



Employer Use of Learning and Employment Records:

Early Lessons from Alabama Talent Triad



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Overview & Use Cases

On March 3, 2023, the Talent Triad leadership team, comprised of representatives from the Office of the Governor of Alabama, EBSCO Information Services and the Competency-Based Education Network, convened forty employers and workforce development professionals to provide tactical, strategic and message-development feedback to Talent Triad developers with the purpose of driving improvements to the platform, guidance for pilot implementation, and ultimately, improving the likelihood of scaled uptake and successful use.

Alabama's Talent Triad is a unique learning and employment record model, closing the loop between job seekers and employers using a true competency-based approach. It seeks to complement existing HR and talent management systems to fill jobs faster with verified candidates.

With insights from Alabama's employers powering platform adaptations, the Talent Triad pilot launched in April, bringing employers, candidates, and institutional partners into the platform. The Talent Triad leadership team anticipates a statewide launch in September and seeks to enroll at least 10,000 candidates through career counselors, workforce centers and other venues before the end of the year

Exploring Use Cases of the Talent Triad

Participants were asked to consider two use cases for the Talent Triad platform: skills-based hiring for new talent and incumbent employee upskilling and advancement.

Among employer participants, excluding workforce and education leaders, the vast majority were not familiar with the platform. The information presented and discussed at the event created an opportunity to understand participants' "first take" on the Talent Triad.

Use Case #1: Skills-Based Hiring of New Talent

Skills-based hiring is an approach to talent recruitment and acquisition that uses skills and competencies to replace or complement prior focus on degrees and other proxies for skills. Much recent attention in this space has focused on removing degree requirements from job descriptions, which eliminates one barrier to employment for people who may otherwise be qualified for a job.

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The Talent Triad is poised to be the clearest demonstration of true skills-based hiring in the nation. The Talent Triad is underpinned by a rigorous, vetted **competency ontology**, which articulates and validates the competencies that are needed by employers and uses the same competencies to validate skills gained by learners across Alabama’s education ecosystem. This is married with a **skills-based job description generator**. As a result, the Talent Triad enables:

...**job seekers** to apply for roles with confidence, recognizing when they have the skills needed to meet requirements.

...**employers** to identify candidates based on validated skills, with immediate “matches” based on required competencies, proficiency, and experience.

...**the state** to support an education and workforce system that connects directly to employer demand, and to create accurate, aggregated skills profiles for the state and regions.

In May 2023, Alabama’s unemployment rate was 2.2%, among the lowest rates on record in the last decade. The unemployment rate is a measure of those who are actively seeking work against residents in the labor force—those who are working or seeking employment. Alabama’s labor force participation rate, a measure of residents who are working and seeking work against all working-age residents, is among the lowest in the nation, with less than 60% of working-age Alabamians participating in the workforce.

A very small proportion of non-working Alabamians are looking for jobs. In fact, according to a [recent report](#) from the US Chamber of Commerce, Alabama has only 46 available workers for every 100 job openings. The Talent Triad is poised to reach Alabamians who may be frustrated in their job search, who may believe they aren’t qualified for any jobs, and who may not have insights into where their skills are applicable.

What Participants Value

Convening participants immediately saw the value in the skills-validation enabled by the Talent Triad, streamlining difficult hiring pipelines and supporting more proactive engagement to reach new candidates. Participants noted that the “matching” facilitated by the Talent Triad would “level the playing field” for workers from many backgrounds and were excited by the opportunity to have a “ready pool of applicants with competencies established.” They especially valued the automated matching that would, in one participant’s words, search through “all the people in the system, and show me ten matches.”

Participants also valued the ease with which candidates could tailor resumes and understand whether their competencies were a good fit for the job. One employer noted, “If they leave, it won’t be because they didn’t know what the job was.” Multiple times, employers mentioned the benefits job seekers would experience by only needing to enter their information once, rather than prepare tailored resumes—they thought this might reduce job seekers’ length of unemployment and reduce discouraging outcomes.

