

SKILLS ECONOMY TOOLKIT

ACTION GUIDE: MAP YOUR PATH FORWARD

Introduction

Every board's journey to a skills economy is unique. Some start by convening employers, others by building digital infrastructure. Some move quickly with strong funding, others take incremental steps with existing resources. There's no single "right" path, but there are patterns that help you see where you are, where you're going, and what comes next.

This action guide is not intended to be a strategic plan with detailed timelines and budgets. It's a journey map, a visual way to understand the natural progression from *awareness to transformation*, identify where you are today, and chart realistic next steps. Use it to communicate your journey to board members, partners, make decisions about sequencing, and celebrate progress along the way.

Why Journey Mapping Matters

A journey map helps you:

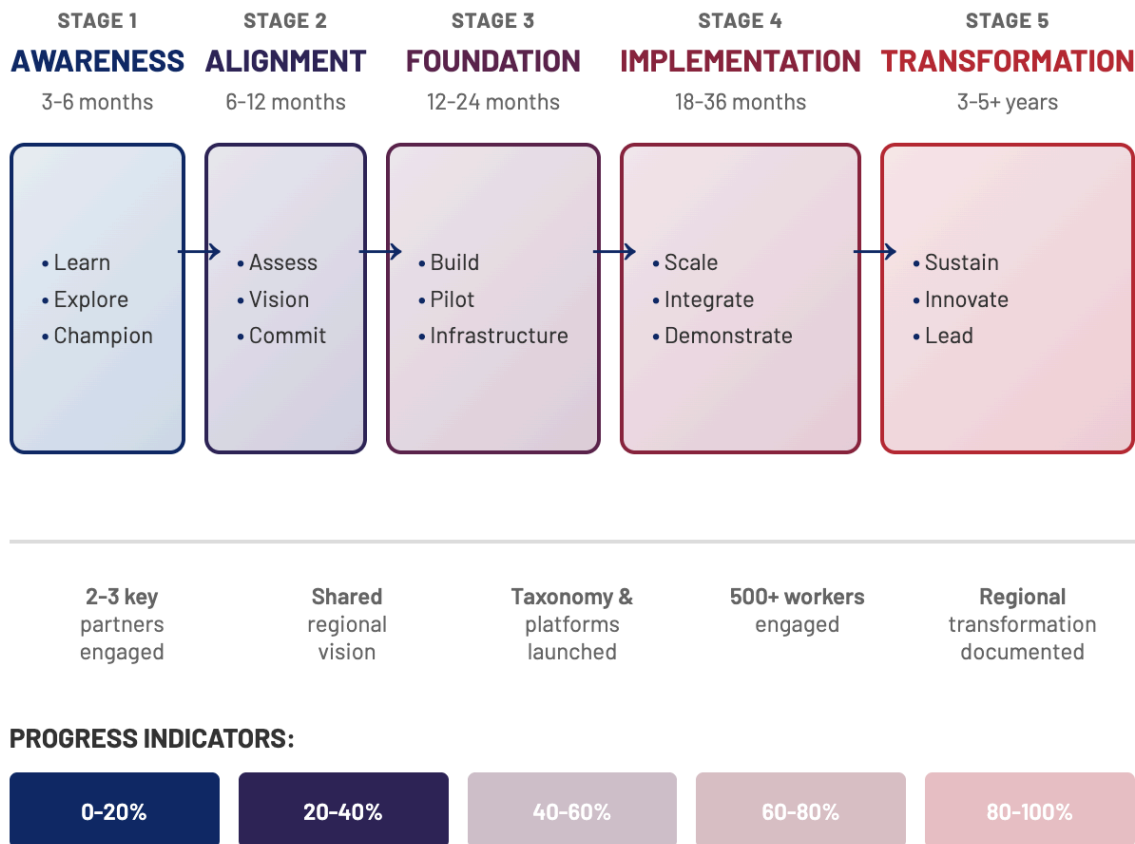
- **Normalize where you are:** Understand that early stages are necessary, not failures
 - **Sequence smartly:** Know what typically comes before what
 - **Set realistic timelines:** See that transformation takes 3-5 years, not months
 - **Avoid common pitfalls:** Learn from boards that tried to skip stages
 - **Communicate progress:** Show partners you're moving forward even when outcomes aren't visible yet
 - **Make strategic choices:** Decide which path fits your context and capacity
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Without a journey map, boards:

- Try to do everything at once and accomplish little
- Expect immediate outcomes and lose momentum when change is slow
- Can't explain to people and partners why foundation-building matters
- Don't recognize progress because they're measuring against the wrong stage

The Five Stages of Skills Economy Development

Most boards move through these stages over 3-5 years. The timeline varies, but the sequence is remarkably consistent. We've created a visual diagram of the Skills Economy Journey Map boards that will be experienced.



