Local Food Processing White Papers

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A CHALLENGING OPPORTUNITY

January 2018

Farm to Institution
NEW ENGLAND

THE EQUIPMENT QUESTION

FARM to INSTITUTION NEW ENGLAND

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FARM TO INSTITUTION NEW ENGLAND

Farm to Institution New England (FINE) is a six-state network of nonprofit, public and private entities working together to mobilize the power of New England institutions to transform our food system.

Since its inception, FINE has focused on developing cross-sector connections between K-12 schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, and other institutions. Today, FINE serves those at the forefront of the farm to institution movement in the region, providing a forum to connect and share ideas, models, resources, and support.

FINE leads projects related to key issues identified by farm to institution leaders and acts as the backbone organization for farm to institution work in the region: we strengthen the network, convene stakeholders, conduct research, develop tools and resources, and communicate with key audiences.

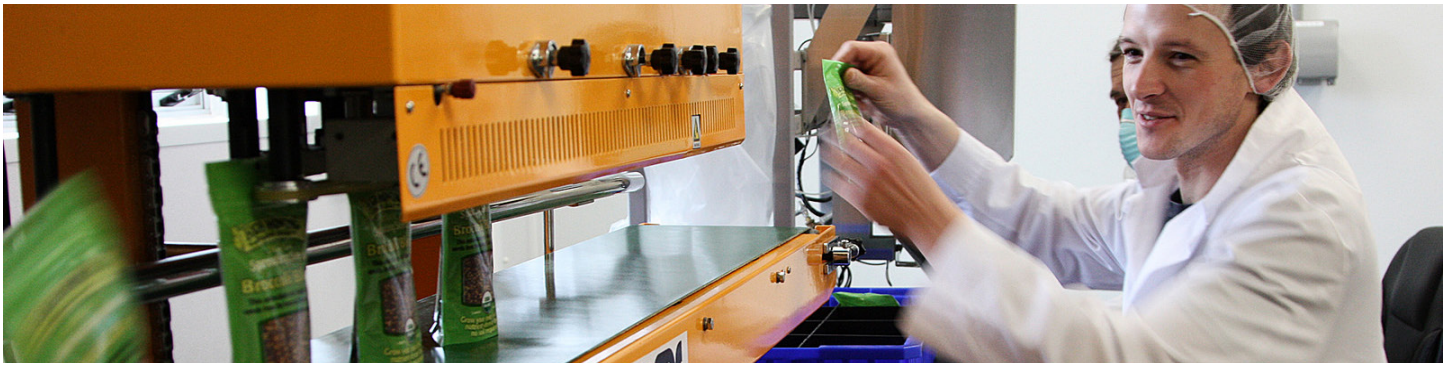
NEW ENGLAND FOOD PROCESSORS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The New England Food Processors' Community of Practice has provided a forum for processors of local food to share information, visit each other's facilities, and develop collaborative solutions to common problems. The group has helped representatives from seven New England food processing facilities become better equipped to meet and overcome their challenges, and share what they are learning with other processors in New England and beyond.

The major goals of the group were to help existing processing facilities become more efficient at processing local produce and meat for institutions and share best practices with new facilities. Participants have learned valuable information about topics like processing equipment, plant design, and food safety.

This publication is part of a series of four white papers, which complements our suite of seven case studies featuring members of the New England Food Processors' Community of Practice.

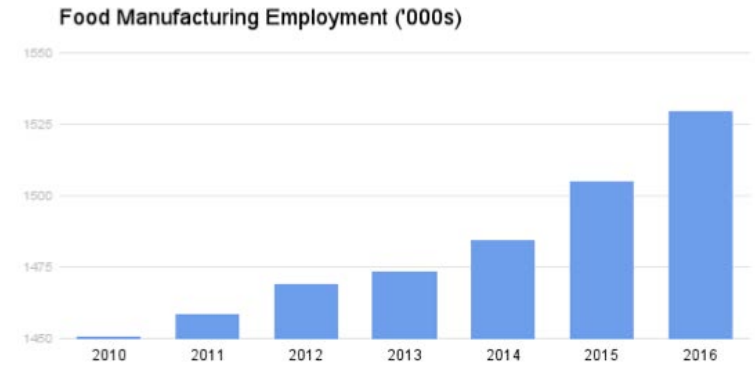
Download these publications and watch an introductory video about the group:
www.farmtoinstitution.org/processors

