



**BEST** HOSPITALITY TRAINING

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
**WORKFORCE  
STRATEGIES  
INITIATIVE**

## BEST Corp: Quality Training for Quality Jobs

Jenny Weissbourd • July 2018

Hospitality ranks among America's fastest-growing sectors, but millions of hotel workers are not reaping the rewards. Boston Education, Skills & Training (BEST) Corp. is solving this problem by providing best-in-class training that prepares workers to excel and engages hotels in discussions about the value of training.

BEST was founded in 2004 as a nonprofit workforce development program focused on helping individuals develop skills and find good jobs in Boston's hospitality industry. BEST serves nearly 500 job seekers and hotel workers each year, with training in English, computer skills, culinary skills, and industry-specific certifications like food safety. Through career coaching BEST helps participants secure quality jobs and provides hotels with the skilled talent to thrive in an increasingly competitive industry. As the third prong of a productive labor-management partnership, BEST works closely with [Local 26](#), the hospitality worker's union, and its high road hotel employers.

These 35 hotels pay a **starting hourly wage as high as \$21.43 to BEST graduates**, and provide a generous benefits package, which includes career advancement training through BEST.

BEST's model programs benefit workers, hotels, and Boston's regional economy by placing engaged employees in stable jobs. BEST reaches the working poor – particularly immigrants and people of color – and provides them with the opportunity to obtain a quality job and enter the middle class. Hotel partners report that BEST-trained workers bring the critical thinking skills and cultural competency to perform better with decreased turnover, contributing to stronger financial performance. The Aspen Institute's [interview with Alex Pratt, Area Director of Human Resources at Omni Hotels & Resorts](#), speaks to BEST's vital role in preparing top talent and enabling operational excellence.

In 2016, BEST's Room Attendant Training Program was registered by the Massachusetts Department of Labor (DOL) as the country's first Housekeeping Pre-Apprenticeship Program. This six-week, 150-hour training prepares un- and under-employed individuals to secure quality hospitality jobs, primarily as hotel housekeepers. From 2011 to 2016, BEST served 186 participants and had an **89 percent placement rate** for graduates. Among these graduates, **83 percent had retained employment as of 2017**. On average, program graduates earn \$7.08 more than in their previous job, **an average annual income increase of \$14,000**. Prior to participating in BEST, only 3 percent of trainees had jobs with employer-provided health benefits. After graduating, **98 percent of program participants found jobs with employer-sponsored health coverage**.

The Aspen Institute recently caught up with **Marie Downey**, the founding Executive Director of BEST, and **Joan Abbot**, BEST's Assistant Director, to learn more about how BEST partners with high road employers to prepare workers to excel in quality jobs.

### **Tell me about your path to this work and how you decided to launch BEST.**

**Marie Downey:** I grew up in South Boston, in an area with one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the United States at that time. I quit high school at 16. I didn't believe in the American Dream, though my parents really did. They said, "If you work hard you can do anything in this country." I'd look at them and I'd say, "You've worked really hard and I don't see how it's benefited you." I couldn't figure out how I could get to college anyway, so at the ripe old age of 16 I decided to throw in the towel. For the next 14 years, I moved from job to job. At 29 I got a job at a hotel in Boston, and this job was different than any I'd ever had. I was a waitress, but I had healthcare benefits. I was being paid more than the minimum wage of \$1.65 an hour. Because there was collective bargaining in place I was paid about \$4.65 an hour. Even in a week when I might not have made good tips, I could still pay my rent. My life began to stabilize, and my dreams of going back to college resurfaced.

I went back to school and got really involved with the union, and I was curious about the employers who owned these hotels who were investing in us through all of these benefits. I went to work for the Employee Assistance Program, where I worked for about 15 years, and I continued to have the opportunity to see how hard immigrants and people of color and low-income people were working, and what kinds of things could make them lose their jobs. One of them was not being able to keep up with industry needs as the skills began to change. When the labor-management partnership began to talk about a need to have better trained workers, I got really excited.

**Joan Abbot:** Marie is a living mission statement. Everything we do is infused with that experience you just heard. I brought another perspective. My background is with immigrants and refugees, teaching English and computer skills and cultural orientation and work orientation here and in other countries, in Sudan and Thailand. Part of my belief had been that if you can work really hard you will get ahead. When we interview our job seekers, we hear from people who have been hired to work in a kitchen and have been there for five years without a raise. One of our students, Margarida, came from Cape Verde for a better life for her children, and in her first interview with us she started crying and said, "This isn't a better life."



