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Promising Workforce Strategies from Across the Reimagine Retail Network

Harnessing Digital Technology for Frontline Worker Mobility: Eat'n Park's Partnered Approach

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"I definitely made progress. I self-reflect [and I'm] more empathetic. ... It's not just the customers that [make me] reflect on empathy and reliability, it is also my team members. Like what can I do to help you make your job better? To help you get better tips, make your customers happy, and make them come back? My team members and my management have definitely noticed my attitude change. They say I'm more positive and happy at work since taking this class."

—Eat'n Park Restaurant Worker

"Decisions made, or left unmade, by community and business leaders over the next three to five years will lead in one of two directions: slow change or inaction that will erode competitiveness, or focused attention, investment, and leadership that will cement Pittsburgh's role as an innovation hub."

—2016 Inflection Point Study¹

¹ *Inflection Point: Supply, Demand and the Future of Work in the Pittsburgh Region*, 2016, Prepared by: Burning Glass Technologies and The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning with: Allegheny Conference on Community Development, p. 1. <https://www.alleghenyconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/InflectionPoint.pdf>

Introduction: Why Invest in Upskilling Frontline Workers?

In recent years, education technology tools designed for workers to access on their own time have proliferated. When **delivered appropriately**,² digital learning programs can help incumbent workers build new skills to advance in their companies or transition to new employment. These tools have the potential to enable continuous, lifelong learning that can support adults to reskill in a changing labor market.

Yet online learning tools are not without challenges. Working adults juggling competing priorities such as caregiving responsibilities may have limited time or resources to complete programs outside work hours, and digital literacy may also pose a barrier. Furthermore, not all digital upskilling programs are recognized by employers. And workers need assistance determining which programs will help them build skills and signal value for local employers. Recognizing both the potential importance of online learning and these challenges, this profile asks:

- What role can or should companies play in making online training accessible and relevant to frontline workers?
- How might businesses partner with outside institutions to design and deliver supplemental online training that increases worker mobility, both within the firm and across industries?

This profile documents one partnered approach to designing and piloting an online training program for incumbent workers, led by a food service company, a

civic leadership organization, and a local university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Context: An Inflection Point in Pittsburgh

This partnership traces its origins to a 2016 **study**³ of Pittsburgh's labor market, which told a startling story: by 2025, the region would need to hire or upskill 1.2 million workers to meet employer demand.⁴ The research was commissioned by the **Allegheny Conference on Community Development**⁵ (the Conference), a civic leadership organization that brings together public and private sector leaders to improve the economy and quality of life in the 10-county Pittsburgh region.⁶ Leaders at the Conference recognized two complementary stories about the region's needs that emerged in the research. First, the region's companies increasingly demand customer service competencies, including in high-growth "destination occupations" in health care and financial services that have the potential to offer stability and economic mobility for workers.⁷ Second, despite these companies' perceived need for workers, thousands of residents — particularly residents of color — remain unemployed or underemployed. As the report explains, "The Pittsburgh region represents a disparity of economic opportunity. ... While the region must continue to expand innovation and growth of high-skill roles, it needs to redouble its efforts to address the skill and workforce needs of residents who are not currently on pathways to high-wage jobs."

The Conference — an organization that works closely with regional companies and helps them align behind shared strategies — saw an opportunity. As the study explained, employers could "move from being simply

² <https://edtech.worlded.org/ttale-report/>

³ <https://www.alleghenyconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/InflectionPoint.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.alleghenyconference.org/>

⁶ The Conference represents 310 employers, and its board comprises 55 CEOs of the largest employers in the region.

⁷ The Conference conducted focus groups with "destination employers" that noted offering opportunities for upward mobility from customer service positions. These employers both confirmed that customer service skills are in high demand at their firms and provided information about the specific aspects of customer service they are looking for.

consumers of talent, to becoming investors in the labor marketplace” who support continuous learning, and partner with peers to align the regional labor supply with market demand. Companies should “focus on upskilling talent in the region,” including by creating explicit career paths and “training that is aligned with employer skill needs.” In Pittsburgh’s large service sector (comprising major health care and

financial services corporations as well as restaurants, retail, hospitality, and other service firms), the Conference believed that employers should invest in upskilling workers’ core customer service skills. This investment would not only benefit their own firms and workers but also be transferable across industries, and in turn support the regional economy.