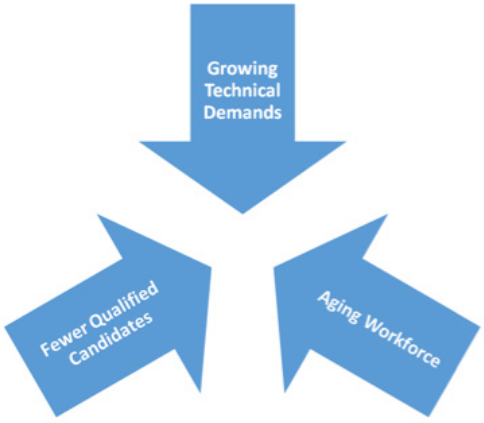


High Mowing Seeds at the Vermont Food Venture Center

INTRODUCTION

The US food manufacturing sector has been expanding since the end of the recession. The number of food manufacturing establishments has increased by nearly 13% since 2010, and employment grown by 5%, an addition of nearly 80,000 jobs (BLS). At the same time, several national trends are converging that make finding and retaining the right workforce for the expansion of food manufacturing increasingly challenging. First, much of the work is becoming increasingly technical and specialized. In the wake of the Food Safety Modernization Act (signed into law by president Obama in 2011; see companion paper Food Safety Regulation: An Introduction for Entrepreneurs) a detailed understanding of food safety, recordkeeping, and process controls have become more important than ever before. Similarly, efficiencies of scale are continuing to drive automation of many production processes, prompting the need for workers adept at learning and using new technology. Second, the aging of the baby boomer generation (the post-war demographic bump of those born between 1946 and 1964) underlies the shift to an older US workforce. Sometimes dubbed the "silver tsunami" (Schumpeter) this sea change is currently well under way. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers 55 years or older made up only 13% of the US workforce in 2010, but that number is projected to nearly double, to 25% by 2020 (Mitra, p56). Finally, manufacturers face a decreased pipeline of qualified candidates entering the industry.





Major Workforce Pressures Facing the Food Manufacturing Sector

Public colleges, one critical piece of workforce development infrastructure, illustrate part of the pipeline challenge: according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities almost all states are spending less per student than before the recession, typically much less. Their research found that "the average state is spending $1,805, or 20 percent, less per student than it did in the 2007-08 school year" (Mitchell and Leachman). Not surprisingly, many colleges have responded by raising tuition: "annual published tuition at four-year public colleges has risen by $2,068, or

29 percent, since the 2007-08 school year" (Mitchell and Leachman). This increase in cost has two effects: it puts postsecondary education out of reach for many, and it encourages those who do pursue education to seek employment that will maximize the return on their investment. Recent graduates are likely facing significant student debt: according to Student Loan Hero, "the average Class of 2016 graduate has $37,172 in student loan debt," an increase of 6% from 2015 (SLH). According to BLS estimates for November 2016, food manufacturing wages trail the manufacturing sector as a whole by a significant margin: $16.71 per hour vs. $20.62 per hour for production nonsupervisory employees (BLS). Industry thus faces a pipeline challenge in two ways: workers interested in upgrading their skills struggle to afford access, and those who take on the expense of a degree face a compelling economic incentive to look elsewhere for employment. These challenges are exacerbated by widespread negative perceptions about the food manufacturing sector. The "celebrity chef" may have become a mainstay in popular culture with the rise of shows like Iron Chef, Hell's Kitchen, and The Great British Bake-Off, but this popularity hasn't necessarily extended to the manufacturing facilities where much of America's food is actually made. The upshot of these three converging trends is that attracting and retaining a qualified, reliable workforce is difficult for food manufacturers.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The workforce development challenges food manufactures are facing impact many others in the food industry as well. As efforts to rebuild a more resilient local/regional food system continue, the workforce that supported the old agribusiness model (highly specialized workers in centralized production facilities with long supply chains) needs to change. A local/regional food system featuring shorter supply chains needs a culinary workforce with the knowledge and skills to handle produce