While all guests expressed interest and need in learning more about the platform, they were optimistic that the competency ontology included both technical and durable skills. Some participants noted that they struggled to identify important skills like problem-solving and critical thinking in potential candidates and

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found it compelling that the Talent Triad platform could help them articulate what those skills look like in the context of job descriptions.

While participants stressed the need to ultimately extend the visibility and usability of the platform outside of Alabama, especially in bordering states, they saw value in supporting workers to stay in the state and expressed gratitude that the government was helping to solve a problem. They appreciated the “for Alabama, by Alabama” approach the Talent Triad has taken.

For more employer feedback on skills-based hiring for new talent, see [Appendix A](#).

Use Case #2: Employee Upskilling and Advancement

As a result, retention of incumbent workers is critical for any employer that wants to retain a competitive advantage or continue to operate.

Costs stemming from turnover and open roles can be significant. While costs to hire differ across roles, with entry-level positions costing less than more technical or skill-specific roles, replacing an individual can cost between 150–200% of that employee’s annual salary, prorated by time. [LinkedIn reports](#) that employee turnover costs companies \$57,150, with 23% of hiring managers reporting it cost their companies more than \$100,000 in hiring costs and lost productivity.

Increasingly, workers are seeking more and different opportunities from their work. A 2022 [McKinsey report](#) indicated that, among people who left their jobs, the top reason for leaving was lack of career development and advancement, exceeding the rate who named inadequate compensation. Among frontline workers, the numbers are even more acute. Another [McKinsey study](#) shows that 70% of frontline workers seek career advancement opportunities with their companies, seeking job growth, learning opportunities, and increased pay. Upskilling and investments in education for incumbent workers have a [demonstrated impact](#) on retention, saving companies money despite spending on education programs.

The Talent Triad is positioned to support more intentional and effective upskilling and advancement plans for Alabama’s employers. The platform will enable:

- Employers to understand their workforces’ skills at an individual and aggregate level.
- Employers to understand the specific skill needs of a role, department, or full workforce, supporting the creation of targeted and relevant upskilling and training programs.
- Suggested and employer-tailored education recommendations, encouraging employees to upskill and seek new credentials.

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What Participants Valued

Participants saw value in the Talent Triad as a complement to the advancement conversations that are already happening in many companies. One participant described a process where annual evaluations supported the personal recommendations from managers: “We know who the rock stars are.” They saw the skills profiles in the Talent Triad as supporting upskilling and advancement conversations, removing the need to dig up records or run new reports.

Participants also appreciated that the Talent Triad would make an employee’s skills transparent, and “allow us to meet people where they are” rather than making assumptions, conducting multiple assessments, or relying on potentially biased feedback. They anticipated using the platform to complement existing personal relationships and “make sure folks don’t get caught between the cracks.”

While learning and development professionals were not well-represented at the convening, those who attended saw significant opportunity for the Talent Triad to support “building a skills-based curriculum” that could target documented skills gaps and be tailored to individuals and departments. “This would make it 100% easier,” an L&D leader commented.

They also saw tactical benefits, noting that the platform would help mitigate credential inflation, while encouraging upskilling for incumbent employees.

For more employer feedback on advancement and upskilling for incumbent employees, visit [Appendix B](#).

What We Learned

What We Learned

In addition to the insights participants shared about how the platform could be best designed and implemented for their purposes, they elevated ideas and issues important to the long-term success and scaling of the learning and employment record movement.

