

SKILLS ECONOMY TOOLKIT

ACTION GUIDE: MAPPING YOUR REGIONAL SKILLS ECOSYSTEM

Introduction

A skills economy doesn't emerge in isolation; it requires a connected ecosystem of employers, educators, training providers, credential issuers, technology platforms, and community organizations working together. Understanding who these players are, what roles they play, and how they connect is the foundation for strategic coordination.

This guide will help you systematically map your regional skills ecosystem, identify gaps and opportunities, and build the relationships needed to create a thriving, skills-based talent system.

Why Ecosystem Mapping Matters

Ecosystem mapping in the context of workforce development and the skills economy is the process of identifying, documenting, and understanding the organizations, stakeholders, and relationships that comprise your region's skills and talent infrastructure. It is also about mapping the jobs and opportunities that mobilize the workforce.

When we map a regional skills ecosystem, we map four main categories: organizations and entities, relationships and connections, resources and infrastructure, and the jobs and roles that mobilize advancement and prosperity.

| Category | Specific Elements | Why It Matters |
|--|---|---|
| Organizations & Entities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employers and industry groups ● Education and training providers (K-12, community colleges, universities, and apprenticeships) ● Workforce development boards and career centers ● Community-based organizations ● Economic development agencies ● Credential issuers ● Technology providers/platforms ● Government agencies ● Labor unions | Identifies all groups and organizations and their roles in the skills ecosystem |
| Relationships & Connections | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who partners with whom ● How information flows ● Where gaps exist ● How workers move through the system ● Where bottlenecks occur | Reveals collaboration patterns, identifies silos, and shows where coordination is needed |
| Jobs and Roles that Mobilize | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Score occupations across four key dimensions: worker opportunity, employer demand, community impact, and strategic economic value ● Generate a list of potential Jobs That Matter (JTM) ● Validate with local board members and partners ● Build a skills profile for each. | Documents the jobs, occupations, and opportunities that move an economy towards advancement and prosperity. |
| Resources & Infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skills taxonomies in use ● Data systems and platforms ● Credential types available ● Funding sources ● Technology tools | Documents existing capabilities and highlights gaps in infrastructure |

The benefits of mapping the skills ecosystem are that it may:

- Reveals hidden connections and partnership opportunities
- Identify gaps in pathways, services, or infrastructure
- Align partners around a shared understanding of the system
- Inform strategic priorities and resource allocation

- Accelerates collaboration by making connections visible

In this action guide, we outline the steps to map your regional skills ecosystem and provide tools to help you identify the jobs, people, organizations, and resources needed to build a thriving skills economy.

Step 1: Define Your Ecosystem Boundaries

Before you can map your ecosystem, you need to define its scope. Consider geography, industry focus, and the populations you serve as ecosystem boundaries.

Key Scoping Questions

| Dimension | Define Your Scope |
|------------------------------|---|
| Geographic Boundary | Will you map at the county, regional, or state level? Consider labor market areas and commuting patterns. |
| Industry/Sector Focus | Are you mapping the entire economy or specific sectors? Start with priority industries for deeper analysis. |
| Population Served | Who are you mapping for? Job seekers, incumbent workers, youth, and specific populations with barriers? |
| Time Horizon | Are you capturing the current state or mapping where you want to be in 3-5 years? Both have value. |

Action Item: Use the *Ecosystem Scoping Worksheet (Tool 1)* to document your boundaries and focus areas.

Step 2: Identify Key Ecosystem Players

A skills ecosystem includes multiple types of organizations, each playing distinct roles. Start by inventorying who's already active in your region.

Core Ecosystem Components

| Player Type | Examples | Role in Skills Economy |
|-------------|----------|------------------------|
|-------------|----------|------------------------|

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Employers/Demand | Large employers, SMEs, industry associations, staffing agencies | Define skill needs, adopt skills-based hiring, and provide work-based learning |
| Education/Training | Colleges, universities, technical schools, bootcamps, CBOs, apprenticeship sponsors | Build skills, align curriculum, provide credentials, connect learners to opportunity |
| Credential Issuers | Certification bodies, industry groups, licensing agencies, and badging platforms | Validate and verify skills, issue portable credentials, and maintain quality standards |
| Workforce System | American Job Centers, WIOA partners, career centers, and employment services | Provide career services, job matching, skills assessment, and training navigation |
| Technology/Data | LMS platforms, job boards, skills management systems, and data analytics providers | Enable data sharing, power matching, provide infrastructure, and deliver analytics |
| Community Partners | Libraries, faith-based orgs, nonprofits, economic development, chambers of commerce | Reach underserved populations, provide wraparound services, and build trust |
| Policy/Funders | State agencies, federal programs, foundations, local government, and economic development | Set policy, fund initiatives, align requirements, remove barriers, drive adoption |

Action Item: Use the *Ecosystem Inventory Template (Tool 2)* to create a comprehensive list of organizations in your region.

Step 3: Map Connections and Flows

Once you've identified the players, map how they connect and interact. Understanding these relationships reveals where the system is working well and where gaps or friction exist.