Ergonomics instructor teaches students how to stock a housekeeping cart

and then a week at another hotel. The coaches have an idea of who might be a good fit where. Then participants get a job at a hotel, and they can continue to come back to us for more training to improve their skills so that they can do their job better. At that point, our classes are part of their Local 26 benefit plan.

**MD:** We've interviewed over 4,000 people, and it really is hard not to get overwhelmed because the stories they come in with are so similar. They've been working 40, 60, 70 hours a week without any sick time, without any vacation time, without any healthcare. They can't even plan ahead to go to a child's baseball game. When you ask them what they want in life they tell you, "I just want a good job." We see a lot of people from the fast food industry. Margarida worked for 10 years at a fast food restaurant. She was a supervisor, and she was making \$10.50 an hour. As soon as we interviewed her, we thought, "This woman could work at the Ritz Carlton Hotel." And, actually, that is where she is now. But they don't have the opportunity or time to figure it out. They don't know how to get into one of those jobs, and they don't have the confidence sometimes to think that they can just go into a beautiful hotel. They may struggle with online applications or interviewing skills. We're able to help them to upskill.

**JA:** We work really closely with the employers so that we know what they want. Our career coaches know all of the hotels, and each one has its own brand. We send students on job shadowing: a week at one hotel

### Given the diversity of operating practices

### across the hotels you work with, how do you design a training program that prepares students to excel across a variety of settings?

**JA:** Everybody needs basic information. We have an ergonomics instructor who comes into each class and teaches them as a group and then works with them one on one. They learn how to clean the bathroom and how to stock the cart without hurting your back. Everybody needs customer service skills. Everybody needs professional language and professional dress. And we teach branding. We take them on hotel tours and ask them to notice details. We ask, "What adjectives would you use?"

**MD:** It's the same thing with understanding diversity and conflict resolution. They're core competencies.

### Do hotels actively compete for graduates?

**JA:** Yes. We had a graduation on Friday. The Human Resources Director from the Taj came. She pointed out that she'd hired three from the last class and she

said, “I hired them before graduation.” We actually had a job fair after graduation, and she got in before graduation.

**MD:** We love it when one of our graduates has two or three offers to choose from, because what a position for them to be in, that they’re deciding. “Well maybe I don’t like the biggest type property; this property works better for me.”

**In 2016, BEST became the country’s first DOL-registered Housekeeping Pre-Apprenticeship program. What was involved in earning this designation and why did you pursue it?**

**MD:** When we first started hearing about apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship, out of curiosity we decided to look into it a little bit more. We found that most of what we were doing already fit within the pre-apprenticeship model. You had to have 144 hours of related technical instruction. Well, we had 150 hours. You had to have designed your curriculum with your employers. We had done that. There was a wage progression in place. By building the pre-apprentice program, we were then able to go to Bunker Hill Community College and ask them to take a look at our curriculum. It took several months, but what they decided was that this program is comparable to classes within their Hospitality Management Associates Degree Program and their Hospitality Certification Program. People can get

nine college credits for completing the 150 hours at BEST and then another three credits for their on-the-job hours.

If we can shine a light on these jobs it changes the image: low skill and low wage are not the same thing. What are the deciding factors in whether a job should be designated low wage or not? And if someone’s thinking, “I’m coming in as a pre-apprentice; I’m coming in with something. Even if I never decide to go back to college I’ve earned this.”

**JA:** Another challenge about the job-seeker piece is I think there’s been a push to train people to get a job, any job, but once they’ve gotten that job at a fast food restaurant or elsewhere they’re off the radar. We’re encouraging a comprehensive holistic approach to then help people move on the career lattice even if it is a lateral move.

**MD:** People come back with good stories. I think of Michelle. As a housekeeper in a hotel she was able to buy a home, become a citizen, get married, have two children and receive 12 weeks paid maternity leave with both. She says she never would have been able



BEST students participate in a teamwork activity

to stay home with her children if it was not for the paid leave.

