

58 From Gridlock to Growth – Better Pathways to Partnership Impact



What does it take to transform education and workforce systems in a way that truly reflects local needs? In this episode, we explore the Talent Hub designation—a model-agnostic standard recognizing excellence in cross-sector partnerships at the local, regional, and state levels. Born from Lumina Foundation’s work with 75 pioneering partnerships, Talent Hubs represent a new way of thinking about collaboration. National thought leader Dakota Pawlicki joins us to share lessons learned, practical strategies for scaling what works, and bold ideas for the future of talent development partnerships.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 58



Dakota Pawlicki
Director of Talent Hubs at CivicLab
[LinkedIn](#)

Links and Resources

- [Episode 58 of the Podcast](#)
- [Talent Hubs from CivicLab](#)
- [Work Ready Communities from ACT](#)
- [WorkKeys Workforce Solutions](#)
- [Episode 4 on Strategic Doing with Ed Morrison](#)
- [Episode 10 overview on Work Ready Communities](#)

Transcript of Episode 58

[Opening Jingle and Music]

Dakota: It is actually difficult to scale specific programs or specific policies. But what you can scale is process. It can be daunting to bite off the whole elephant all at once. Instead, go where the energy is. Start small. Think big, aim high.

Jasen: From Gridlock to Growth, Dakota Pawlicki of Talent Hubs shows us innovative pathways for partnership impact.

[Podcast Open] Ready for Work is a podcast from A-C-T! spotlighting excellence and innovation, throughout the workforce ecosystem! Jason Jones hosts this journey, with trends and ideas to help your region’s workforce reach its highest potential.

[Jingle] Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: This is Jasen Jones and thanks for dialing us in for episode 58.

In hundreds of Work Ready Communities locations across dozens of states, local champions across the workforce ecosystem join forces for success. Here at ACT, we focus on how ecosystems can align and measure skills to achieve their goals and advance their missions while promoting flexibility for each team to adopt a planning model that fits best for their scenario.

We're always on the lookout for best practices to maximize the partnerships on the ground in each of our Work Ready Communities, so we were thrilled to connect with Dakota Pawlicki, the Director of Talent Hubs at Civic Lab.

Let's set the stage for Talent Hubs, Dakota, what they are, how they work, and why they matter now more than ever.

Dakota: Yeah, absolutely. It's a great place to start. Talent hubs came out of a clear need at the time. Lumina Foundation had set their national post-secondary attainment goal. And while many states were adopting that goal, there are also many communities that were coming together and bringing together the public, private and social sectors and saying, hey, you know, what can we do to support improving post-secondary attainment in this place that we call home?

And for a number of years, Lumina had invested in several of those partnerships. Some of them were already established. Others were newly forming, and over the course of three years, 75 partnerships started really functioning and focusing on post-secondary attainment. But there comes a time where you start getting asked a bunch of questions. Who's doing this really well? Where are places that we can really learn from?

And it's very difficult as a foundation because you might accidentally just start telling people to go, calling the people that, you know, call you the most. It doesn't necessarily mean its high quality. We also knew that we wanted to make sure that we weren't responsive to only just one model. The reality is, is that every place in the United States is different.

They have different stakeholder compositions. They have different partners. They have different folks who are ready to roll up their sleeves. So we needed something to be model agnostic. So we came up with the Town Hub designation. It's a designation standard that's bestowed on a cross-sector partnership that's operating at a local, regional or state level. And I like to think of it a lot like a LEED certification.

When you go up inside of a LEED certified building, you know that no matter where that building is in the world or what happens inside that building, if it's a hotel or dormitory, that is met rigorous standards to earn that certification. Same thing is true with the town of designation. So it's a marker of excellence for cross-sector partnerships that are focused on the talent system, as well as an aspirational model for other communities and partnerships to aspire to.

Jasen: Dakota, thank you for affirming the importance of local context and avoiding the one size fits all approach. As each partnership strives for growth and impact, how do we scale what works without losing that local authenticity?

Dakota: You know, there's a couple things that come to mind. I mean, one, it is really important for national groups, national thought leaders, and certainly a designation program like this to remain model agnostic. And what I mean by that is for a while there was this proliferation of individual, not you know, national organizations saying, hey, if you, you know, get this kind of

organization and they get these CEOs in the room and you measure these things, these things will happen.

And what we find time and time again is that that doesn't actually work. That's a great way to get started. But, you know, each place is different in some places you might have a very active, united way that sees themselves as a convener, that wants to take responsibility for the entire cradle to career system, and they might be the ones that are going to convene the universities, colleges, philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, city agencies, what have you.

