RTI’s Workforce Development Ecosystem Framework and Survey Tool: Findings from Caribbean Pilot Tests

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INTRODUCTION

Workforce development is critical for any economy; that is, the ability to provide an educated, highly skilled, adaptable workforce is a key component of economic growth and a country’s competitive advantage. A skilled workforce provides human capital for business productivity, innovation, and growth (supply), as long as the specific needs of the private sector are met (demand). Aligning these two components, however—the supply of a skilled workforce and the evolving demand of hiring employers—is a growing global challenge.

Dobbs et al. (2012) estimated that by 2020, developing countries could see shortages of up to 45 million mid-skill workers, accompanied by a surplus of more than 90 million low-skill workers. They predicted that “…if current trends persist, in 2020… Hundreds of millions of working adults without job-relevant skills would need training; India alone has 340 million such workers, half of them with virtually no schooling” (p. 3). They require not only the professional, technical, and vocational skills aligned with industry standards and employer demand, but also a variety of transferrable skills—including “soft skills” relating to behaviors, attitudes, and workplace aptitudes—all of which rest upon sound basic education.

Workforce development systems are a complex web of often-disconnected actors, institutions, policies, regulations, and regimes. Addressing this challenge requires a well-functioning workforce development ecosystem, in which all stakeholders, actors, and programs are in alignment and collaborating to train, employ workers, and drive firm-level growth. In practice, it is not uncommon for parts of the ecosystem to be functioning well, while other parts are abject failures. These situations occur because policy makers, stakeholders, and their donor partners, especially in developing countries, lack an effective way to assess the system and plot high-potential interventions. Numerous studies released in the past several years by organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Asian Development Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank’s Multilateral Investment Fund (IDB-MIF) confirm these findings (see, for example, Alaimo et al. 2015; Maclean, Jagannathan, and Jouko 2012; OECD 2008; UNESCO 2002; Word Bank 2011).

RTI International developed the Workforce Development Ecosystem Framework and Survey Tool in response to this need. Note from its name that the product has two parts: First, the workforce development (WfD) framework provides a way to map out the workforce system in a country or territory by breaking down the essential functions of the system into core processes and assessing who’s doing what for whom. The map of the workforce development ecosystem is then verified and assessed through the second part, the survey tool, which has two distinct versions to capture the perspectives of youth and other diverse stakeholders about their interactions with that system. Areas of confusion, lack of information, or low assessed performance identify possible high-impact intervention areas. While efforts
similar to this one exist, the WfD ecosystem framework and tool diverges in that it places a premium on primary data from “user groups” (students, educators, employers, government, service providers, and more), with a quick, action-oriented diagnostic meant to propel project-based interventions.

Given the newness of such an approach, careful development and testing of the survey tool was needed. This paper describes the framework and survey tool’s development, early testing in the Caribbean, examples of ways to analyze and visualize the data, and survey tool recalibrations made based on the pilot results. The paper begins with background on the emerging importance of workforce development systems; a brief description of the survey tool and its foundational concept; and the results of the first field test, which took place in the Eastern Caribbean. The conclusion highlights future considerations and next steps in the development process.

**BACKGROUND**

The traditional view of workforce development has been a problem-focused approach that addresses issues such as low-skilled workers or the need for more employees in a particular industry. Relatively recently, however, multiple industries have begun to understand that a collaborative workforce ecosystem is based upon a strong network of policies and practices that has the ability to respond to changes in regional or local economies. At the center of a highly functioning workforce development ecosystem is close collaboration between demand- and supply-side actors. With this type of interaction, employers know what jobs they need to fill and are best positioned to advise on how workforce training and interventions can accommodate that demand. Workforce development initiatives can enhance their efficiency by turning to employers to help solve the structural challenges in an economy. These trends have driven a shift from what has historically been a disconnected set of players and services to an ecosystem that is more collaborative—where employers and training entities are more integrally involved in workforce interventions (see Figure 1).

**Mapping the Ecosystem**

Building and assessing the effectiveness of emerging workforce development ecosystems requires not only adjusting to shifting paradigms but also developing innovative tools—such as RTI’s *Workforce Development Ecosystem Framework and Survey Tool*. To summarize from above, the WfD ecosystem framework and survey tool maps the landscape of providers and participants of a country’s or territory’s WfD system; assesses each *element* of the ecosystem; and notionally, gauges the performance of the ecosystem as a whole.