Sodexo staff at Franklin Pierce University with garden-grown parsley

chosen for flavor and freshness rather than uniformity and shelf life. On the face of it, the challenges in making this transition are daunting. As Albert Einstein once said, however, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Increasing the capacity of the food sector workforce can have many benefits; to businesses, workers, and the broader economy.

Consumer demand for local foods is strong and growing. According to research from Packaged Facts, "local foods generated $12 billion in sales in 2014" and are anticipated to "grow faster than the annual pace of total food and beverage sales to approach $20 billion in 2019" (Packaged Facts). Companies responding to this trend can seize an advantage, especially in the increasingly competitive markets for higher education and health care food service. Some leading companies have realized this and are acting accordingly. For example Sodexo, one of the largest dining services providers, in 2013 signed a supply chain transparency agreement with Real Food Challenge (RFC).[1] More recently the company, which serves some 34,000 meals in Vermont each day, hired Anne Rowell, formerly program manager of the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick, VT, to direct the company's "Vermont First" local food purchasing initiative (Sodexo).

The impacts of shifting to greater local sourcing can be far reaching. If the culinary workforce is unionized, for example, the need to upgrade skills to better work with local produce can trigger job reclassification and a new round of collective bargaining. Workers with greater training are better positioned to advance, either within the current business, or by leveraging their skills to find other employment. Investing in workforce development thus not only allows businesses to compete more effectively by responding to the demand for local food, it creates a pool of better-trained workers,

Vermont Food Venture Center

1 RFC is a national student organization at 300+ colleges with the goal to "shift $1 billion of existing university food budgets away from industrial farms and junk food and towards local/community-based, fair, ecologically sound and humane food sources" by 2020 (RFC).

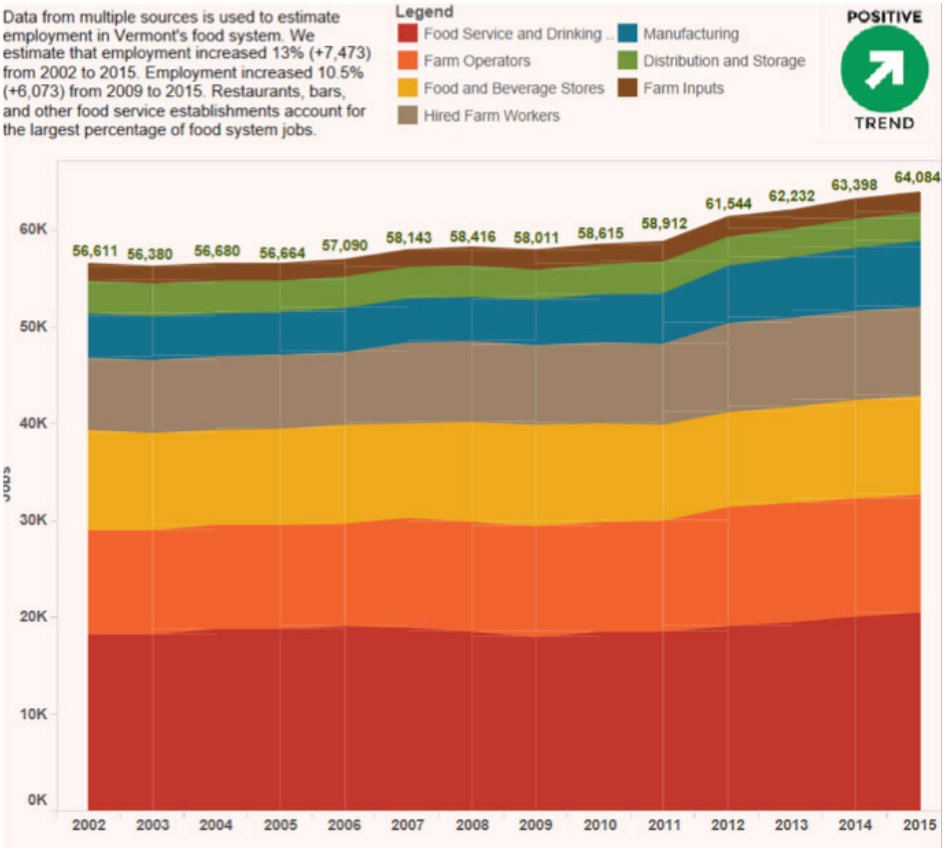
benefitting the local economy as a whole. While the long-term benefits of a stronger labor pool of trained culinary workers have yet to be quantified, a recent study of local food purchasing at University of Vermont Medical Center (UVMMC) illustrates some of the economic benefits that take place immediately. Using IMPLAN economic modeling software, the researchers found that the $1.6 million UVMMC spent on local food in 2012 supported 6 additional local jobs and an additional $1.1 million in local economic activity (Becot et al, p 3). Especially in locations with a large number of institutions, shifting to a local/regional food system can be a significant economic engine. Because of the many lateral connections to related industries (e.g., transport/logistics, services, sustainable packaging) in the "food driven economy," the potential exists for clusters of self-reinforcing economic development to take hold, with food the leading edge of broader economic development (Borgez-Medez). Without investment in workforce development, however, that shift will be impossible.

