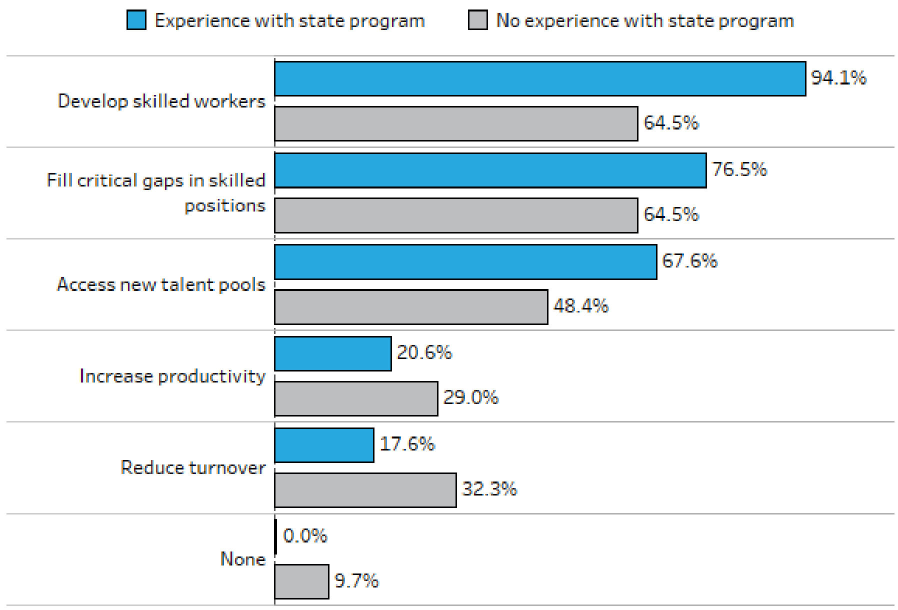
Share of respondents facing workforce challenges, by severity



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

Fig. 4: Employers Value Apprenticeships for Developing Skills, Filling Gaps

Share of respondents selecting each potential benefit in their top three



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

restaurants and hotels, while the “other” category includes a broader mix ranging from nonprofits to professional services employers working in areas such as real estate and environmental sustainability.

These findings reflect the awareness and experiences of employers who responded to our survey and should be interpreted in the context of the survey sample. For example, respondents were more likely to be located in northwest Wisconsin and therefore may not reflect employers statewide. It is also important to note that Wisconsin's apprenticeship system continues to grow, with Registered Apprenticeship, Youth Apprenticeship, and Certified Pre-Apprenticeship all reaching record participation levels in 2025, according to the state [Department of Workforce Development's Year in Review].

Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship program is the largest of its kind in the nation, and 2025 marked its fourth consecutive year of record growth. Expanded outreach by the Department of Workforce Development increased participation from 75% to more than 99% of school districts with a high school. These efforts have also strengthened pathways into Registered Apprenticeship, with a growing number of sponsors expanding from Youth to Registered Apprenticeship.

EMPLOYERS CITE WORKFORCE BARRIERS, APPRENTICESHIP BENEFITS

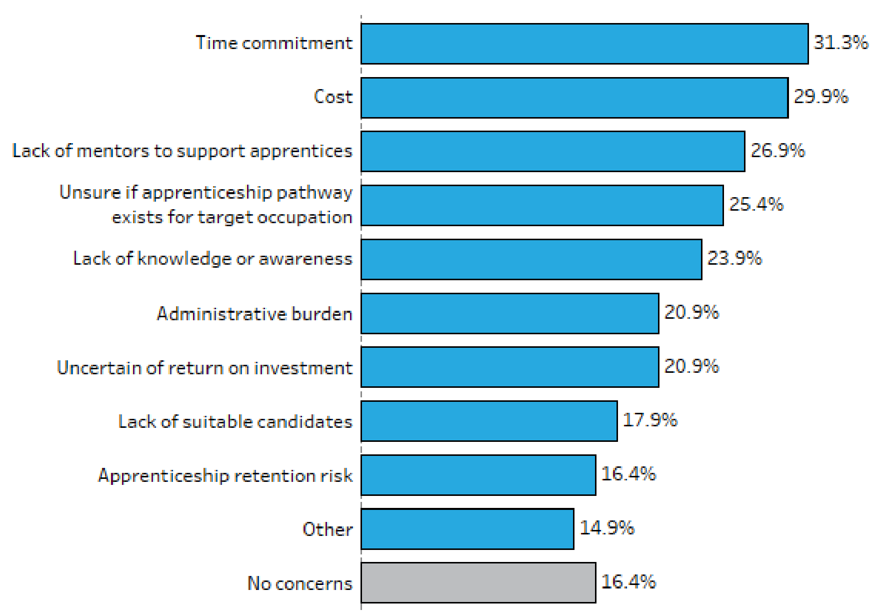
While apprenticeships are not the only tool available to address Wisconsin’s workforce needs, survey responses highlight several common workforce challenges that apprenticeships may help mitigate. Difficulty recruiting applicants emerged as the most prevalent workforce challenge among survey respondents, with more than 70% citing it as a major or moderate challenge for their businesses (see Figure 3 on the previous page).