The WfD framework scans the on-the-ground workforce development situation in terms of four key employment-related outcomes:

1. Private returns to skill accumulation,
2. Employer satisfaction,
3. Unemployment, and
Building upon the work of World Bank’s Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), which is a diagnostic approach for workforce systems, the WfD framework breaks systems down into 22 defined core processes (see Table 1). The survey tool takes an agnostic approach to who might be performing these processes, seeking solely to understand who is doing what, and with what level of performance as perceived by key stakeholders.

Table 1. WfD ecosystem framework and survey tool: Core processes

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Acquiring education and skills</td>
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<td>2 Responding to market and cultural signals</td>
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<td>3 Investing in own education and training</td>
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<td>4 Effectively managing business/sectors for growth and upgrading</td>
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<td>5 Maintaining business functions to define positions and pathways (rewards)</td>
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<td>6 Articulating and communicating skill requirements</td>
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<td>10 Matching job seekers with jobs</td>
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<td>12 Aligning WfD strategy [and implementation] with economic and development goals</td>
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<td>13 Regulating the system: accreditation, credentialing, and performance measurement</td>
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<td>14 Measuring and improving performance by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data</td>
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<td>15 Funding and financing WfD activities</td>
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<td>16 Encouraging employer-based training through soft or hard incentives</td>
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<td>17 Ensuring equity of access and (group-specific) advancement through policy and practice</td>
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<td>18 Educating students/youth for basic and foundational skills (basic education)</td>
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<td>19 Training secondary * PS students for (real) jobs and careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Training and retraining adults for new and upgraded employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Incorporating skills requirements into education and training programs</td>
</tr>
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<td>22 Tracking employment and earning outcomes (of graduates/exits)</td>
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Desk research, which encompasses both a literature review and interviews with key experts, produces an initial understanding of how these functions are being performed, and informs the sampling approach for the survey portion of the data collection. This research is a critical step, as without the WfD framework to determine the key actors within the given ecosystem, the survey tool cannot be appropriately calibrated for the specific country context.

Once prepared, a survey team, made up of two to four individuals (depending on size of country/territory to be visited), spends roughly a month in country implementing the survey and conducting focus groups to collect data on stakeholders’ perceptions of the workforce development system in a given area. These data answer questions about the actual map of system processes and actors and provide insights into where stakeholders agree and diverge about performance therein.

The results from the survey can be presented in a number of different ways, including spider graphs showing the disparities in perceptions among workforce stakeholders, bar graphs showing youth perceptions versus workforce stakeholder perceptions, and a heat map showing perceived perception deviations on how the individual core process is performing. The heat map (see Figure 2), which assigns the colors of a traditional traffic light, based on the assessed level of challenge, allows for easy identification of critical places for further research and assessment and areas with high potential to benefit from improvement programs.

Figure 2. Heat map example to indicate areas of focus for positive change

![Heat map example to indicate areas of focus for positive change](image-url)
PILOT TESTING

The RTI pilot team chose to pilot the survey tool in the Caribbean due to the small population and geographic size, ease of access from the U.S. mainland, and the islands’ widespread use of the English language. The countries selected were Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, and Trinidad. In each country, the survey tool was piloted with two key groups: youth (including students) and the workforce stakeholders (e.g., employers, service providers, educators, government). The direct solicitation and inclusion of youth perspectives is another distinguishing feature of this product. Their inputs were captured along with those of the workforce stakeholders, which varied from country to country dependent on the particular actors in their workforce ecosystem.

The research team determined that during this first pilot, the main focus would be on the survey tool as an instrument. Consequently, a convenience sample was used, and the resulting sample size did not allow for robust analyses. In the four countries, the survey sample included respondents from both rural and urban settings (noting that the size of the island meant rural was still easily accessible) in an effort to help diversify feedback and opinion. See Table 2 for the final counts by country and response type (youth or workforce).