Understanding the Value of Upskilling: Eat’n Park Hospitality Group

To pilot an employer-driven customer service upskilling program, the Conference had a particular partner in mind, well-known in the region for its commitment to community: Eat’n Park Restaurants- a part of Eat’n Park Hospitality Group. Eat’n Park Hospitality Group is a diversified food service company comprised of Parkhurst Dining as well as Eat’n Park, Hello Bistro and the Porch restaurants. The company is a family-owned business headquartered in Homestead, Pennsylvania, with locations in 11 states and nearly 10,000 employees across the company’s footprint. The Hospitality Group, and in particular Eat’n Park Restaurants, has deep regional roots, and a reputation for giving back. The annual “Day of Smiles” brings team members out to engage in service activities in the neighborhoods surrounding their restaurants. During May’s “Team Member Appreciation Month” managers distribute gifts to their team members, celebrating their contributions and successes. At the restaurant level, employees are encouraged to give back in their own way. In one restaurant, the manager created a group called “Fireflies” to mentor teenage female employees in the store. They meet every other week, and older women mentor them and help them grow professionally.

Eat’n Park has also demonstrated a commitment to developing team members and providing upward mobility within the company, regardless of educational attainment. Mercy Senchur, COO of the company’s restaurant division began her career as a midnight shift worker and received the tools and training she needed to move her way up through the company’s ranks. Eat’n Park offers their team members training opportunities such as Smile Plus and Train the Trainer, and emphasizes cross-training in order to build diverse skills and offer more hours to each employee.

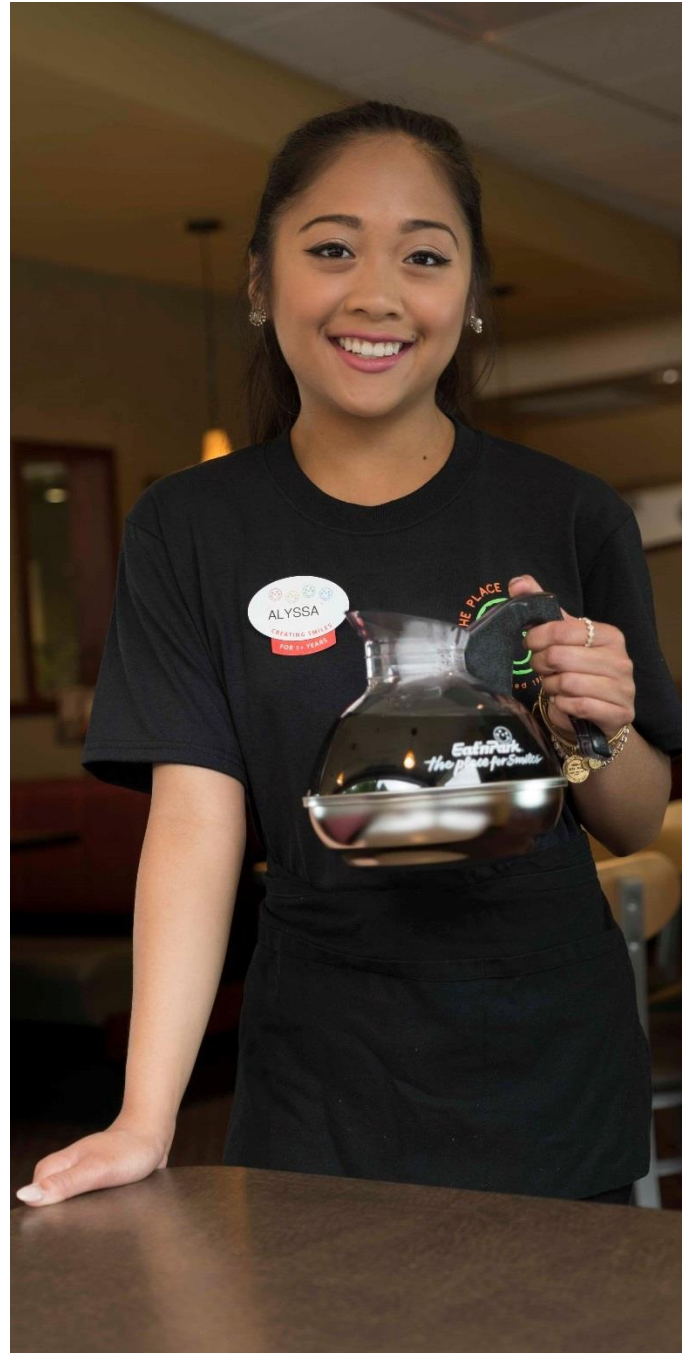
Eat’n Park stood out to the Conference as a strong partner because of company values — but Eat’n Park also saw a business case for launching a supplemental online training program focused on customer service. Not only could this training improve the customer experience in restaurants, but it could also help to alleviate a daunting cost: **burdensome hiring and training expenses**⁸ from turnover. Eat’n Park recognizes that turnover is a challenge across service sector work. Engaging workers in skill-building can help to attract and engage talent, extending worker tenure. Some employers fear that workers may leave after completing training, but Eat’n Park recognized that the investment would be worthwhile if job tenure is lengthened. Even incremental increases in retention can have a tangible business impact.