Skill gaps are also a common workforce concern. A majority of employers cited applicants lacking needed technical skills (59.1%) and nearly half cited inadequate soft skills (47.7%) as major or moderate challenges.

Although survey respondents’ familiarity and experience with apprenticeship programs varied, they generally agreed that developing skilled workers and filling critical gaps in skilled positions were the top potential benefits

Figure 5: Employers Cite Time and Cost as Top Barriers to Apprenticeships

Share of respondents reporting concern/uncertainty



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

of apprenticeships. This was particularly clear among those experienced with at least one of these state programs, among whom nearly all (94.1%) cited developing skilled workers and more than three-quarters (76.5%) selected filling critical gaps in skilled positions among the top three benefits (Figure 4). A majority of employers without apprenticeship experience also ranked each of these among their top three benefits.

Roughly two-thirds (67.6%) of employers with apprenticeship experience also selected access to new talent pools as a top potential benefit of apprenticeships, while just under half (48.4%) of those with no experience did so.

BARRIERS LIMIT APPRENTICESHIPS

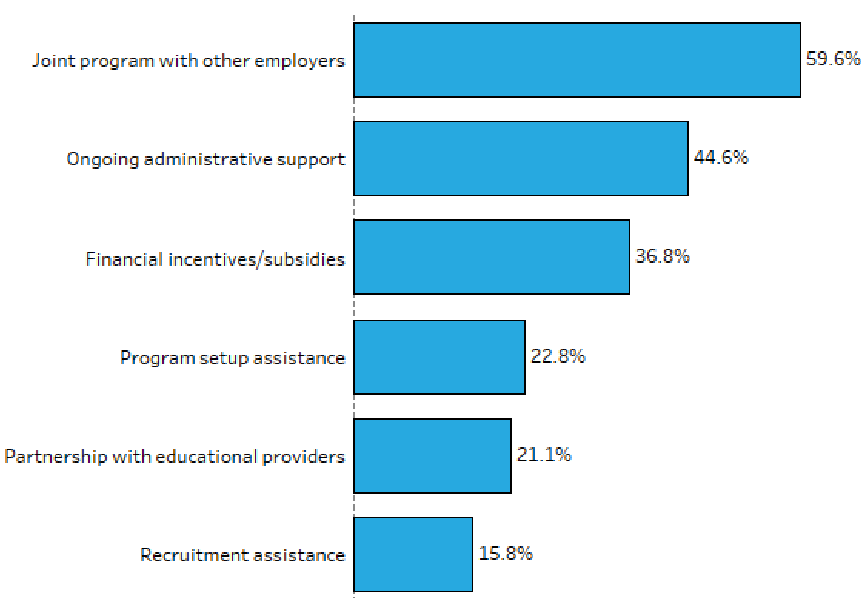
While employers see clear benefits to apprenticeships, many reported lacking the capacity or support needed to create or maintain apprenticeship positions.

The most commonly cited barriers were time, cost, and the availability of experienced mentors (Figure 5). Just under one-third of respondents (31.3%) cited the time commitment required as a barrier, while similar shares cited cost (29.9%) or lack of mentors to support apprentices (26.9%). These concerns were generally more prevalent among employers without apprenticeship experience, potentially reflecting their lower familiarity with these programs, though it could also indicate that experienced employers are better equipped to manage the associated costs and administrative demands. However, the lack of mentors was a consistent challenge cited at similar rates regardless of apprenticeship experience.