Administration of the Youth Survey Tool

Youth were defined as students or recent graduates between the ages of 15 and 24 who were focused on finding a job, were building skills for a job, or were interested in becoming an entrepreneur. To obtain a convenience sample from this defined population, the research team identified and contacted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, church groups, advocacy groups, public service institutions and educational institutions, asking them to select youth to participate in the survey. In some cases, the entities arranged for the pilot team to come to a predetermined meeting space (such as a classroom or community center). In other cases, youth were surveyed at job fairs, at institutions, or on university campuses. The selected youth participants were always asked for their consent before the survey proceeded.

Although the youth typically convened in a group setting, they were asked to respond to each item on the survey individually. This was done to eliminate potential intra-group biases typically found in focus groups, and to reduce desirability bias. Youth participants were provided with an unmarked paper copy of the youth version of the survey tool. The pilot team read each statement exactly as written and asked the individual youth to respond using a Likert scale to indicate whether they “strongly agreed,” “agreed,” “neither,” “disagreed,” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement. Youth also could choose the option: “I have no experience with this issue.” The youth were encouraged to add any comments they had about each statement. This allowed the research team to use a mixed-methods (qualitative and

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1 For our purposes, we defined “youth” as those who were currently in school. “Workforce” constituted those who were currently employed, including potential employers.
quantitative) approach in the analysis. However, allowing the youth only to respond individually could have limited the amount of additional comments obtained. If a youth did not understand a statement, the pilot team was instructed to further explain the question so that everyone in the group could hear the same information. Upon completion, all paper instruments were collected and the data were entered via the Tangerine™ electronic data capture software.

As the youth were completing the survey, the administrators made note of which statements needed more explanation, or had words that needed to be defined. In group settings, the explanation and/or definition was provided to the whole group to help maximize the amount of feedback on the quality of the pilot version of the survey tool. This information was collected qualitatively and used to help revise the survey tool (WfD Ecosystem Survey Tools, version 2.0).

As a side note, during the first few youth groups, strict protocol was not followed, in that the administrators talked while the youth were completing the survey, which may have led to biased answers. On the other hand, overall, the pilot team found that the group-based method allowed for discussion that produced very fruitful and lively engagement by the youth, enriching the data captured by the survey tool. One added value of these discussions was that they allowed the research team to share with youth any information they had learned about job openings, job fairs, skills employers were seeking, and more, therefore benefiting the youth. Nevertheless, the pilot team later learned that this type of interaction could lead to youth changing their answers based on the discussion, which prompted the pilot team to keep silent during subsequent youth group sessions.

**Administration of the Workforce Survey Tool**

The workforce stakeholder participants were identified during the WfD framework review of countries by the pilot team. Workforce stakeholders and actors are not the same in every country. Thus, the survey tool allows the team to adjust for the stakeholders identified in that country or territory. For the pilot, the following groups were specifically targeted, as they had been identified during the WfD framework assessment: ministry staff, education institution trainers and administrators, private sector employers, public service providers, NGO staff, and business councils/chambers.

The pilot team gave representatives of the selected entities a brief introduction to the tool by email and asked them to participate. The pilot team members always offered to visit the office of the workforce participant to complete the survey tool, although on occasion it was instead suggested to meet at a restaurant or hotel lobby. The researchers always asked the selected workforce participants for their consent before proceeding with the survey.

At the face-to-face meeting, after a brief introduction, the pilot team offered the workforce participants the option of either a paper or an electronic version (“e-survey”) of the survey tool. The pilot team allowed for questions as the participant filled out the survey. Both the e-survey and the paper survey tool took longer to fill out than anticipated, and some participants had technical issues with the e-survey, mainly user difficulty. It was apparent based on the questions they asked the pilot team that the reading level was a bit too high for these workforce participants as well. Additionally, while the tablet was certainly easier to carry and to upload collected data, fewer comments were provided via tablet. We believe this is because one could simply check a box to provide the Likert scale response, but providing a
comment required typing on the tablet. The pilot team found that the paper form allowed for more conversation and more comments.

In addition to the common issue of language level, another apparent complication with the survey was a mixture of double-barreled or compound statements. Based on participants’ questions, it was easy to ascertain that sometimes they wanted to provide two answers for one statement, which led to the identification of the double-barreled statements.

**PILOT SURVEY RESULTS**

The pilot applications in the four selected countries served as our preliminary test of the survey tool. Because of the convenience sample, the results we summarize below are not meant to be inferred to a larger population. And because of the small sample sizes, the results are not robust enough to make appropriate statistical conclusions about the sampled groups.