FOOD STARTUPS FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

The potential for a shift in the food system to drive economic development relies on established players shifting practices, but also on the success of new food businesses. The number of food manufacturing establishments has increased 15% since 2006 (BLS), signaling the importance of new entrants in responding to new market demands. These new food manufacturers face the same structural challenges as existing manufacturers, as well as several that are unique:

- **Intermittent or highly variable labor needs.** Until a new food manufacture has carved out a market niche for its products, demand is often driven by sales, events, or wholesale contracts. Each can temporarily boost sales, but with an impact on longer-term production needs that can be hard to predict. Until a business has enough time in each sales channel to understand seasonality, customer dynamics, and market trends, or enough scale that fluctuations in sales volume are small relative to baseline, production needs can fluctuate widely. This makes it challenging to retain qualified staff, especially given that few businesses can afford to pay employees to sit idle until needed.
- **Limited accessibility of production locations.** Few food manufacturers are located in downtown business districts; the cost of commercial real estate is simply too high. As CommonWealth Kitchen (a culinary incubator in Dorchester, MA) learned when they surveyed clients searching for dedicated space, many settle for cheaper suburban locations, which are often poorly served by public transit. This has the effect of limiting the workforce to those who live in the immediate neighborhood or have access to a vehicle (Faigel and Freeman).
- **A premium on flexibility.** A multi-talented staff willing and able to take on a wide variety of work and execute it flawlessly is something any business would love to have. For new businesses, however, it's closer to a necessity. Given scarce resources, many priorities, and a flatter organizational structure with less specialization, all startups need staff who can trouble-shoot, problem-solve, and grow into increasing responsibility as the company matures. Given the importance of product quality in gaining traction in a crowded market and the critical need for food safety (a recall that would merely tarnish an existing brand could cripple a new entrant), new food makers need a talented workforce even more than the typical startup.

A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE



VT Farm to Plate Population Indicators: Food System Employment

The current challenges facing food manufacturers, whether new or established, are largely the result of macro demographic and economic trends. A revitalized local/regional food system represents a significant economic opportunity, if only the workforce needed to support it can be developed. The success of state policy in shifting the food system is illustrated by Vermont, where the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan has helped spur generation of more than 5,000 new jobs since 2010, a 9% increase in the food sector and a significant accomplishment in a state whose total workforce numbers only some 340,000 (VT Department of Labor). Some of this is no doubt due to a general economic rebound. Employment in nondurable goods manufacturing (e.g., food and beverages) is 16.7% higher than pre-recession levels, however, and Vermont leads the New England states in job growth in this category ("Vermont Labor Market Quarterly," p2). This suggests that policy can support the transition to a revitalized food system. Unfortunately, the support for workforce development has not necessarily been connected to support for a revitalized food system more broadly.