Several respondents noted that training an apprentice requires a substantial investment of labor and resources, creating risks if participants are not well prepared or do not continue their employment.

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 (25.4%) of survey respondents reported being unsure whether an apprenticeship pathway exists for the occupations they are recruiting for; most of these employers were outside of construction and manufacturing or located in the northwest region of the state. Additionally, employers in the northwest region were more likely to report lack of knowledge or awareness as a barrier to creating an apprenticeship position (31.7% versus 11.5% among employers from other areas of the state). This aligns with other survey responses showing employers in the northwest region are generally less familiar with these programs.

Figure 6: Joint Programs Viewed As Most Critical Support Need
Share of respondents ranking each support in their top two priorities



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers; *Note: 57 total respondents

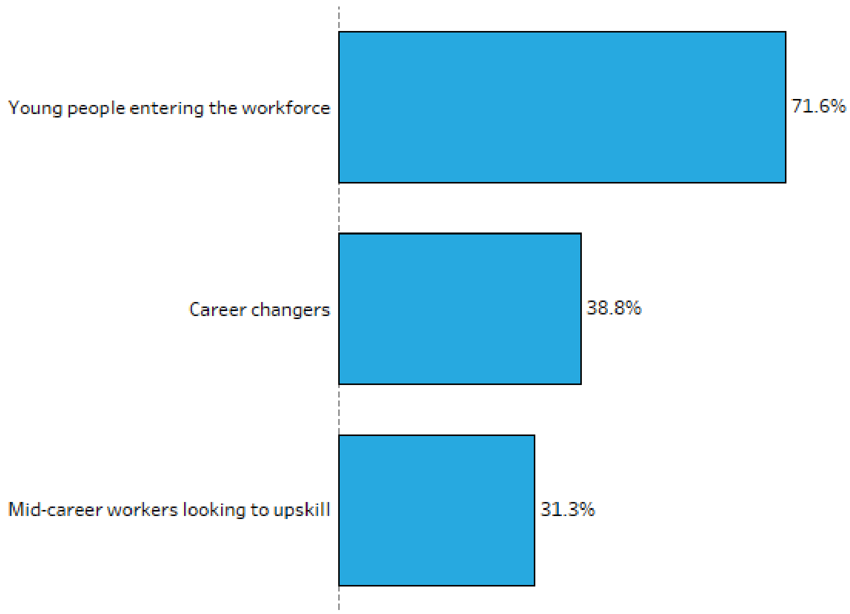
EMPLOYERS IDENTIFY NEEDED SUPPORTS

Survey respondents emphasized that partnerships are critical to overcoming these barriers. A majority (59.6%) ranked joint programs with other employers among the top two types of support they would need to establish or expand apprenticeship positions (Figure 6). Administrative support and financial incentives were also identified by many as needed supports.

These responses highlight the importance of partnership structures that help employers navigate apprenticeship requirements and build talent pipelines. In construction and manufacturing, unions and apprenticeship committees typically play this role for registered apprenticeships. For youth

Figure 7: Employers View Young People as a Key Target for Apprenticeships

Share of respondents citing each population as likely to benefit



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

apprenticeships, regional consortia coordinate recruitment and employer engagement. In certain regions and sectors, workforce organizations or intermediaries may help employers connect with training providers or manage program requirements. In some instances, organizations may sponsor apprenticeship programs on behalf of multiple employers. These partnership models vary across the state, and employers in sectors without established structures may face greater challenges to create apprenticeship pathways or positions.

Workforce intermediary organizations can reduce the burden on individual employers by convening partners and supporting the development or administration of shared apprenticeship models. In Milwaukee, this approach is illustrated by WRTP|BIG STEP's efforts to develop a registered apprenticeship program for industrial manufacturing technicians. Working with a diverse group of employers, unions, state apprenticeship officials, and educational partners, WRTP helped create a flexible apprenticeship program that could be adopted across multiple manufacturers. Following its recognition by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2014, the program was expanded to additional states with support from national partners, including the AFL-CIO Working for America Institute, and federal funding from the U.S. Department of Labor's American Apprenticeship Initiative.