⁸ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/cost-of-turnover-tool/>

Designing the Certificate of Excellence in Customer Service

In 2016, as part of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program's (Aspen EOP's) national Reimagine Retail initiative, supported by the Walmart Foundation, the Conference and Eat'n Park began planning a pilot customer service credentialing program for frontline workers at Pittsburgh-area restaurants. From the outset, they saw value in digital delivery, which could more easily align with workers' busy schedules. They explored a range of formats, from mobile apps to community college courses and consulted national experts. Ultimately, they opted to work with a local university with relevant expertise and a trusted brand, positioned to deliver a hybrid online and in-person program: **Robert Morris University**⁹ (RMU), a private university in suburban Pittsburgh. In addition to offering a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees, RMU has a robust corporate partnerships program and significant experience designing and delivering courses customized to a particular industry and employer, including customer service trainings.

This profile shares findings from the initial, 10-person pilot course, focusing on the experience of the workers who participated. By design, it emphasizes the voices of workers and their managers, sharing in their own words how the training influenced their jobs and why. The profile begins with an overview of the program's content, followed by feedback from graduates and managers gathered through in-person interviews and a focus group conducted by Aspen EOP researchers. It concludes with an analysis of lessons learned and potential next steps. The experiences may be helpful to education and workforce partners seeking to develop digital customer service trainings to improve worker mobility.



An Eat'n Park team member putting customer service skills to work on the job.

⁹ <https://www.rmu.edu/>

Content and Delivery of the Online Training

Eat'n Park's human resources team worked closely with RMU under a contract to develop an online Customer Service Excellence Certificate Program customized for the restaurant's culture and business needs. To develop the content, the partners talked at length about Eat'n Park's existing trainings and designed complementary modules that would deepen entry-level workers' soft skills to improve service. In other **geographies**,¹⁰ the Aspen EOP Reimagine Retail research team has observed that training tailored to a business's norms and priorities can have a positive effect on worker productivity and mobility. This certificate program focused on customer service. Students learned how their own personality traits influence customer service delivery, how to identify customer needs, and the elements that comprise superior service quality. The program was formatted into 10 weekly modules, including two in-person meetings and eight online courses that students accessed via their computers or mobile phones on their own time, with accompanying written assignments. The course was structured as follows:

Week 1 – Orientation

During the first week, the students and Dr. Jill Maher, the program instructor, met in person for a two-hour orientation at RMU. Eat'n Park paid students for the time spent at orientation. During orientation, Maher welcomed the students and introduced the certificate program, walking through the curriculum and setting program expectations. The students had the opportunity to meet their peers from other restaurants. They later noted that this face-to-face connection was incredibly valuable throughout the program, as students kept in touch and supported each other to problem-solve and complete the course.

Students were provided an overview of Blackboard, the classroom website, and a general computer training. They were each given a school email address to facilitate communication with Maher and other students.

Weeks 2 through 9 – Online Content and Related Assignments

During eight weeks of online modules, students watched lecture videos, read short articles, and completed two blog posts and other assignments in which they were asked to reflect on how to implement their learning on the job at Eat'n Park. The program started with a focus on the meaning of customer service and the importance of being a team player to provide excellent service. Each student wrote their personal customer service philosophy at the outset. For example, one student wrote "I pledge to provide exceptional customer service by serving with a smile and working as a team." Students then completed personality assessments to understand their own personality types, including their individual strengths as team members. Students evaluated themselves using a reliable and valid assessment tool consisting of a series of statements such as "I enjoy vibrant social events with lots of people," "people rarely upset me," and "I often spend time exploring unrealistic yet intriguing ideas." These personality assessments were followed by modules on empathy, listening, and responding to customer needs to deliver high-quality service and improve their ability to monitor and assess customer satisfaction in real time. The students learned theories about drivers of human behavior, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and practiced applying this knowledge to their jobs and engagement with guests. These modules were designed based on the **five service quality dimensions**:¹¹ tangibles (such as appearance of facilities), reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. During the final module, students learned to

¹⁰ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/chicagos-fresh-approach-incumbent-worker-training/>

¹¹ <http://www.serviceperformance.com/the-5-service-dimensions-all-customers-care-about/>

distinguish service quality from satisfaction, and reviewed and updated their initial personal commitments to customer service. During the course, students met with their general managers to reflect on their growth and progress.