> "Workforce development is not yet aware of the work opportunities inherent in an interconnected regional food system."
>
> – MA Workers Alliance

At the national level, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority and signed into law by President Obama in July of 2014) sets the stage for workforce development policy. Most significantly, the WIOA defines four core program areas: "(1) youth workforce investment activities and adult and dislocated worker employment and training activities, (2) adult education and literacy activities, (3) employment services, and (4) vocational rehabilitation services" and requires states to draw up and approve "unified state plans with a four-year strategy for the core programs" that "meet the skilled workforce needs of employers" (Congressional Research Service). This is promising, but unfortunately doesn't directly address the major workforce pressures food manufacturers face. While it suggests a potential leverage point for intervention (i.e., state policy)

local food advocates fear that the entire apparatus is “stuck in traditional modes of thinking” and see a need for longer-term investment in research and academic support for food system studies as critical to long term change (Borgez-Medez).

Like any complicated challenge, the need for workforce development in the food industry has no single, simple solution. A systems view positions the challenge in the context of national demographic trends and policy, but also recognizes that many other intervention points exist. Local policies, programs, and individual company practices still have enormous power to change workforce dynamics, regardless of the high-level trends. The innovation taking place at these levels, if successful, may sow the seeds of wider change.

EXCITING APPROACHES

A number of exciting approaches to food industry workforce development are emerging around the Northeast. A brief sampling indicates the diversity of approaches.

Culinary Skill-Building as Job-Readiness Training

Successful programs to teach culinary skills as part of a broader job-readiness curriculum exist in a number of states, working with a variety of populations. Farm Fresh Rhode Island’s Harvest Kitchen Project, for example, works with youth in the juvenile justice system to process and preserve local food. The 20-week training program, held after school Monday-Thursday, begins with 15 weeks of basic job readiness (timeliness, personal presentation) kitchen skills and food safety, retail sales training, resume preparation, and job interview practice. Participants are then placed in a 5-week supported internship at a local food business where they can put their skills to work. The program has a 63% graduation rate and has expanded over time to include a 6-person kitchen crew of recent graduates, providing transitional work for youth who need jobs.

Farm Fresh Rhode Island, Pawtucket RI

In Vermont, FRESH Food, a social enterprise business run by Vermont Works for Women as part of their holistic “Step In to Work” job readiness program, trains women on food safety and culinary skills. Over 13 weeks, participants “assist professional chefs in preparing 6,000 healthy, nutritious meals per

month for local childcare centers" using locally-sourced ingredients wherever possible (FRESH Food). In New York, Project Renewal runs a 6-month Culinary Arts Training Program for formerly homeless adults with a history of addiction. The program combines classroom instruction with on-the-job practice preparing meals for Comfort Foods Catering, a social impact venture run by Project Renewal that delivers approximately 3,000 meals per day to senior centers and shelters as well as professional parties and events. Participants are placed in supported internships, and receive intensive one-on-one counseling and job placement assistance upon graduation. Started in 1995, the program has grown to serve approximately 150 adults each year and boasts an 85% placement rate and turnover only half of industry average ("Culinary Arts Training Program").

In Massachusetts, Community Works Services runs a variety of job-training programs, including a 16-week "Food Arts Careers" course that covers "all the facets and functions in the food industry, including farm to table and composting." Program participants work with a different industry professionals each week to create a meal that draws on the skills and cuisines they've been studying. The program emphasizes sustainable practices and nutrition, and each participant receives food manager ServSafe training and accreditation (Community Works Services).