Similar intermediary organizations operate in other states. For example, the Minnesota Training Partnership provides outreach, technical assistance, and administrative support to help unions and manufacturers create, expand, and manage manufacturing apprenticeship programs. Likewise, the Greater Cleveland Partnership has supported apprenticeship growth across multiple industries, launching 12 new programs in 2023 in occupations such as hotel and restaurant manager, insurance associate, and retail banking teller.

SECTOR AND PIPELINE OPPORTUNITIES

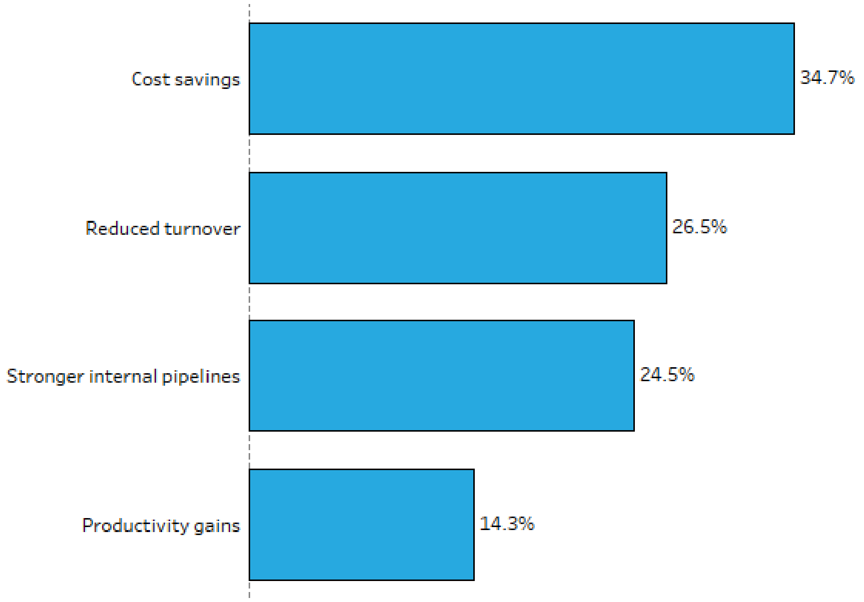
Many employers across industries see opportunities to expand existing apprenticeship pathways or develop new ones. More than half of our survey respondents (57.4%) reported having roles within their businesses that could benefit from an apprenticeship program. Employers in sectors outside of construction and manufacturing were just as likely to identify these opportunities. At the same time, nearly one-third (31.1%) were unsure whether their businesses had roles well suited to apprenticeship, suggesting both interest and uncertainty across industries.

Employers view young people entering the workforce as the strongest target population for apprenticeships. A strong majority (71.6%) of respondents indicated that this group would likely benefit from apprenticeship opportunities — far higher than the shares that identified career changers (38.8%) or mid-career workers looking to upskill (31.3%) as likely to benefit (Figure 7).

Employers also identified opportunities to create or expand apprenticeships in occupations that currently have limited or no registered apprenticeship pathways in Wisconsin, including bookkeeping and accounting, marketing, hospitality and tourism, and certain health care roles. Some of these occupations already have nationally recognized apprenticeship standards or strong youth apprenticeship participation, which may reduce barriers to developing new programs.

Fig. 8: Cost Savings Would Make Apprenticeships "Worth it" for Employers

Share of respondents ranking each outcome as top factor making apprenticeships worthwhile



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers. *Note: 49 total respondents

The health care sector illustrates both the opportunities and challenges involved in establishing new apprenticeship pathways. Large health care employers in Dane, Milwaukee, and St. Croix counties have worked with regional workforce boards, area technical colleges, and the state Department of Workforce Development to create registered apprenticeship programs for nursing assistants, pharmacy technicians, and other in-demand occupations. However, some health care employers in these regions still reported difficulties securing supervisor buy-in and establishing partnerships with educational partners. These partnerships are essential, since technical colleges typically provide mandated classroom instruction and collaborate with employers and the Department of Workforce Development to create training standards.