Week 10 – Reflection and Graduation

During the final week, Eat'n Park held a graduation ceremony at its Corporate Support Center in Pittsburgh. This celebratory event was attended by graduates of the certificate program, their general managers, the course instructor, and executive

leadership from Eat'n Park and RMU. Family and friends also attended to cheer on the graduates, most of whom had never received an academic credential from a college. During onstage remarks, Maher reflected on the growth she observed in the students throughout the program. One student's final service pledge showed growth from their commitment at the beginning: "I pledge to listen to my customers' needs and understand the importance of these needs to the best of my ability. I will use empathy and an individualistic approach with each guest in order to provide them with great service." Graduates were presented with a diploma and a summary of customer service concepts they can refer to at work.



Mercy Senchur, COO of Eat'n Park, congratulates a graduate as she receives her certificate.

In Their Own Words: Student Reflections on the Program

Ten students, ranging in age from early 20s to late 40s and including nine women and one man, were selected to participate in the pilot training program. All 10 completed and graduated with a certificate in Customer Service Excellence. Students demonstrated determination and resilience in completing the program, overcoming barriers such as broken computers, digital literacy challenges, and busy schedules. All graduates are full-time employees of Eat'n Park and serve in a variety of roles, including servers, cooks, and cover managers (who take over for short periods of time when a manager is not on site). Their tenure at the company ranged from less than a year to five years. The team members' previous work experience varied, with several having prior retail experience. Several had returned to Eat'n Park after leaving to work in other occupations or for other companies.

Why Students Value Eat'n Park

The graduates expressed strong affinity for the Eat'n Park restaurants where they work. They shared that Eat'n Park offers a "comfortable" environment and a team that is "always willing to help" and feels like "family." They value the regular customers and open communication channels with management. They especially appreciate managers who are willing to work with them to design a work schedule that aligns with their personal commitments, such as caregiving responsibilities.

"With management, there's just an open-door policy and it's awesome. So, like, if I get frustrated with a customer or team member, I go run and talk to my manager. They calm me down, and then I'm ready to get back to work. It's so nice to have that relationship with the higher-ups."

"Because I have two sons and I'm very limited on babysitters, I do four 10-hour shifts a week. They didn't have to do that for me, but they did and that's why I love my job. I make more money, so I know I can afford my bills."



Dr. Jill Maher, Professor of Marketing at RMU, addresses students at graduation.

Why Workers Chose to Participate – and What Motivated Them to Finish

The graduates were initially selected for the program because they were identified as high-performing employees by their managers. Patrice Micheals, director of training and development at Eat'n Park, personally spoke to each team member by phone or in person and invited them to participate. Micheals communicated to the team members that the program would be online, and it would take only a few hours of their time per week. One student later shared: "I mean, it's about personal growth, so how can you say no to that? We are all trying to get to a better place than the one we are in right now. It's about empowering yourself and doing something to get there. Plus, it's free. You can't beat that, right?"

The Customer Service Excellence Certificate program's success can be measured in part by its 100 percent completion rate. In our focus group, graduates pointed to four key practices that motivated them to sign up and to finish:

1. **Recognition:** Students felt honored to be selected for the program by leaders at Eat'n Park. The invitation made students feel special and valued and drew them in to participate in the program.
2. **Credibility:** Participants were excited that the online program was delivered by RMU – expressing a sense of credibility and trust attached to the university. Because Eat'n Park shared the opportunity, participants knew that their managers and company endorsed and valued the program. They also appreciated that it included a formal certificate.
3. **Accessibility:** The free, online delivery of the course made it flexible and easy to fit into workers' busy schedules. They were able to complete lessons and assignments as it was convenient and could re-watch videos and lectures as needed. One student said, "If it had been in a classroom, it would have been too time-consuming."
4. **Connection:** While participants accessed modules on their own time, the success of the online learning component of the program was supported by the relationships built between students before and during the course. The in-person orientation facilitated contact-sharing and connection, which led to greater resilience when students faced challenges, such as having difficulty with an assignment. Students noted that personal connections built between peers during the 10 weeks provided an effective support network.