In other cases, you know, folks realize, listen, we can't really trust anyone. But we do want to work together. And so they create a separate 501 C3 organization with the exclusive purpose of supporting the education system and to be there as a neutral convener. Sometimes it's chambers of commerce, sometimes it's local philanthropy and community foundation. So, the first thing that we really learned is that you have to remain model agnostic, because excellence comes in a lot of different forms.

And so you have to start to figure out ways to measure that excellence. We have five pillars of the town hub designation. One of which is partnership Health, which literally measures how strong an individual partnership is, how they share data and relationships, and shared governance and decision making. And we lump a lot of things in that partnership. I think there's a lot of other learning that we can certainly dig into, but I think the other piece that we that is probably interesting for folks to hear about is how we approach scale.

The thing is, is that scale doesn't, you know, scale will scale anything. You can put whatever you want into the scale machine and it will scale. I mean, look at today's food systems, for example. And we're really concerned about whether or not everyone has access to healthy food. Well, it's because we had to scale our food systems. When we think about housing and cookie cutter homes and those kinds of things and those people who lament the homegrown architecture movement, well, that's also because we had to scale home building.

The same thing can happen in our industry around improving post-secondary attainment and ensuring workforce, ensuring that people have the workforce is needed, which is that we might just simply scale a program or a policy without much regard to what's actually happening within the town hub designation. Yes, scale is a function of it, but we look at kind of like responsible scaling new.

Well, you know, we ask ourselves, are the things that you're doing appropriately scaled within the confines of your community, within the contextual appropriateness? And also, we look very closely at what is being scaled. It is actually rather difficult to scale specific programs or specific policies because of how much variation is required as you go from place to place.

But what you can scale is process. So a lot of times we're looking for places that have a strong collaborative process that has been scaled to not only include many, many more partners, but even many, many more issue areas they want to tackle together.

Jasen: That's great advice, Dakota, that partnerships thrive when they're measured by their health instead of their structure. How do we make sure we're using the right data—and starting in the right place?

Dakota: Two places to start. For a lot of these folks are trying to really figure out how to move toward skills, how to really make this happen. The first is to just be very weary and careful of the

data and information that they're using. A lot of times in the skills conversation, we're looking at data that is being collected and analyzed and synthesized and processed and interpreted.

So many layers of what, you know, we're very far from the raw data itself, or we're looking at national data and saying, oh, I guess this is what an EV technician is needed. You know, these are the particular skills. And while some of that data might be accurate and true, you're really missing that local flavor. So the very first thing we really want to encourage and we see successful talent hubs doing, is sitting down with their employers and having these deeper conversations and saying, what are the skills that are needed?

What are the skills that are coming out of our education and training programs and really getting down to the nitty gritty of documenting what those skills are for local employers. I think the, you know, a lot of us talk about its kind of a thing to say like, oh, you need to have partners with your employers. Yes. But let's also keep in mind that 49% of businesses in the United States are small or medium sized businesses.

So a lot of the national data we have around skills is actually coming from those other, you know, large scale employers like Walmart and Amazon and all that that might not resonate with the local advanced manufacturing center down the street that's using lasers to produce next gen materials or, you know, the folks that are working on autonomous flight out in Tulsa.

So it's really important to actually have meaningful conversations with employers about the skills that are required in that particular context. The second bit of advice, though, kind of relates to it, which is we have kind of a we have a bunch of heuristics at Civic Lab. One of them is start small. think big, aim high. So you might be in a position as a community partnership and you might say, yeah, we really do want to move to skills.

We're hearing that from employers. We're hearing this from our education partners. But it can be daunting to just, you know, bite off the whole elephant all at once. Instead, go where the energy is. You know, I think about our talent hub in Columbus, Indiana. There was a large demand for workforce needed advanced manufacturing and health care, transportation, IT, logistics that had to start somewhere.

And so they said, all right, we're going to do this first round with advanced manufacturing. And they went through a process called the stakeholder engagement process to really co-design new solutions, to make sure people could come into the workplace, be ready to do skills alignment. They follow that rigorous collaborative process. What was interesting is the health care people were I think, maybe a little annoyed at first, you know, hey, we need people though right now.

Like, why aren't you starting with us? Well, there was a bit more energy with the manufacturing folks and as the convener, they just went to the health care folks and said, hey, why don't you sit in on what we're doing with manufacturing, learn the process. We're going to make a lot of mistakes as we go through it with manufacturing.

But you're next, you know, in 6 to 9 months' time, we're going to do this same process again now with health care and see what we can learn from the process. So the goal is actually to improve the process itself. Work with a group of stakeholders that have the most amount of energy, of the most amount of interest of tackling this today and then documenting what you're learning through that process.

So then you can replicate the next time you go to another industry, to another industry.