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Stage 1: AWARENESS (3-6 months)

What's Happening	Success Indicators
<p>Board members, staff, and key partners are learning about skills economy concepts and exploring relevance to your region</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leadership understands what the skills economy means ● Initial interest from 2-3 key partners ● Skills economy appears in board conversations
Key Activities	Common Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sharing toolkits and research ● Attending conferences and webinars ● Having initial conversations about skills-based approaches ● Identifying early champions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skepticism: "We already do this." ● Competing priorities ● Unclear how to start

Stage 2: ALIGNMENT (6-12 months)

What's Happening	Success Indicators
<p>Building shared understanding and commitment among stakeholders; conducting assessments to understand the current state and opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shared regional vision documented ● Core group of champions committed ● Readiness assessment completed ● Early priorities identified
Key Activities	Common Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skills Readiness Assessment ● Skills Economy Visioning workshops ● Partner and worker interviews and focus groups ● Labor market analysis ● Identifying gaps and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Getting diverse stakeholders to the table ● Competing visions for the future ● Pressure to show results before the foundation is built

Stage 3: FOUNDATION (12-24 months)

What's Happening	Success Indicators
Building essential infrastructure, partnerships, and capabilities needed for skills transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills framework adopted • Partnership governance established • At least one pilot is underway • Resources allocated to skills work
Key Activities	Common Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting or adapting skills taxonomy • Establishing data governance • Convening regular stakeholder groups • Piloting initial skills-based initiatives • Securing dedicated funding or staff capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical complexity of taxonomies and platforms • Partner capacity limitations • Pilot scale too small to demonstrate impact • Impatience from stakeholders wanting faster results

Stage 4: IMPLEMENTATION (18-36 months)

What's Happening	Success Indicators
Scaling successful pilots, integrating skills approaches into operations, and demonstrating early outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple employers use skills in hiring • Credentials recognized by 10+ employers • Workers earn and share credentials • Measurable outcomes emerging
Key Activities	Common Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers adopting skills-based job descriptions • Training providers aligning with the skills framework • Digital credentials or badges are being issued • Career centers integrating skills into services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uneven adoption across partners • Technology integration issues • Change management resistance • Sustaining momentum

- Collecting and analyzing outcome data

Stage 5: TRANSFORMATION (3+ years)

What's Happening	Success Indicators
<p>Skills approaches are embedded across the ecosystem; continuous improvement and innovation; demonstrating regional impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills language used routinely by all partners • Measurable impact on employment and wages • Self-sustaining governance and funding • Regional recognition as skills leader
Key Activities	Common Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills infrastructure operating at scale • Partners co-investing in maintenance and growth • Continuous improvement based on data • Sharing lessons with other regions • Influencing state/national policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining innovation as work becomes routine • Sustaining funding as grants end • Adapting to technology and labor market changes

TOOL 1: Plot Your Current Position

Use this tool to identify where you are in the journey:

Stage	Do These Describe Your Board?	Score (0-5)
AWARENESS	<input type="checkbox"/> We're learning about skills economy concepts <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership is exploring relevance <input type="checkbox"/> We've shared resources with the board/staff <input type="checkbox"/> Early champions are emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Skills are part of conversations	
ALIGNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> We've conducted a readiness assessment <input type="checkbox"/> We have a documented vision <input type="checkbox"/> Core partners are committed <input type="checkbox"/> We've identified gaps and priorities <input type="checkbox"/> Stakeholders share a common language	
FOUNDATION	<input type="checkbox"/> We've adopted a skills framework <input type="checkbox"/> Data governance is established <input type="checkbox"/> Regular stakeholder convenings occur <input type="checkbox"/> At least one pilot is underway <input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated resources allocated	
IMPLEMENTATION	<input type="checkbox"/> Multiple pilots are scaling <input type="checkbox"/> Employers use skills in hiring <input type="checkbox"/> Credentials are being issued and recognized <input type="checkbox"/> Early outcomes documented <input type="checkbox"/> Integration into core operations	
TRANSFORMATION	<input type="checkbox"/> Skills infrastructure at scale <input type="checkbox"/> Measurable regional impact <input type="checkbox"/> Self-sustaining governance/funding <input type="checkbox"/> Continuous improvement cycles <input type="checkbox"/> Regional/national recognition	

Your highest-scoring stage is likely where you are today. Your next-highest score shows where you're transitioning to.

TOOL 2: Identify Your Next Milestones

Based on your current stage, what are your next 3-5 milestones?