- **Employer validation.** Many employers provide valuable upskilling and training in-house, enabling employees to grow in their roles. One potential long-term use of the Talent Triad is employer validation of skills and competencies gained on the job through the platform. While participants did not spend a great deal of time discussing this use case, we learned that competition is fierce and employers are not necessarily interested in becoming skills validators themselves, which they view as “sharing their workforce strategy.” While employer-validated skills would certainly be a powerful force for economic mobility for employees, we under-estimated how much competition is driving employers’ efforts to retain talent.
- **Small business impact.** Small businesses were not well-represented at the March 3 convening, but multiple participants spoke up on their behalf and indicated that special effort should be given to ensuring the Talent Triad works for them. Indeed, the Talent Triad may be more valuable for small businesses than larger companies. The planning team is ramping up efforts to engage small business leaders directly.
- **Skills-based job descriptions.** The skills-based job description generator was less intuitive than the planning team anticipated, and based on feedback from participants, there is likely a steep learning curve for employers to adopt skills-based descriptions and hiring practices. The planning team is doubling down on efforts to ensure employers have solid training and guidance in building skills-based job descriptions
- **Lack of clarity—what will this replace?** A valuable lesson the planning team learned is that without clarity on how the Talent Triad will connect or align with or disrupt existing systems, employers are not able to fully describe their needs. Moving forward, we need to create clearer scenarios so employers can fully consider where the Talent Triad fits in their environments.

For additional information about opportunities for future enhancements to the Talent Triad, visit [Appendix C](#).

Design Principles

Design Principles—Early Insights

As mentioned, the Talent Triad is a unique model, closing the loop between job seekers and employers using a true skills-based approach. It seeks integration with HR and talent management systems to fill jobs faster with skills-verified candidates.

Based on feedback during the March 3 convening, and taking other learning and employment record efforts into account, the Talent Triad is demonstrating some promising design principles:

- 1. Skills First. The most important and transformational aspect of the Talent Triad is the competency ontology that underpins it.** Based on real job descriptions along with existing competency objectives, the Talent Triad created shared competencies that could connect learning gained through Alabama's educational institutions with skills required for employment. This enables accurate matching of candidates with roles, supports analysis of skills demands within companies and across industries, and, importantly, enables education and employers to speak the same language, removing barriers for candidates and without sacrificing specificity, context and unique situations for employers.
- 2. Close the Loop.** Learning and employment records themselves are important because they are portable, transparent, often verified accounts of learner experiences and learning. **However, unless these records are connected to employers' needs—jobs, competencies, and other needs—they do not necessarily add more value to learners and workers than a well-done LinkedIn profile.** The Talent Triad was built with the intent that the platform would create a true connection between employers, candidates and learning systems, enabling all three sectors to work in response to each other.
- 3. Engage Employers Early.** LERs, like any transformational effort, should not be built in the field of dreams. If you build it, they will not necessarily come. The Talent Triad prioritized employer needs in the planning, design and early implementation of the platform. Specifically, the Talent Triad attempts to provide unique value for employers, complementing existing systems and products to drive business impact.
- 4. Employer Practices Matter.** While the Talent Triad was built to streamline talent acquisition and upskilling for employers, businesses must shift their practices to benefit fully. Whether this is building skills-based job descriptions or creating upskilling and advancement opportunities for incumbent employees, to use the Talent Triad to its best potential, employers need to change. The Triad leadership team is exploring how best to support the training needs of employers.
- 5. Create Value for Learners and Job Seekers.** The Talent Triad will be provided to workers from all walks of life in Alabama, including high school graduates, learners participating in workforce training programs, and those attending the state's colleges. This inclusive approach assures that no learner is left behind, and that the platform's benefits are reaching those who need them most, including un- and under-employed people, those who are out of the workforce entirely, and those who do not have postsecondary experience.

Design Principles

- 6. Create Value for Education Institutions.** With more companies and governments removing degree requirements for hiring, education institutions are seeking meaningful ways of connecting with employers. The data and analysis capability implicit in the Talent Triad platform can help education institutions more readily prepare graduates for jobs and identify areas of strength and opportunity for improvement. At the March 3 convening, participants expressed an already deep trust in Alabama's postsecondary institutions, which the Talent Triad may only extend.
- 7. Policy Insights.** The Talent Triad is also unique in that it is the only state government-led LER platform. While this approach may or may not be replicable in other states, it does provide the benefit of understanding the policy implications of the platform. For example, skills-based matching of candidates with appropriate roles may significantly reduce the time workers spend using unemployment benefits and could drive shifts in how the state administers the program. Similarly, the platform could assist workforce development organizations in aligning funding and meeting compliance requirements. The Talent Triad could also support more effective economic development policy, and even support more successful business development efforts, if state agencies are able to show verified skills of the workforce. Engagement of state government as an employer may be an important design aspect, as well.