The health care sector also offers a strong example of how youth apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship can work together. Every surveyed health care employer with registered apprenticeship experience also reported having a youth apprenticeship program or plans to launch one. Our previous research also found that this sector has stronger pipelines between the two programs, particularly in high-demand roles such as nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians. This alignment is partly driven by the popularity of youth apprenticeships in health care, with more participating youth working in this sector than in any other, reflecting both strong industry growth and student interest.

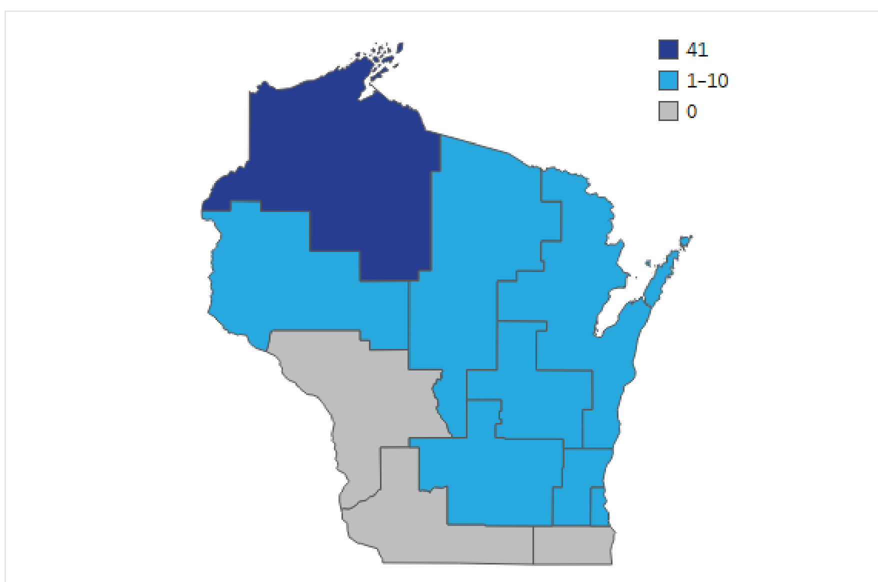
MEASURING SUCCESS

Many employers identified specific outcomes that would make apprenticeship programs worthwhile for their businesses, with their priorities often closely mirroring the barriers they reported previously. Cost savings was the most frequently cited outcome that would make apprenticeships "worth it," selected by 34.7% of respondents (Figure 8). This aligns with cost being one of the most frequently cited barriers to establishing apprenticeships. Since apprenticeship programs require significant upfront investment of time and financial resources, cost savings are more likely to be realized over the long term through workforce pipeline development rather than over the short term.

Reducing turnover (26.5%) and strengthening internal pipelines (24.5%) were also cited by many employers as

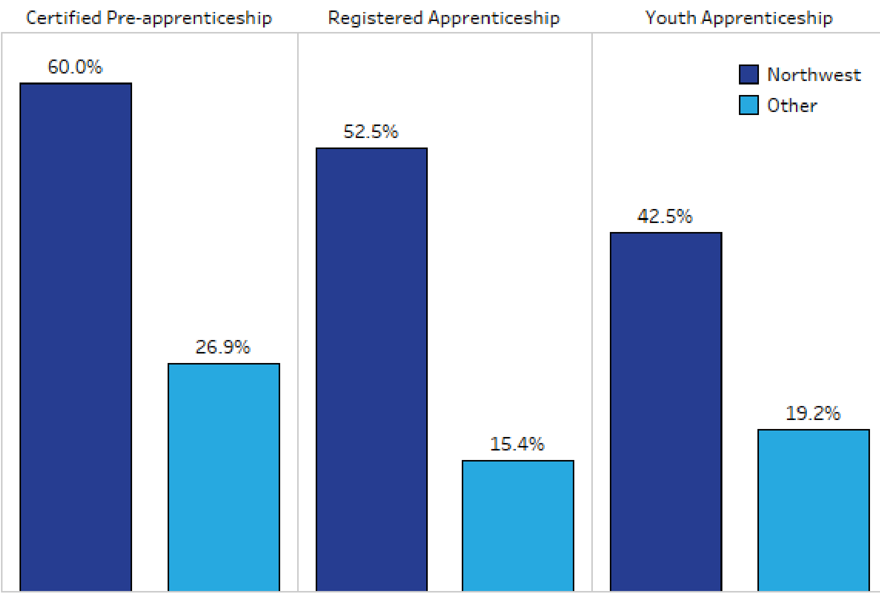
Figure 9: Majority of Employer Respondents from Northwest Wisconsin

Number of respondents by state workforce development area



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

Figure 10: Northwest Employers Less Aware of Apprenticeship Programs
Share of respondents not at all familiar with each state program, NW WI vs. rest of state



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers

key measures of success. In open-ended responses, several employers emphasized that apprenticeships would be worthwhile if they could help build a sustainable internal pipeline of trained workers and develop future leaders or supervisors.