Stage	Next Milestones	Timeline
AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete Skills Readiness Assessment with the leadership team <input type="checkbox"/> Share the toolkit with board members at the next meeting <input type="checkbox"/> Attend the NAWB webinar or conference <input type="checkbox"/> Identify 2-3 initial champion partners <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule Skills Economy Visioning workshop 	3-6 months
ALIGNMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete Skills Economy Visioning with the board and partners <input type="checkbox"/> Document shared regional vision <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct labor market analysis to identify priority skills <input type="checkbox"/> Clarify board's role (Convener/Builder/Advocate/etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Secure initial funding or reallocate existing resources <input type="checkbox"/> Form a skills working group or coalition 	6-12 months
FOUNDATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Select and adopt skills taxonomy (or adapt existing) <input type="checkbox"/> Establish a data governance framework <input type="checkbox"/> Launch first pilot (badges, skills-based hiring, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Create a regular convening structure for partners <input type="checkbox"/> Train staff on skills-based approaches <input type="checkbox"/> Build or select a technology platform 	12-18 months
IMPLEMENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Scale successful pilots to 3-5x original size <input type="checkbox"/> Integrate skills into all career center services <input type="checkbox"/> Engage 10-20 employers in skills-based hiring <input type="checkbox"/> Issue 500+ digital credentials <input type="checkbox"/> Collect 6-12 months of outcome data <input type="checkbox"/> Share early results with funders and board 	18-24 months
TRANSFORMATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Document and share lessons learned <input type="checkbox"/> Establish a sustainable funding model <input type="checkbox"/> Influence state or federal policy <input type="checkbox"/> Mentor other boards starting their journey <input type="checkbox"/> Launch next-generation innovations <input type="checkbox"/> Measure and communicate regional impact 	Ongoing

Example Journey Maps

Journey #1: Metro Regional Board (Large Urban Area)

Stage	Timeline	Key Activities & Milestones
<p>Starting Point (Year 0): Large board with strong employer network, career center operations, and state funding. Limited understanding of skills economy, no digital infrastructure.</p>		
AWARENESS	Months 1-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The executive director attended the NAWB Forum and brought back the Skills Economy Toolkit Presented to the board; formed an exploratory committee Staff attended webinars, shared research articles Identified 3 employer champions from existing Business Services team relationships
ALIGNMENT	Months 6-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted readiness assessment: scored 15/24 (Building) Facilitated 3 visioning sessions with 40 stakeholders Hired a consultant to conduct labor market analysis Documented vision: "Skills-based pathways in healthcare, IT, and advanced manufacturing." The board formally adopted the vision and allocated \$150K for the pilot
FOUNDATION	Months 18-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopted the O*NET skills taxonomy for three sectors Partnered with the state community college system on data sharing Selected digital badge platform vendor Launched pilot: healthcare skills badges with 2 hospitals, 3 training providers Trained 15 career center staff on skills-based career counseling
IMPLEMENTATION	Months 30-48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scaled healthcare pilot: 8 hospitals, 10 training providers, 500 badges issued Launched the IT sector, pilot 12 employers adopted skills-based job descriptions Early data: 78% badge earners employed within 90 days vs. 62% comparison group Expanded to all 6 career centers
TRANSFORMATION	Year 4+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthcare and IT infrastructure are fully operational 2,500+ badges issued, 35 employers participating Demonstrated \$2.3M in wage gains for participants State replicated model in 3 other regions The board is now mentoring other workforce areas
<p>Key Success Factors: Strong employer relationships from the start, secured dedicated funding early, started with one sector before expanding, invested in staff training and change management.</p>		

Journey #2: Rural Workforce Board (Small Service Area)

Stage	Timeline	Key Activities & Milestones
<p>Starting Point (Year 0): Small board serving 3 counties, limited staff, modest budget. Strong community college partnership, but employers are fragmented and hard to engage.</p>		
AWARENESS	Months 1-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A board member heard about the skills economy at the state conference • Small team (ED + 2 staff) reviewed the toolkit together • Reached out to NAWB for information • Attended virtual peer learning community
ALIGNMENT	Months 6-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted readiness assessment: scored 8/24 (Developing) • Decided to focus on Convener + Advocate roles (not Infrastructure Builder) • Facilitated 2 visioning sessions with local employers and the community college • Vision: "Skills pathways for local youth and dislocated workers in agriculture tech and healthcare." • Decided to leverage the state technology platform rather than build our own
FOUNDATION	Months 24-42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joined the state's digital credential consortium (cost-sharing model) • Formed a monthly "Skills Roundtable" with 8 employers and the college • Community college aligned 3 programs to the state skills taxonomy • Launched a small pilot: 50 students earning badges in ag tech • Applied for and won a \$75K rural innovation grant
IMPLEMENTATION	Months 42-60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot successful: 80% badge earners employed locally • Scaled to include a healthcare program • 12 local employers now recognize badges in hiring • Youth engagement increased 40% • Board advocating at the state level for rural broadband to support digital credentials
TRANSFORMATION	Year 5+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model being adapted by 4 other rural boards statewide • Employer roundtable is now self-organizing with board facilitation • Sustainable through a combination of state platform, local employer investment, and grants • Recognized as a model for rural skills infrastructure
<p>Key Success Factors: Focused on convening role given limited capacity, Leveraged state infrastructure rather than building own, Started very small (50 participants) and proved concept, Strong partnership with community college from the start, Creative about funding (piecing together multiple small sources).</p>		