Conclusion

The Talent Triad convening represented an important opportunity to receive feedback, build awareness and avoid problems with employers. Participants did not disappoint. A highly engaged group, they were frank, describing what needed to happen for the platform to be useful, and driving the state to ensure this wasn't "just another government program." They were self-critical, noting the significant practice changes needed to move their own organizations toward skills and competencies. Importantly, they agreed that, for the good of Alabama's people, businesses and future, the Talent Triad represented an inclusive path forward based on skills and competencies rather than pedigrees and proxies.

We appreciate the insights, candor, and enthusiasm of the convening participants, who recognize the vision and value of the Talent Triad and who are committed to Alabama's future.

Appendix

Appendix A: Platform Recommendations, Skills-Based Hiring of New Talent

Convening participants were highly engaged and shared a wealth of insights and ideas. The following matrix organizes those insights for action and understanding.

Recommendations	
Technical (Tool-related)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Frontload relevant information in resume-view for employers—show skills alignment first.- Clarify ideal-state for skills-based job descriptions – show before/after for descriptions.- Provide on-demand and structured training for skills-based job description development.- Employers need confirmation that Talent Triad will integrate with HRIS (WorkDay) and to understand how that integration will happen—this is a non-negotiable for larger employers.- Ensure border state usability.- Develop reports catalog for easy use; enable employers to request or build their own reports.
Implementation (daily use, alignment with existing systems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Frontload relevant information in resume-view for employers—show skills alignment first.- Clarify ideal-state for skills-based job descriptions – show before/after for descriptions.- Provide on-demand and structured training for skills-based job description development.- Employers need confirmation that Talent Triad will integrate with HRIS (WorkDay) and to understand how that integration will happen—this is a non-negotiable for larger employers.- Ensure border state usability.- Develop reports catalog for easy use; enable employers to request or build their own reports.
Engagement (scale and reach)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Workforce development system is poised to support expansion.- Elevate potential “one-stop shop” for talent acquisition.- Conduct specific outreach and engagement with public employers, who often have different and/or more restrictive hiring policies and requirements.- Clarify applicability of platform to “which jobs.” Is the platform useful for all positions, or best-fit for some?- Build evidence base for use. What cost and/or time savings can users expect?

Appendix

Concerns and Lingering Questions

While there was significant optimism among participants, they did note some concerns and questions that, unless addressed, could stymie uptake.

1. Participants questioned whether 4-year institutions in Alabama would ultimately participate in the Talent Triad, noting that for both employer and job seekers, data from 4-year institutions and education pathways through 4-year institutions would be valuable.
2. Participants were highly engaged on the topic of interstate operations, indicating that being able to draw talent into the state was desirable, while competing on the platform with out-of-state employers was less so.
3. Participants noted that the Talent Triad may create outsized benefits for small businesses, which make up most companies in the state. Small businesses were not well-represented at the convening, and they may have specific insights and needs that larger employers do not.
4. While not a unanimous request, some participants sought more information and detail about how the Talent Triad works, particularly around how job history is established and how the platform would address privacy concerns. They were also interested in how the skills populated in the job description generator had been built.
5. As noted above, many participants saw a need for significant training in developing skills-based job descriptions.

Savings and Costs

Participants saw a wide array of potential savings in talent attraction areas, both in time and money, resulting from implementation of the Talent Triad, including:

- More efficient onboarding and orientation periods
- Fewer “poor fit” hires
- Shorter, more efficient candidate searches due to the ability to prioritize and identify must-have skills
- Reduction in need for additional verifications, such as degree verifications
- Reduction in need for background checks
- Shorter time required to develop job descriptions for new or changing roles (over time)

Participants also noted potential costs, especially in early implementation, including:

- Training costs and time off-task for HR and hiring managers.
- Depending on full use case, training for any staff members involved in talent management.
- Likely cost of connecting systems, including potential downtime or, for public systems, potential technology requirements.

