

BUILDING A SKILLS ECONOMY

LESSONS LEARNED: ALABAMA

Anna Chappelle, Executive Director of the Alabama Workforce Board, and Nathan Rankin, Director of Alabama's Office of Education and Workforce Statistics, share lessons from building a statewide skills-based hiring ecosystem with a small team, a clear north star, and a commitment to breaking down silos.

01 Define what a competency is before you ask people to write them

When Alabama convened technical advisory committees to review and write competencies for its skills framework, participants initially produced language that read like job descriptions. The team learned through experience that a competency must be both demonstrable and testable, and aligning everyone on that definition took significant time. Resources on competency writing should be available from the very beginning. Any state or board embarking on this work should invest in a shared language before technical work begins.

02 Unbundle the 'wrappers': Every credential is a bundle of competencies

Alabama's core framework treats every credential, degree, and training program as a 'wrapper' of competencies. Unbundle the wrapper, and you can see what someone actually knows and identify the specific gaps that stand between them and their next occupation. This granular view enables stackable career pathways: rather than telling someone to start over, you can show them they only need a few more competencies to advance. The approach makes the system encouraging rather than discouraging.

03 Plan for realistic staffing: This work takes more people than you think

Alabama built its skills infrastructure over six years with roughly three and a half full-time employees' worth of effort. Anna currently operates with a staff of one; Nathan's office has two. Nathan estimates that launching this from scratch would require seven or eight full-time employees, plus investment from the board and the career center staff. Boards considering this work should develop a realistic staffing plan—not just a budget for technology and consultants.

04 Prepare for leadership changes with a succession plan

Every time leadership changes, whether at an agency, a board, or a partner organization, the team has to start from the beginning: getting new leaders brought in, educated, and invested. There is a disorientation that follows leadership transitions, and a succession plan is essential, not optional. Without documented institutional knowledge and onboarding processes, initiatives lose momentum with every personnel change.

05 Choose vendors as partners, not just providers

Alabama credits much of its technical progress to a single vendor who brings knowledge of education and government contracts, a willingness to build to industry standards (including integration with Credential Engine's CTDL standard) rather than bespoke solutions, accessibility at every level (from leadership to the person editing the website), a willingness to provide one-on-one employer training, and genuine passion for the work. A vendor who is honest about what can and cannot work is invaluable. With a small staff, the right vendor becomes an extension of the team.

06 Build for Interoperability from Day One

Nathan's non-negotiable: a guide to interoperability. Thousands of Alabamians commute daily to Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida, and Louisiana for work. If Alabama's system cannot communicate with the systems those states build, it is useless to those workers. The lesson extends beyond technology: interoperability requires shared standards, mutual recognition, and the willingness to build open systems rather than closed ones. This should be a design principle from the start, not an afterthought.