Types of Connections to Map

- **Information Flow:** Who shares data, skills frameworks, or labor market information?
- **Talent Pathways:** How do learners move from training to credentials to employment?
- **Credential Acceptance:** Which credentials do employers recognize and value?
- **Service Referrals:** Who refers clients to whom? Are there warm handoffs?
- **Partnership Agreements:** Formal MOUs, contracts, or collaborations
- **Funding Flows:** How do resources move through the system?

Connection Strength Assessment

Not all connections are equal. Rate connection strength to prioritize where to invest in deeper partnerships:

| Strength | Description |
|----------|---|
| Strong | Regular collaboration, data sharing, joint programs, aligned goals |
| Moderate | Occasional communication, ad hoc collaboration, and awareness of each other |
| Weak | Little to no interaction, siloed operations, missed opportunities |
| Missing | Critical connection doesn't exist, a gap in the ecosystem |

● **Action Item:** Use the *Connection Mapping Matrix (Tool 3)* to document relationships between key players.

Step 4: Identify Jobs and Roles that Mobilize

The *Jobs that Mobilize Framework* from the Burning Glass Institute is a useful resource for identifying which jobs and roles in a region truly support advancement and move people toward prosperity. The framework tackles challenges faced by four key groups at once:

1. Employers looking to fill critical roles and address skills gaps
2. Workers seeking well-paying jobs with growth potential
3. Communities striving for equality and inclusivity
4. Local leaders need workers to drive growth in key sectors and the broader economy

To identify jobs and roles that mobilize, the framework asks you to:

- Score occupations across four key dimensions: worker opportunity, employer demand, community impact, and strategic economic value
- Generate a list of potential JTMs
- Validate with local stakeholders
- Develop a skills profile for each

● **Action Item:** Read the Burning Glass Institute Report and use the Jobs that Mobilize Worksheet (Tool 4) to map which jobs and roles mobilize.

Step 5: Identify Gaps and Opportunities

With your ecosystem mapped, you can now identify where interventions will have the greatest impact. Look for patterns that reveal systemic issues or untapped potential.

Common Ecosystem Gaps

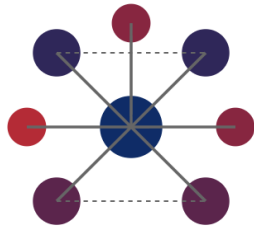
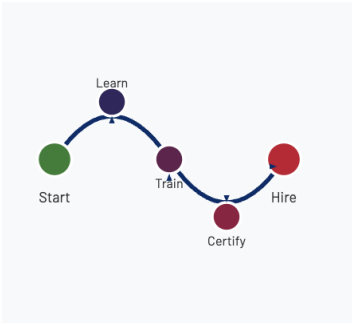
| Gap Type | What to Look For |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Missing Players | Are there categories with few or no organizations? For example, a lack of credential issuers or limited training capacity in key sectors. |
| Broken Pathways | Can learners seamlessly move from training to credentialing to employment? Look for dead ends or missing links in progression. |
| Information Silos | Do employers know what training providers offer? Do trainers understand employer needs? Where is communication breaking down? |
| Misaligned Incentives | Are funding structures, performance metrics, or organizational goals pulling partners in different directions? |
| Infrastructure Limitations | Is there technology for data exchange? Platforms for credential sharing? Systems for skills validation? |
| Equity Gaps | Are all populations served equitably? Do certain communities lack access to skills infrastructure or face barriers to participation? |

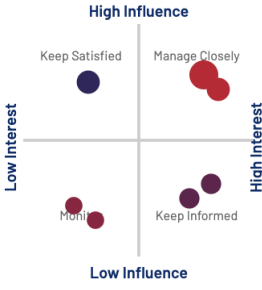

● **Action Item:** Use the Gap Analysis Worksheet (Tool 5) to systematically identify and prioritize gaps in your ecosystem.

Step 6: Create Visual Maps for Communication

Data becomes actionable when it's visualized. Create visual ecosystem maps of your region to help people, partners, and organizations understand the system and see their place in it.

Types of Ecosystem Maps

| Visual Example | Map Type & Description |
|---|---|
|  | <p>1. Network Map Shows all players as nodes with connections between them. Great for identifying clusters, central actors, and isolated players.</p> <p>Best for: Understanding overall connectivity</p> <p>Tools: Kumu, Miro, PowerPoint, or specialized network analysis software</p> |
|  | <p>2. Journey Map Follows the learner/worker path from initial engagement through skill development to employment. Shows touchpoints and transitions.</p> <p>Best for: Identifying friction points in talent pathways</p> <p>Tools: Lucidchart, Miro, Google Slides</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
|  | <p>3. Stakeholder Map Organizes players by influence and interest to help prioritize engagement strategies.</p> <p>Best for: Planning stakeholder engagement</p> <p>Tools: 2x2 matrix in any presentation software</p> |
|  | <p>4. Geographic Map Places ecosystem players on an actual map to identify geographic concentrations and deserts.</p> <p>Best for: Identifying service gaps and access barriers</p> <p>Tools: Google My Maps, ArcGIS, Tableau</p> |

● **Action Item:** Play with a number of the tools to find which map type suits your skills ecosystem and the information you'd like to share about it.