Bumper: Showcasing voices of excellence in the workforce ecosystem. You're listening to Ready for Work with ACT.

Jasen: Starting small, thinking big, and learning as you go is the name of the game.

Dakota: Absolutely. That's part of our model agnostic approach. You know, we have some talent hubs that are focused on more traditional age students, making sure the pipeline from our K-12 into our postsecondary system works. We have others that are focused just on adults and within specific industries, and we have many, quite honestly, that focus on the entire system, usually to earn a town of designation.

It's an entity that is taking responsibility for the entire talent system, which includes talent attraction, talent development, and talent connection.

Jasen: If we had the ability to grant you three wishes, Dakota, how would you use those accelerate the good work of your team underway at Talent Hubs?

Dakota: A number one would be to give groups and partnerships much more time to actually redesign their existing system. In the United States, we have a predilection for new things, and what we constantly find ourselves doing is using a programmatic mindset when it comes to addressing a complex social challenge. Hey, there's not enough students entering this pipeline. You can't get the people who are leaving this training program aren't, you know, well qualified for these jobs.

Whatever that challenge might be. And what we're constantly doing, saying what? We just need another program. We need a new navigator. We need another policy. We need this other tool. Let's build a website. Here's a chat bot. Right? We love adding new. And what's interesting to me is that eventually these partnerships reach a level of maturity where they look around and they say, gosh, we are really program rich, but very systems poor.

And they call me up and my colleagues at Civic Lab and just say, can you help us make sense of all this? Because we have all these things going on and everyone now is reporting that they have initiative fatigue. No one wants to come be a part of our partnership because everyone's so busy doing all this work. So actually, my very first wish would be that people have a little bit more time and energy to actually document how the current system is working, make that visible for everyone involved, and just simply ask the question, how do we redesign our existing system before we add anything new into the process?

I think the second thing that I would certainly wish for is that there is a greater investment in these neutral convening bodies. You know, when we look at how change happens inside social systems, you do need a neutral, trusted party that wants to bring multiple stakeholders together and take responsibility for the system and for the people the system is intended to serve.

It's very difficult when an organization or person has a perceived conflict, a perceived, you know, bias towards their own organization of some way, shape or form right. And so, it's important that we actually find ways to financially sustain local and regional intermediary groups that can be conveners of these various organizations. I want to bring them together to address and answer the question, what can we do together that we couldn't do alone?

I think the third thing that I would just also add on my wish list, and I love the question, by the way, is give folks a chance to break away from the typical data that they're using right now,

particularly in our education and workforce space, where ingesting a lot of national data and thought pieces, for example, there's a lot of conversation about wages.

It all comes down to wages. We just make sure more people avoid. I'm not saying that's not true. You know, that is really, really important. But I'll tell you every single place that I've worked with, once you get down on the ground level, it actually becomes not about wages whatsoever. It becomes about family. It becomes about time. It becomes about fulfilling a lifetime goal.

It becomes about returning something to your community. And so we need to, as a group, cross-sector partnerships operate into local and regional level, actually collect much more local qualitative data, much more place based data to understand where opportunity is located. That's the huge advantage we have as local practitioners that I don't think we use enough. There is a dime a dozen of national institutes out there that will produce all the data in the world around LMI, data, in wages and skills gaps, and that's good and right and needed.

But your value as a community organization, as a organization is bringing multiple counties together, is that you're rooted in a place and you have this really rich opportunity to collect qualitative data of the people that you're trying to serve and look at, you know, various things add down to the census block, group level, say, wait a minute, why is this neighborhood over here?

And why is that census block group over there not enjoying the same benefits of our social system as other folks are? And what can we do in that exact place? Right. That's your local advantage that you have. I just don't think enough places really avail themselves of it.

Jasen: Dakota, your perspectives on partnership health are going to help so many of our listeners that feel stuck in their local partnership efforts. Thank you for coming on Ready for Work and sharing the innovations of Talent Hubs.

Dakota: Thank you, Jasen. Pleasure to be here.

Jasen: The Work Ready Communities model from ACT helps workforce ecosystems identify and measure skills along with the solutions that close skill gaps. Work Ready Communities share synergy with Talent Hubs and other planning models like Talent Pipeline Management, the Baldrige Framework, and Strategic Doing.

Check out episode 4 with Ed Morrison to learn more about Strategic Doing along with episode 10 to dig deeper on Work Ready Communities. You'll find links to these resources and much more in our show notes.

[Podcast Closing and Jingle] Thanks for listening to Ready for Work, from A C T, your partner in Workforce Solutions and Work Ready Communities. Subscribe in your favorite app, or learn more at A C T dot org, slash, ready for work podcast.