However, the sample methodology and the qualities and quantitative data collected did allow for a mixed-methods approach that could reliably be used to improve the survey tool for future pilot studies (WfD Ecosystem Survey Tools, version 2.0). The pilot data also allowed the team to derive various analyses and data visualizations tools that will help inform stakeholders on how the youth and workforce respondents perceived their countries’ education and workforce development.

The following section provides a select set of different analyses and data visualizations (along with the write-ups) that could be paired with data collected with this survey tool, if used with a robust sample size and sampling frame.

Employers tend to look for three types of skill sets from entry-level employees: foundational skills (e.g., reading, math), technical skills (e.g., welding, accounting) and interpersonal skills (e.g., punctuality, problem solving). The pilot tool allows for comparisons of these skills within and across countries. *Figure 3* is an example of how the data could be used. It shows that among the workforce stakeholders surveyed, less than half were satisfied with the skills of youth entering the workforce. For comparison, in the piloted countries surveyed, the qualitative data did suggest that workforce stakeholders felt that interpersonal or soft skills were the quality most lacking in young workers.

Results from the pilot suggest that among this limited sample of young people surveyed in Barbados (84%), Grenada (68%), and Guyana (100%), many believed that education and training would lead to improved career and income prospects. However, the young people surveyed seemed less positive about their actual ability to find a job. For example, in Barbados, 27 out of 38 youth respondents believed...
that recent graduates struggle to find employment. Difficulties in finding employment may not be based solely on the availability of jobs. The surveys of workforce stakeholders suggested that even when jobs are available, employers struggle to find qualified applicants. In Barbados, less than half of the workforce stakeholders who were interviewed reported being able to easily fill vacancies with qualified workers (see pilot result graphs in Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Sample graphs: Youth and other stakeholders’ perceptions of employment opportunities**

![Figure 4a. Youth in Barbados who believe unemployment is low among graduates](image)

![Figure 4b. Workforce stakeholders who perceive it is easy to fill vacancies in Barbados](image)

The research team was able to use the data collected from the pilot to identify mismatches between how youth and employers perceived the labor market. As an example, Figure 5 depicts the convergence and divergence of perceptions related to the survey tool statements between youth and workforce stakeholders in Barbados and Grenada. The product’s graphical output indicates that in some cases, the responses were closely aligned; however, often the discrepancies were substantial in how young people and workforce stakeholders felt about how well the 22 core processes were functioning or were accessible.
Changes to the Survey Tool

The research team used all the information collected during the pilots as well as inputs from a diverse team of additional researchers to learn from and improve the WfD Ecosystem Survey Tools. By using the electronically collected data (statistical evidence), experiences of the survey team (testimonial evidence), and feedback from the participants (anecdotal evidence), the research team was able to use a mixed methods approach, to develop the next generation of the product, called “WfD Ecosystem Survey Tool, version 2.0.” Members of the pilot data collection team, along with a group of workforce experts, survey tool developers, research methodologists, and statisticians reviewed all the information described above. The team met several times and reviewed each survey item one by one. By having a holistic view...
of the reliability and validity of each question, the team was able to determine if a question needed to be revised. Major criteria used to determine if revisions were needed are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Review of survey tool reliability and validity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review questions</th>
<th>Evaluation resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Did the participants understand the item?</td>
<td>Used statistical evidence by checking how frequently participants checked “I have no experience with this issue.” Also used testimonial evidence from the survey team, and anecdotal evidence from the participants’ feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did the item truly measure the participants’ perceptions of the WfD core process it was thought to measure?</td>
<td>Used the expertise of the workforce experts and anecdotal evidence from the participants’ additional comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Does this item contain one, simple statement? (Or is it an array of run-on questions?)</td>
<td>Used the expertise of the entire group partially from the workforce experts, the survey developers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is the item internally consistent with the other items in the survey?</td>
<td>Used Cronbach’s alpha (statistical evidence) to measure internal consistency (internal reliability) of each item when compared to the other items in group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is this item in the youth survey phrased similarly to its complementary item in the workforce survey?</td>
<td>Compared the Cronbach’s alpha item value in the youth survey with the Cronbach’s alpha of the complementary item value in the workforce survey to see if they had similar values, indicating they may have performed similarly in both surveys. Also used expertise of the entire group partially from the workforce experts and the survey developers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It became clear during the post-pilot review that some processes covered in the overall survey had little connection to youth, such that a statement for that particular process was not relevant to them. When this was the case, the process number was kept on their survey, but the statement was removed, leaving a blank row to indicate “not applicable.” The reason for this was to ease data analysis by ensuring that each numbered youth response would continue to match up with a workforce response.