Step 7: Activate Your Ecosystem Map

A map is only valuable if it drives action. Here's how to use your ecosystem insights strategically:

Practical Applications

| Use Case | How It Works |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Strategic Planning | Use gaps to set strategic priorities. Strong connections suggest collaboration opportunities. Weak connections indicate where relationship-building is needed. |
| Partnership Development | Share the map with partners to create a shared understanding. Use it to identify complementary organizations and broker new connections. |
| Resource Allocation | Direct funding and staff time to areas where ecosystem gaps exist or connections are weakest. |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Policy Advocacy | Use ecosystem insights to advocate for policy changes, funding priorities, or regulatory adjustments that strengthen the system. |
| Progress Tracking | Update your map annually to track how connections strengthen, new players emerge, and gaps close. |

Action Item: Share your ecosystem map widely. Make it a living document that stakeholders can reference and contribute to. Consider creating an online interactive version.

Ecosystem Mapping Tools & Templates

Use these practical tools to systematically map your skills ecosystem.

TOOL 1: Ecosystem Scoping Worksheet

Define the boundaries and focus of your ecosystem mapping effort.

Geographic Scope

Which counties, regions, or areas will you include?

Industry/Sector Focus

Will you map all industries or focus on specific sectors?

Target Populations

Who are you mapping for? (e.g., job seekers, incumbent workers, youth)

Time Horizon

Current state or future vision? What timeframe?

TOOL 3: Connection Mapping Matrix

Map relationships between key organizations. Rate connection strength: Strong (S), Moderate (M), Weak (W), or Missing (X).

| Organization | Org A | Org B | Org C | Org D | Org E |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
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Rating Key: S = Strong | M = Moderate | W = Weak | X = Missing

TOOL 4: Jobs that Mobilize Worksheet

This worksheet helps your board identify which occupations to prioritize for skills economy investments. Read the Burning Glass Institute report on *Jobs that Mobilize Framework*, and use these four metrics to evaluate potential target occupations, balancing worker opportunity, employer need, equity impact, and strategic value.

| WORKER METRIC | |
|---|--|
| Which occupations offer strong opportunities for workers in terms of wages, job mobility, or accessibility? | |
| What jobs provide good career pathways for workers? | |
| Which occupations balance good pay with reasonable entry requirements? | |

| EMPLOYER METRIC | |
|---|--|
| Which occupations are experiencing high demand from employers, both now and in the future? | |
| Where are the current and projected "pain points" for employers in terms of workforce needs? | |
| Which occupations are facing potential shortages due to factors like an aging workforce or high turnover? | |

| EQUITY METRIC | |
|--|--|
| Which occupations can help reduce wage inequality or occupational segregation? | |
| What jobs offer opportunities to improve equity for people who identify as Black, Native, Hispanic, and women workers? | |
| Which occupations show the most promise for increasing diversity and inclusion in the workforce? | |

| STRATEGY METRIC | |
|---|--|
| Which occupations are strategically important for the growth and development of key industries because of their niche skill sets? | |
| Which occupations are central to skill networks within an industry, allowing for knowledge transfer and innovation? | |
| What jobs allow an economy to specialize in high-growth industries or in areas that capitalize on local resources? | |

Next Steps: (1) Score each occupation 1-5 on each metric. (2) Prioritize occupations scoring highly across 3-4 metrics. (3) Choose 2-3 where you have partnerships and capacity. (4) Validate with labor market data and employer input.

Source: Burning Glass Institute (2025) Jobs that Mobilize Framework

TOOL 5: Gap Analysis Worksheet

Systematically identify and prioritize gaps in your ecosystem.

| Gap Identified | Impact on System | Priority | Potential Solution |
|----------------|------------------|----------|--------------------|
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Priority Rating: High | Medium | Low

Next Steps

You now have the tools to create a comprehensive ecosystem map of your region in terms of opportunities, partners, and resources. Here's how to get started:

- Define your scope using the scoping worksheet
- Inventory ecosystem players across all categories
- Map connections between key organizations
- Identify the jobs and roles that provide opportunities for advancement and prosperity
- Identify gaps and prioritize them by impact
- Create visual maps to communicate findings
- Use insights to inform strategic planning and partnership development

Additional Resources

- Action Guide: Strategic Planning for Skills Economy
- Action Guide: Skills Data Governance
- Action Guide: Employer and Issuer Engagement
- Mapping Tools: [Kumu.io](#), [Miro](#), [Lucidchart](#)
- Ecosystem Maps: [LER Ecosystem](#)
- JFF Resources: [Skills-Based Hiring Toolkit](#)

Questions, feedback, or need help mapping your regional ecosystem?

Contact the National Association of Workforce Boards

www.nawb.org