What Graduates Learned

Several graduates expressed that they were initially hesitant about a customer service program; they wondered what more they could learn after being in the service industry for so long. However, all 10 graduates expressed that they developed and strengthened their skills through the program and saw a tangible impact in their performance at work. Some students indicated that their tips had increased after implementing strategies they learned in the certificate program.

Graduates appreciated the opportunity to reflect and build self-awareness, and to learn new skills to better serve customers and interact with team members. After completing the course, they expressed that they felt more confident engaging with guests in the front of the house – and they shared tangible examples of how they implemented insights and skills from the course in their daily work, such as by creatively responding to an upset customer. Students noted that they shared strategies with other team members who didn't take the course, so that co-workers could also improve their interactions with guests. Graduates

noted that these skills could help them advance at Eat'n Park or succeed in other work environments with a customer service focus. The graduates shared their key learnings from the program:

"One of the customers had this whole blowout, and as [cover] manager, I had to go and defuse the situation and calm it down. I went in there thinking of three, four, five different ways I could handle this rather than just, OK, I'm going to give you a free meal, and you're just going to get out of here because I'm having a horrible day. ... I actually cared about getting to the root of the problem and actually fixing it rather than just, you know, polishing it off and saying it is what it is."

"I think I've gotten a better perspective of my customers that come in, especially with the social needs. We have a guy who comes in three times a day. He comes in and talks. He's 93. Come to find out his brother is in a home and he's here talking to me because he doesn't have anyone. I've also been talking to my co-workers a little bit about this."

"This is how you can be a little more empathetic to your customer. Instead of being like, 'Oh, this person screamed at me. I'm just not going to go back over there.' OK, well, why were they screaming at you? What can you do better? Is there a way that the customer is not happy? Is it the food? Is it your attitude? Like, what can we do better?"

"Personally, I feel more confident in going and taking care of customer complaints or even just going around the dining room and checking up on customers. ... It gives me different ways to approach people and different issues."

"This class has helped me a lot, and it was awesome that while I was taking this course I was also training to be a cover manager. It has helped me be more aware of things, also helped me improve my customer service skills. When I have a situation going on that I

need to resolve, I think in more than one way how to resolve it now; I approach situations with more knowledge now than I've ever had. I also use a lot of the skills outside of work as well. I learned a lot about myself taking the quiz on personalities, which made me understand myself more. At work I try to share different ways to improve the quality of service, and something must have stuck because we've been getting better guest surveys. This was a great experience, and I would take this class again if I could because I feel like you will learn something new every time you review this."

"Being a part of this course has been such a great experience! I have learned so much about customer service that can be applied to each and every position in our restaurants, as well as in daily life. The lesson that seemed to stick with me the most was on listening skills. I have been able to implement these skills into my work in the past few weeks. This has greatly impacted my connection with guests. I appreciated this course, because it taught us practical lessons. We have gained knowledge that we can not only use but can also teach to fellow team members. I look forward to sharing what I have learned and gathering new experience with the knowledge I have gained from this course."

"I always said I am a pretty good server. Why should I take this class? I've learned a lot, and I've been using it with my customers because I have a lot of older regulars that come in. Sometimes I'm just so busy, but I've been trying to slow it down, sit there and listen, and talk to them more. I try to find more time. I think I get better tips from that. It's been helping me financially."

"I do feel like this course could be used anywhere. You can apply it not just at Eat'n Park but anywhere you go. I mean, for the most part I serve and, ideally, I do not want to be a server for the rest of my life, but I feel like I could take the skills anywhere, which is a good thing."

Seeing Impact at Work: Manager Reflections on Student Growth

Managers shared that the team members selected for this pilot were chosen because of the initiative they showed at work. Students were all regarded as highly motivated and engaged employees in their respective restaurants. Although they were already performing well, their managers noted visible growth and improvements both early on and throughout the course. One manager expressed that graduates are “more thoughtful about how to better themselves because of this program.” Managers were proud of some team members for overcoming personal challenges to finish the program.