Second, after we adjusted the statements to better reflect the 22 processes, we simplified the language of the statements to ensure that readers with lower literacy levels could easily understand the statements presented. Third, any statement that had been deemed “double barreled” or compound was unpacked to render it into a simple, single statement. Finally, any statements that were judged redundant or otherwise unnecessary were eliminated from the survey.

**CONCLUSION**

The assessment approach detailed in this working paper represents the first effort to develop a consistent and transferrable process-based ecosystem mapping and assessment methodology applicable to developing-country contexts. This pilot administration of the RTI Workforce Development Ecosystem Framework and Survey Tool successfully demonstrated how to attain a baseline assessment of key workforce development outcomes and processes, and yielded preliminary information highlighting divergences of opinion among stakeholders. The ability to holistically assess perceptions of education and
labor market opportunities will be helpful for donor program design and planning, as well as for more routine government system mapping by policy makers.

As with any tool, continuous improvement is a critical element of the product development cycle. Based upon the work to date, three key areas require further consideration: better accommodating differing country contexts, comparing perceptions and reality, and redefining “rapid assessment.”

Accommodating Differing Country Contexts

It is difficult to create a single tool for a wide range of country contexts. Developing and middle-income countries where RTI would apply this WfD framework have a variety of institutional arrangements and vary greatly in terms of institutional and governmental capacity to undertake workforce activities. This WfD framework assessment must be applicable in low-income and lower middle-income countries, with their radically different resource bases, distributions of responsibility for workforce-related activities, and levels of formality in institutions. So another part of this challenge is to more clearly understand which features and processes should be assumed to be “universal” or “persistent” features of workforce systems across contexts, as a way of assisting in defining the field for a global audience. This is what led to the approach that focused squarely on the core processes that comprise the workforce development system. The main objective is to try to understand the institutions and organizations involved in workforce development, while at the same time recognizing that they will vary significantly across contexts. Further, any assessment must be flexible enough to encompass a very wide variety of organizational configurations in terms of coordination, education, training, and intermediation functions.

“Perceptions Are Reality”

It is important to emphasize that this survey tool measures the “perceptions” of stakeholders within the system. The results, therefore, should not be treated as right or wrong. We believe the uniqueness of this survey tool is that it provides important insights when “perception is reality.” That is, if youth trainees say they are unable to access job data and a ministry posts results of employer surveys on an obscure website, the perceptions of these youth highlight a disconnect within the workforce development ecosystem. In an effective ecosystem, trainees must have easy access to usable information on where the jobs are and the best training paths to those jobs. For this reason, the WfD framework and survey tool should be considered part of a suite of tools, such as others that RTI is developing, which can quickly and accurately collect labor market information.

Rapid Assessment

The WfD framework and survey tool was initially designed to serve as a “rapid assessment”—in other words, a way to take a quick snapshot from the scenic overlook of the general landscape below. But in the end, given the number of actors and the requirement to engage enough respondents in each category to result in a data set of reasonable size for research, the pilot implementation of the tool took more time and, therefore, cost more than expected. It is not clear that these factors are avoidable. Obviously, each case is unique. The situation in each country and each project must be assessed, thereby matching the right tool with the right objectives. These issues of time and cost might be reduced by leveraging conferences, meetings, or institutions where multiple actors could come together and participate in the
assessment process. Consideration should also be given to simplifying the survey tool further if possible. For example, perhaps the “functions” could be consolidated or the number of items reduced. In either case, time and costs need to be balanced with the need to continue pursuing strong results.

The next steps in the development of the Workforce Development Ecosystem Framework and Survey Tool will involve field testing the updated survey tool (version 2.0) and completing the mapping framework within a larger country. This pilot field test had limited resources and was focused on refining the survey instrument. The work was done in conjunction with other related fieldwork. True field tests and an in-depth pilot will require extensive time in the field and a strong implementation team.
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