Meanwhile, a smaller share of respondents prioritized productivity gains (14.3%) as the primary measure of success, which may suggest that most employers view apprenticeships less as a short-term efficiency strategy and more as a long-term workforce development tool.

ADDRESSING GAPS IN NORTHWEST WISCONSIN

Employers in northwest Wisconsin face distinct workforce challenges and lower awareness of apprenticeship programs than those in other areas of the state. While we surveyed employers statewide, over 60% of our responses came from businesses with headquarters in the northwest Wisconsin workforce development area (Figure 9) — a region we targeted due to its lower apprenticeship participation levels relative to the rest of the state.

Employers in northwest Wisconsin were more likely than those elsewhere in the state to identify stronger internal workforce pipelines as a key measure of success for apprenticeship programs, which may reflect more acute workforce challenges in the region. More than one-third (36.7%) of respondents from the region selected stronger internal pipelines as the top outcome that would make apprenticeships worthwhile, compared to only 5.3% of respondents outside the region.

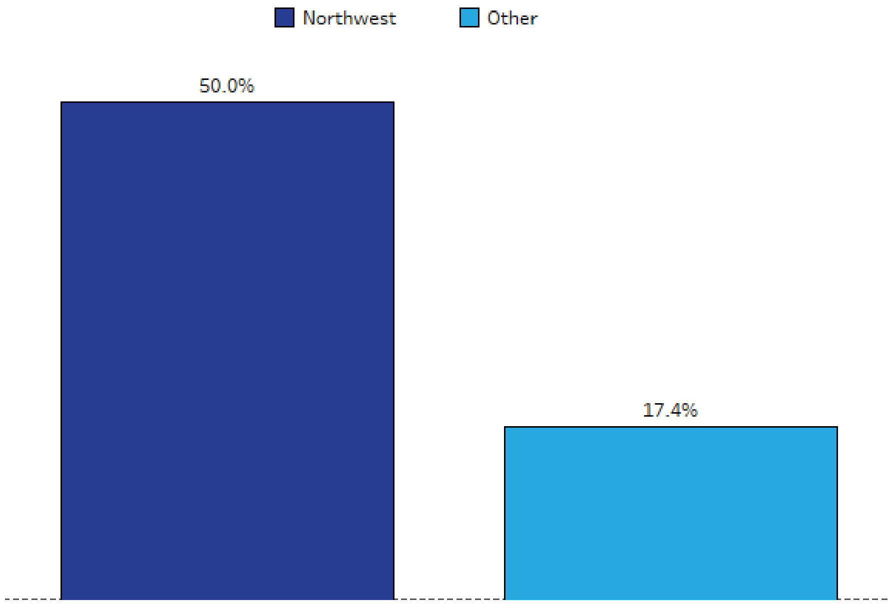
This aligns with the region's more severe recruitment challenges: 36.6% of northwest Wisconsin employers reported major recruitment difficulties, compared to 16.0% of employers from other regions. In open-ended responses, some employers cited limited housing as a barrier to attracting workers to northwest Wisconsin. Local workforce development leaders also pointed to demographic and transportation challenges – such as an aging population, difficulty attracting and retaining young workers, long distances to access related instruction, and geographically dispersed employers – as additional barriers to participation.

Despite these workforce pressures, employers in the northwest region lack awareness of apprenticeship programs. Across all three state programs, employers in the northwest were more likely to report being not at all familiar with these programs than respondents elsewhere in Wisconsin (Figure 10). This was the case even for the Youth Apprenticeship program, despite its strong statewide presence; 42.5% of employers in the northwest region reported being not at all familiar with it, which was more than double the rate among employers from the rest of the state (19.2%).