Two general managers and one district manager shared their reflections on their team members' growth. They noted improvements in how they developed the guest experience, including increased levels of engagement with guests in the front of house. This was an improvement especially for the team members who worked primarily in the back of house, who had begun coming out to interact with guests more frequently. Managers shared that there was a notable increase in students' level of confidence, and they were asking more questions. One manager noted that a team member had noticed an increase in their tips since starting the course.

At Eat'n Park, general managers participate in an annual summit, to which they are permitted to bring one guest. This year, four graduates of the certificate program were invited and attended. One took home an award for being an outstanding team member.

Managers shared the following reflections about how workers had changed during the program:

“[Team member] has been covering for us a couple of shifts due to the fact that we are down a manager. She was able to apply some of the things she has learned, such as identifying guests' needs. She has really enjoyed taking the classes, and I think the program will help her in her development with the company.”

“[Team member] learned after taking the personality test that she is an Executive Personality, which means that she likes to take charge and she holds everyone at a higher standard. She learned how to use her personality type to her advantage.”

“[Team members] said that they went into it not expecting to take much away because they felt they didn't have a lot of room for improvement. However, both mentioned this changed very quickly as they started to learn. They both said that they gained some great tools for guest service and that the biggest takeaway was that the guests that come here really are looking for more of an experience rather than just a meal.”

“What I came away with is how much confidence [Team member] has gained, which was a slight weakness for them. We talked about approaching guests and listening to them. I talked about different guest comment scenarios and how would they handle them, and they had the confidence to handle each one we talked about with a little coaching from me. The bottom line is they have gained so much confidence, and that's exactly what I was hoping the program would do for them.”

Next Steps: Strategies to Strengthen and Expand

The partners learned helpful lessons through this pilot, including the advantage of a hybrid in-person and online approach that enabled students to build community while still pursuing learning on their own time. Recruiting students directly and partnering with a trusted education provider also encouraged participation and completion. Students and managers reported demonstrable improvements in graduates' customer service, self-awareness, confidence, and even tips.

The pilot also revealed ways to structure and improve the worker experience in programs of this type. For example, students expressed interest in more interactions with their managers about their learning and development during the course. It would also be helpful to facilitate more interactions between students, faculty, and restaurant management as part of the program. This can be challenging to balance with the demands of a busy restaurant operating multiple shifts, where managers may not consistently work during the same shifts as students.

Providing additional wraparound supports could also help participants navigate obstacles that arise during a course of this type. Several students had issues with technology, such as computer availability and functionality, as well as mobile access to the Blackboard website. For many workers who have been out of school for a while, using a computer to learn is a new and unfamiliar experience. It would be beneficial to have additional supports focused on

learning how to use technology while getting back into schoolwork and balancing a full-time job.

To build out the business case for training to justify the investment, a company such as Eat'n Park could identify and track outcomes related to participation — such as monitoring customer feedback, bill and tip size, employee engagement, and manager feedback. It would be equally valuable to track changes related to employee recruitment and strengthening of the internal management pipeline.

A next step for the Conference is to reengage destination employers seeking workers with customer service skills. The Conference seeks to understand whether the competencies graduates honed in the course position them for destination careers outside Eat'n Park, in addition to supporting their internal advancement. Hiring managers in these destination firms report that service sector employees often struggle to communicate their skillsets in job applications and interviews — a challenge they expect to be exacerbated by moves toward competency-based hiring. Might workers who completed the program — and increased their self-awareness — be better prepared to market their skills and identify examples that demonstrate their competencies? Or, might this certificate gain regional recognition as a trusted credential? If so, programs like this one could have a meaningful impact on the regional economy, helping employers across industries enlarge their local labor pool and diversify talent, while helping service workers increase mobility, either by transitioning to in-house management roles or by using retail work as a stepping stone to occupations in other growing local industries.



Three servers taking a break at Eat'n Park.

With support from the Walmart Foundation, in 2016 the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program launched **Reimagine Retail**, a project that explores ways to enhance stability and improve mobility for the retail workforce. We are working closely with partners in six regions – Chicago, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Phoenix, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh – to test strategies and capture learning about approaches they are using to support retail worker job quality and advancement. This is the third in a series of profiles by the Workforce Strategies Initiative spotlighting promising practices from across the Reimagine Retail Network. To learn more about Reimagine Retail, visit as.pn/reimagineretail. To learn more about the Workforce Strategies Initiative, visit as.pn/wsi. Stay up-to-date with the Workforce Strategies Initiative by joining our mailing list (as.pn/eopmail) and following us on social media (as.pn/eopsocial).

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