Journey #3: Mid-Size Board (Suburban Area)

Stage	Timeline	Key Activities & Milestones
<p>Starting Point (Year 0): Board serving a diverse population, strong K-12 connections, and less employer engagement. Focused historically on youth programs.</p>		
AWARENESS	Months 1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth program staff noticed employers asking for skills documentation Explored digital badges for the career pathways program Brought the concept to the board with research on the skills economy
ALIGNMENT	Months 4-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted readiness assessment: scored 12/24 (Developing) Realized the need for broader employer engagement beyond youth focus Facilitated visioning with an expanded stakeholder group Vision: "Every young person graduates with documented skills employers value." Decided to start with youth as a pilot, expand to adults later
FOUNDATION	Months 12-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnered with 3 high schools to integrate badges into career pathways Engaged 10 employers to validate which skills matter for entry-level roles Selected badge platform used by the school district for continuity Trained teachers and counselors on competency-based approaches
IMPLEMENTATION	Months 24-42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 500 students earned badges in the first year Employers created "skills-preferred" entry-level positions Early data: badged students had 2x interview rate Schools formally integrated badges into career readiness curriculum Began pilot with adult dislocated workers
<p>Challenges encountered: Year 3: New superintendent less supportive, momentum slowed, Solution: Shifted to employer-driven model, less dependent on schools, Year 4: Badge platform vendor changed pricing, budget pressure, Solution: Negotiated consortium pricing with neighboring boards</p>		
TRANSFORMATION	Year 5+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth and adult pathways both operational Regional brand: "Skills-Ready Graduates." 20 employers participating, some co-funding Model being written into state education policy

Key Success Factors: Started with existing strength (youth programming). Employer validation of skills from the beginning. Adaptable when leadership changed. Regional collaboration on technology costs.

Common Journey Patterns

Pattern 1: Employer-Led

Path: Strong employer engagement → Skills-based hiring pilot → Scale to credentials → Infrastructure follows demand

Best For: Boards with established Business Services teams and active employer networks

Timeline: Typically faster (3-4 years to transformation) because demand drives adoption

Pattern 2: Education-Led

Path: Training provider alignment → Competency-based credentials → Employer adoption → Scale across sectors

Best For: Boards with strong education partnerships, less employer engagement initially

Timeline: Typically moderate (4-5 years) as employer engagement takes time to build

Pattern 3: Infrastructure-First

Path: Adopt taxonomy → Build digital platform → Recruit partners → Launch pilots → Scale

Best For: Boards with funding and technical capacity to build before proving demand

Risks: Can build infrastructure no one uses; needs strong change management

Timeline: Often longer (5+ years) due to upfront investment before outcomes

Pattern 4: Coalition-Building

Path: Convene stakeholders → Co-create vision → Shared decision-making → Distributed implementation

Best For: Boards with limited authority but strong convening power

Timeline: Slower to start (18+ months of alignment) but more sustainable long-term

TOOL 3: Your Journey Map Template

Use this template to map your unique journey:

Stage	Timeline	Key Activities & Milestones
Starting Point (Year 0):		
AWARENESS	Months	
ALIGNMENT	Months	
FOUNDATION	Months	
IMPLEMENTATION	Months	
TRANSFORMATION	Year 5+	
Challenges:		

Key Success Factors:

Decision Points

We've decided to prioritize ...

We've decided not to prioritize ...

Avoiding Common Journey Pitfalls

Pitfall	Why It Happens	How to Avoid It
Skipping Alignment	Pressure to show quick results	Invest 6-12 months in vision and readiness before implementation
Building Infrastructure No One Uses	Technology-first approach without demand validation	Start with pilots that prove demand before scaling infrastructure
Trying to Boil the Ocean	Attempting all sectors, all populations, all services at once	Start with 1-2 sectors or populations, prove the concept, then expand
Losing Momentum	Leadership changes, funding gaps, competing priorities	Build distributed leadership, diversify funding, and integrate into core operations early
Measuring Too Early	Expecting outcomes before the foundation is built	Set stage-appropriate success metrics (awareness metrics in Year 1, outcome metrics in Year 3+)
Going It Alone	Underestimating partnership requirements	Invest heavily in convening, align partners around shared goals, and distribute responsibilities

*Questions, feedback, or need help mapping your path forward?
Contact the National Association of Workforce Boards
www.nawb.org*