### **Tell me about the relationship with the Local 26 hospitality union. How do you work together?**

**MD:** We really believe that there wouldn't be the type of job quality there is if it weren't for Local 26. They're a really important partner to us. We know why we do what we do, and it's because of the work the union has done. Our employers would also tell you that it's the union that's been able to keep up the quality of these jobs in spite of the continued pressure to reduce labor costs as owners become more removed from the operations. We have an excellent relationship with Local 26. Yet we've also been able to build excellent relationships with the 35 hotel employers that we represent. And we're continuing to build our capacity with more than 20 hotels that are scheduled to open in the next two to three years.

### **How do you select employer partners, and do you use a "good jobs" frame to vet them?**

**MD:** We work with any employer who provides quality jobs. It's the sick pay, vacation time, and scheduling. For the most part people know their schedules two weeks in advance. They try to give them set days off. Does the worker have some voice within their own organization? Are they respected? We've certainly had employers who have asked us to send graduates and we have not. And it's not always about wages.

### **What are the business benefits of working with BEST, for hotel partners?**

**MD:** From what our employers tell us, it's because we've vetted and found people that are actually

interested in hospitality, and our graduates hit the ground running. The hotels save on recruitment and training costs, and reduce turnover, and even save money because of the ergonomics component. Our employers don't have any hard data but one employer said, "I don't hire anybody anymore unless they come from you because our workman's comp costs have gone down." When people learn exceptional customer service skills, it has to save the hotels money. The hotels want people who can problem solve and do critical thinking. One of the things we hear from a lot of the folks who come into our program is, "I worked in a job that required customer service skills, and I was always told give good customer service, but nobody ever showed me what that was." We do many roleplays so that people feel more empowered. Their confidence level goes up. And we're able to change curricula in real time. If something relevant comes up for the hotels that they need training for, it doesn't take us two years or five years to get that into the training. It happens within that cycle.

**JA:** There should be a campaign. Do you want to stay in a hotel where the housekeeper didn't have time to thoroughly clean your room, or in a hotel where there's a limit on how many rooms they have to clean?

**MD:** Hopefully there will be a real push at some point. People want to know where their chicken was raised and how, but they don't ask, how is that worker treated?

### **How replicable is BEST's model in other geographies and industries?**

**MD:** I think it's totally replicable, but it depends on funding and wages. If you want the same retention rates, you have to understand that people stay for a reason. They stay because they feel like they're being invested in and they're making a living wage, and workers have to have a voice. These are starting to

open up across the country. Miami is just getting a program off the ground. Las Vegas has been a leader for years. LA has one, Chicago is starting one. They're all union-based. The key piece is to find employers who are really invested in their workers and willing to pay higher than average wages.



Student makes a bed in a model hotel room

**What advice would you offer to workforce training organizations that want to replicate this model?**

**MD:** That they need to work with the right employers. Employers are certainly looking for trained workers, but they have to be willing to share profits. It's letting employers know in the kindest and gentlest of ways that if they want retention, this is a proven model. If

you invest in people, they're going to invest in you. And your business is going to thrive because of that. People come back because of the experience they've had. I think of restaurants that I go to – sure I want a good meal but it's about, "how was I treated when I went there?" And it's the same thing when you go to a hotel. People love to come back and have someone know their name or see the same doorman there or the same housekeeper.

*This project was supported by a legacy gift from the Hitachi Foundation. The Foundation incubated its Good Companies@Work and Entrepreneurship@Work programs to new homes at the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, and Investors' Circle.*

To learn more, visit [aspeninstitute.org/wsi](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wsi). Stay up-to-date with the Workforce Strategies Initiative by joining our mailing list ([as.pn/eopmail](https://aspeninstitute.org/eopmail)) and following us on social media ([as.pn/eopsocial](https://aspeninstitute.org/eopsocial)).

 [twitter.com/aspenworkforce](https://twitter.com/aspenworkforce)

 [facebook.com/aspenwsi](https://facebook.com/aspenwsi)

 [linkedin.com/company/economic-opportunities-program](https://linkedin.com/company/economic-opportunities-program)

2018 by the Workforce Strategies Initiative, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. Published in the United States of America. © by the Aspen Institute. All rights reserved.

Pictured on the first page: Student in BEST's On-Call Banquet Server class.