Industry-Led Initiatives

Few companies have been as proactive and successful in implementing workforce programs as Rhino Foods. Based in Burlington, VT, Rhino foods began in 1981 as a small ice cream shop in Winooski. Now a certified B-corporation employing more than 100 people, the business is still run by founder Ted Castle, who has made "provid[ing] a vehicle for our people to develop and achieve their personal and professional aspirations" one of the foundational principles of the business ("Our Story"). In 2007 Rhino Foods partnered with the United Way of Chittenden County to launch the "Working Bridges" program, which acknowledged that the line between work and the rest of an employee's life is an arbitrary division and opened up dialog with employees living at or below the poverty line about how to address the barriers they faced. The outcome was an Income Advance short-term loan program, financial literacy training, an on-site resource coordinator to help employees troubleshoot financial, housing, or medical issues, and connect them to relevant state resources and benefits. The impact of the program has been significant: almost half the company's employees have met with the resource coordinator, Rhino Foods has guaranteed more than $250,000 in short-term loans, and by 2010 turnover had dropped from 37% to less than 15% (Rhino Foods).

CommonWealth Kitchen, Boston MA

Educational Innovations

One of the most important educational innovations to support ongoing workforce development is the increase in so-called "stackable credentials." The basic concept is simple: "allow working learners to balance their education and training with job schedules, family needs, and financial resources by earning short-term, industry-validated credentials one at a time" (Wilson p1). By creating pathways towards professional credentialing (e.g., certificates, licenses, etc.) stackable credentials better illustrate the steps employees need to pursue to advance their careers. By focusing on skills mastery, they provide documentation of transferable skill sets, a boon to manufacturers recruiting individuals without direct industry experience. Perhaps most importantly, this approach increases equity by making post-secondary education more accessible to low-income workers who have historically been excluded.

Hope & Main, Warren RI

A number of academic institutions in New England are beginning to provide training on food systems. The Greenfield Community College Farm and Food Systems program, which provides students with "an interdisciplinary understanding of the ecological, economic, political, and social systems as they relate to food and farming" includes a combination of academic coursework, hands-on fieldwork, and integrated internships (GCC). In the Bronx, Hostos Community College (a finalist for the 2015 2015 ASPEN Prize For Community College Excellence) offers a Food Studies program that covers the City University of New York common core curriculum and blends classroom work with supported internships and a capstone project. The two-year program sets students up for success in the workplace or to transfer seamlessly into a four-year degree program in fields such as political science, health and nutrition, or environmental studies (Hostos).

Other academic institutions are focusing on the support of food entrepreneurship and training existing industry members. The Lewis Institute at Babson College, created in 2010 to focus on social impact innovation, hosts Food Sol, an "action tank for food entrepreneurs of all kinds" that brings together food business innovators and students through weekly community table events, periodic "quick service incubator" pitch and crowd-sourced problem solving gatherings, and other events (Babson). The Rutgers Food Innovation Center has provided technical support and training services to over 1500 companies since launching in 2000. In 2008 the center completed construction on a new 23,000 square foot incubator and shared-use processing facility. The facility supports new food businesses, as well as serving as the hub for professional training and providing office space for the center's staff. In December 2016, the Center convened New Jersey food processors for the Food Industry Targeted Industry Partnership (FoodTIP), a workshop with the NJ Department of Labor to "identify solutions to the industry's workforce needs and help shape workforce training opportunities" (Cooperhouse p1).