Appendix B: Platform Recommendations, Employee Upskilling and Advancement

Convening participants shared their insights. Compared to the conversation about talent attraction, participants had less to say about talent management and upskilling, likely because the Talent Triad’s capacities in that space were not demonstrated, and because of concerns identified below.

	Recommendations
Technical (Tool-related)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employers are seeking clarification on what platform can/will do—demonstrations and training are required. - Dashboards and ready-made reports would be helpful. - Desire to see workforce skills aggregated by different levels (team, department, etc.). - Ability within platform to search active employees based on skill would be desirable: “Who has what?” - Employers need clarity/confirmation about whether skills gained through OTJ training are visible – concern re: poaching and sharing of talent strategy.
Implementation (daily use, alignment with existing systems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider how the platform could support Continuing Education Units or other required upskilling. - Function showing “this is what you’re missing” would be valuable, enabling employees to see what they need to move to next level. - Function showing skills gaps would be helpful for upskilling and evaluation conversations between employees and managers. - Confirm whether the platform is “teachable,” able to tailor pathways and recommendations for users based on job demand, skills gaps, and/or other factors. - Unclear whether there is a predictive function, able to identify employees who are likely to succeed in advancing roles.
Engagement (scale and reach)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May have outsized value for small businesses, particularly those that do not have other HRIS or learning management systems. - Emphasize “data-informed, skills-based pathways”.

Appendix

Concerns and Lingering Questions

While convening participants saw value in the Talent Triad for upskilling and advancement purposes, they expressed some concerns.

Primarily, employers were concerned that the Talent Triad would enable easier poaching of talent by other companies, especially if skills and competencies gained through employment were documented on the platform. They were reticent to publicize their internal upskilling initiatives lest other companies take advantage of their investments.

Likely due to limited demonstration, participants also questioned whether this aspect of the platform was overly complicated. They saw value in it, but whether the platform would fulfill an urgent need in this area was unclear. Participants also sought clarification about what existing platforms and resources the Talent Triad would replace, complement or leave unaffected.

Similarly to skills-based hiring efforts, participants vocalized need for on-demand and ongoing training and support in setting up and using the Talent Triad to its full potential, and indicated desire for real use cases and evidence.

Savings and Costs

To the degree that the Talent Triad affects retention and promotion through more effective and accessible upskilling, users can expect to save money in decreased turnover and improved productivity. Employers may also see cost savings resulting from more tailored and targeted upskilling efforts, rather than broader programs.

Appendix C: Opportunities for Future Enhancements

Participants saw multiple opportunities to expand the Talent Triad's value over time.

- **Improving Business/Higher Education Partnerships**

- o Participants indicated a deep existing trust of Alabama's higher education institutions and systems. However, they noted that the ability to see systemically where well-qualified candidates received training would be a benefit, one even mentioning "preferred training providers." On the other hand, employers seeing at a systemic level where candidates may lack important skills may drive opportunities for improvement and better alignment within institutions.

- **Employer of Choice"**

- o While employers expressed some caution about the platform driving increased competition, a lively conversation about differentiating attributes of employers emerged. Participants noted that potential candidates may be attracted by transparent wages and upfront notice of the availability of benefits (healthcare, education, etc.).

- **Dashboards, Data Aggregation, and Analytics Support**

- o With data comes opportunities to measure impact. Participants noted that having access to skills dashboards at multiple levels would be helpful, and that they would benefit from seeing the skills profiles of their workforces.
- o Participants also noted that having access to Return-on-Investment information at their fingertips would be helpful.

- **Discrete Populations Focus**

- o Participants noted that the platform may have outsized value for key populations, including those who have high school diplomas, those with disabilities, those re-entering from incarceration, and those who have been out of the workforce.

- **Research and Evidence**

- o Participants indicated desire for evidence and use cases that could support their internal efforts to use the platform.



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