Limited regional support structures may contribute to these awareness gaps. While the state's 11 regional workforce boards are responsible for strengthening local workforce connections, some have limited experience and involvement with apprenticeships, including the Northwest Wisconsin Workforce Investment Board. Local workforce development leaders stressed that the region's apprenticeship challenges stem from structural barriers rather than from a lack of local interest in expanding apprenticeship use. For example, there is no state apprenticeship training representative in northwest Wisconsin, with the nearest one located just outside that region in Eau Claire. These regional employees of the state Department of Workforce Development help employers

Figure 11: Financial Incentives Viewed as a Higher-Priority in Northwest WI

Share of respondents ranking financial support in top two priorities, NW WI vs. rest of state



Source: WPF survey of Wisconsin employers; *Note: 34 total respondents in NW; 23 in rest of state

start and maintain apprenticeships. They also noted Minnesota's strong influence on the trades in northwest Wisconsin.

When ranking the types of support needed to create or expand apprenticeships, financial incentives emerged as a higher priority for employers in northwest Wisconsin. Exactly half of respondents from the region ranked financial support among their top two needs — more than double the share (17.4%) from the rest of the state (see Figure 11 on the next page). Most other supports were valued similarly across regions.

The widespread interest in financial incentives in northwest Wisconsin may reflect the region's greater representation of small employers among survey respondents, who were more likely to report cost concerns. In the northwest region, 43.9% of respondents were from companies with fewer than 10 employees, compared to only 15.4% of those from other areas of the state. Statewide, cost concerns were reported by more than half (54.5%) of employers in companies with fewer than 10 employees, while only 17.8% of employers from companies with 10 or more employees reported this concern. These differences may suggest that smaller employers in the northwest region face greater financial constraints when considering apprenticeship programs.

Through the Apprenticeship Completion Award Program, the state of Wisconsin offers a financial incentive designed to reduce training costs for apprentices and sponsors. This program provides partial reimbursement of up to $1,000 or 25% of tuition costs for the related instruction required for a registered apprenticeship.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our survey suggest that Wisconsin employers view apprenticeships as a valuable workforce development strategy with strong potential to address current and future labor market needs. Employers identified developing skilled workers and filling hard-to-staff positions as the primary benefits of apprenticeship programs. Many also indicated that apprenticeships can strengthen internal talent pipelines, improve employee retention, and support long-term workforce stability.

The survey also highlights opportunities to expand the apprenticeship model into new industries and occupations. Respondents identified promising pathways in fields such as bookkeeping and accounting, hospitality, tourism, and marketing. Several of these occupations already have established apprenticeship standards nationally or strong participation in youth apprenticeship programs in Wisconsin, providing a foundation for future growth. Continuing to strengthen connections between youth and registered apprenticeship programs may be an effective strategy for expanding participation while creating clearer career pathways in high-demand occupations.

Despite this potential, significant barriers remain. Many employers – particularly those outside of construction and manufacturing – lack the awareness, capacity, or resources needed to establish apprenticeship positions. The costs of sustaining a paid apprenticeship program are also a major concern, especially for small employers and those in northwest Wisconsin. Employers consistently emphasized the importance of partnerships and external support, including collaboration with educational institutions, workforce development and intermediary organizations, and other employers.

Administrative assistance, recruitment support, and guidance with program development were viewed as critical factors for successful expansion.

The findings also reveal important regional differences. Employers in northwest Wisconsin reported lower levels of apprenticeship awareness, greater recruitment challenges, and stronger interest in financial incentives than employers in other parts of the state. Smaller employers in the region may face additional constraints related to capacity and resources. These findings suggest that state and regional partners could prioritize northwest Wisconsin for outreach, technical assistance, and the expansion of intermediary and pre-apprenticeship training models.

Targeted financial incentives may help reduce barriers for employers seeking to launch or expand apprenticeship programs, particularly in emerging industries and underserved regions. This strategy may be especially helpful for smaller employers, who were more likely to identify cost as a barrier.

Overall, our survey results indicate that apprenticeship remains a promising strategy for addressing workforce shortages across Wisconsin. Continued investment in employer support, partnership development, pre-apprenticeship programming, and pathway expansion can help further increase participation and strengthen the state's workforce across a broader range of industries and occupations.