SUMMARY

The demand for local food is strong and growing. Strengthening local/regional food systems has the potential to spur economic development, but a culinary workforce equipped with greater skills is necessary to make the transition. Demographic trends, cultural messaging, and past policy choices have resulted in an aging manufacturing workforce and a limited pipeline of new talent. Food manufacturers rely on increasingly sophisticated technology and food safety measures, meaning their workforce needs a higher degree of training than in the past. New food businesses, which may be less automated, often struggle to attract and retain staff due to intermittent production schedules and inconvenient locations. Industry wages significantly lower than in other sectors, the increasing cost of higher education, unclear pathways to advancement, and negative perceptions all discourage young people from pursuing a career in food manufacturing. Despite these many challenges, innovative programs are successfully using culinary skill-building to help even disadvantaged populations become valuable members of the food sector workforce. Pioneering companies have shown the competitive advantage in embracing a shift to greater local/regional sourcing and the mutual benefits of investing in workforce development. Leading educational institutions are developing the curricula to impart the skills and knowledge the next generation of food sector workers will need, as well as supporting training for existing industry members and the conception, creation, and launch of new food businesses. “Stackable credentials” are gaining traction as a mechanism to help close the skill gap in the current workforce and increase equity in access to postsecondary education. Federal policy, in the form of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, has mandated states work strategically with industry to address workforce development, and in states where a unified policy in support of the new food economy is in place, positive results are already becoming apparent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Food Manufacturers

- **Invest to find the right employees and keep them.** Turnover is expensive, and as training needs continue to expand the cost will only grow.
- **Create pathways to advancement.** Communicate to employees how gaining the appropriate skills (food safety, process control, etc.) can support their growth at the company. Make employees aware of different credentialing opportunities (ServSafe, HACCP, SQF, ISO, etc.) and work with those interested to ensure they can access.
- **Build strategic partnerships.** Support organizations can help employees navigate and address challenges outside of the workplace that may be impacting their performance. A small investment in finding and developing partnerships can reap substantial rewards in employee morale and reduced turnover.
- **Make innovative labor practices part of your brand.** The Millennial generation (the 75 million born between 1981 and 1997; Fry) is now the single largest consumer demographic and more than 75% are willing to pay a premium for sustainable brands, a measurement that includes the degree to which “a company is known for its commitment to social value” (Neilsen). Investing in human capital creation through workforce development can be both a cost-savings measure and a public relations benefit.

- **Engage in the policy process.** States are charged with creating a workforce development strategy responsive to the needs of their employers. Those who speak up will be the ones to benefit from state efforts.

Funders and Nonprofits

- **Support innovative programs for food sector workforce development.** Funding for higher education can support efforts to develop new curricula, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training programs as well as subsidize tuition for populations otherwise unable to access educational opportunities. Support of job-readiness programs has an immense impact on participants as well as helping build a qualified labor pool.
- **Look for opportunities to partner with progressive employers.** Many existing social service programs are underutilized because eligible employees may not be aware of the program or lack the resources to complete the application process on their own. Supporting organizations can play a valuable role in connecting these individuals with resources and employers provide a single point of contact to connect with potential beneficiaries within the established routines of their lives.

Mad River Food Hub

Government Officials

- **Engage industry to craft a workforce development strategy that meets their needs.** A renaissance is under way in food, with an explosion in new products and a boom in new manufacturing establishments. To sustain this positive momentum food manufacturing needs workforce development programs that will create a pool of trained, talented workers ready to embrace the greater complexity of local/regional food and the increasingly technical aspects of food safety and manufacturing automation.
- **Position food at the center of economic development efforts.** The shift to a local/regional food system has the potential to drive growth in many laterally linked industries. Because the point of differentiation is the locality, it is something that can't be lost to cheaper labor overseas or more advantageous tax breaks across state borders. As the example of UVM Medical Center illustrates, even a single institution that shifts purchasing patterns has the ability to make a significant difference.

- **Invest in workforce development infrastructure.** Whether at the federal, state, or local level, policy and budget decisions will have significant impact on workforce development efforts. Many of the support structures necessary to build a robust, skilled labor force depend on public funding. Community colleges, university extension programs, job training centers, state and local health and food safety departments; all of these are necessary to sustain the necessary culinary workforce. Sufficient funding is critical to allow continued innovation and bring costs within reach for the economically disadvantaged.
- **Develop preferential purchasing policies.** Government is accountable to the taxpayer for using money wisely, but that shouldn't extend only to program budgets. Government itself is a significant purchaser of goods and services and, as such, has the ability to use its power as a consumer to support workforce development. Mandating that contract awards and procurement decisions take into account labor practices can make purchasing decisions reinforce policy.

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