

Summary of Findings from Focus Groups around Job Training and Workforce Development

May 2008

- **Methodology**
- **Strategic Summary**
- **Key Findings**

Focus Group Methodology

Lake Research Partners and conducted a total of five focus groups among attentive voters and businesspeople across three cities, Columbus, Baltimore and Atlanta. The groups in Columbus were held on April 3, 2008 and consisted of one group of attentive white men and one group of small business owners. The group in Baltimore was held on April 10, 2008 and consisted of one group of attentive white women. The groups in Atlanta were held on April 15, 2008 and consisted of one group of attentive, mixed gender African Americans and one group of medium to large business employees.

*Attentive public defined as as people who are aware of what is going on in the world today, who read the newspaper, watch the news on TV, vote regularly, volunteer in their community, etc.

Statement of Limitations

- In opinion research, the focus group seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.
- The reader may find that some of the information seems inconsistent in character upon first reading this report. These inconsistencies should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in his or her knowledge or judgment and we should interpret this as useful information about their level of understanding.

Statement of Limitations

- The following biases are inherent in this type of study and are stated here to remind each reader that the data presented here cannot be projected to any universe of individuals.
 - Bias 1. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants.
 - Bias 2. Some participants speak more often and more forcefully in focus group sessions than other participants, so their opinions tend to carry more weight in the findings.
 - Bias 3. Participants “self-select” themselves, i.e., they are those people who are available on the night a particular group was scheduled.
 - Bias 4. Participants were not selected randomly so that each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected.
 - Bias 5. People in groups may respond differently to a question than if asked that same question individually. They may follow the lead of a strong speaker or someone they perceive as an “expert.”
- Further, this report cannot accurately detail the wealth of information in the non-verbal area; e.g., “body language” (posture, sleepiness, wiggling in the chair, etc.) or the amount of time lapsed between questions from the moderator and actual responses from the group. It also cannot report on the subtle area of “peer pressure” – the willingness to avoid making a particular response because of fear of what others might think or to change a response when others in the group appear to oppose his or her original position.

Strategic Summary

Strategic Summary: Language

- **Education is a core value that needs to be captured in this discussion.** Education has a broad focus for voters and allows a role for government.
- While one phrase did not garner unanimous support, **the strongest positioning encompasses the words “skills,” “development,” and “education.”** These words allow a broad positioning and connote an emphasis on gaining and advancing skills rather than a specific job – a critical component in the discussion.
- **“Job training” and “workforce development” did not test as well** – “job training” means training for the current job an employee is in and doesn’t seem to relate to advancement and also has a blue-collar connotation. “Workforce development” seems to apply more to white-collar/managerial positions and also makes people think this is something for businesses to accomplish.
- **The phrases “economic opportunity” and “ladder of success” conjure positive reactions from most participants, though they tend to have different meanings. Overall “economic opportunity” is the better phrase.**

Strategic Summary: Messages

- **Messaging around additional education and how this can help individuals and families achieve the American Dream is compelling. In addition, focus group participants respond to language around ongoing learning and the need to strengthen the middle class.**
- **Job training should be positioned in the context of the skills and education people need to be successful in the 21st century economy.**
- **Most focus group participants have a sense that to succeed in the workforce, you need skills, and a broad range of skills would be most beneficial.** Some say employees need to diversify their skills so they have several skill sets and also that it is beneficial to have skills in a high demand area. Many emphasize the importance of technical skills, in particular, which require education not just training. Successful workers in this economy require new skills throughout their lives.
- **Overall, participants maintain there is value in education and skills development for both employers and employees.**
- Job training is seen as an investment by a business in an employee, but not as much as an investment for government. **While participants in the Columbus groups are somewhat receptive to shared responsibility between government and businesses to accomplish job training - because they feel businesses by themselves may not do the best job -- most participants in the other two cities prove resistant to a major role for government around job training.** They see businesses as having the primary responsibility, with government as an assistant, not a partner. The role for government is more about tax breaks and incentives. Broadening the discussion to education and skills development allows for a slightly expanded role for government.
- Opposition messaging around other spending priorities and individual lack of motivation also proves somewhat persuasive to focus group participants.
- When presented with a number of facts, the disparity between available jobs and the workforces' education proves most compelling to participants - 45% of all job openings will require more than a high school education, but less than a four year degree, yet 75 million Americans have no post-secondary education.

Strategic Summary: Opposition Messages

- Top opposition messages focus on other funding priorities and individual lack of motivation.
 - **Attack:** There are too many other priority issues – for example, health care and education – that the issue of significantly increasing spending on job training and providing even more tax breaks to businesses shouldn't even register as a priority. At a time when our economy is struggling and we are spending billions to fight a war overseas, we need to focus on cutting spending, not looking for new programs that need additional resources or new tax breaks for businesses.

Response: For our families and our children to do well in the 21st century economy, investing in education and skills development is a top priority. We are now in an economy where you need to diversify and adapt throughout life to help more American families achieve the American Dream for themselves and their children

- **Attack:** Across the country, our public schools are overcrowded, resources are tight, and the dropout rate is acute, especially in urban areas. We need to be directing funding and attention to strengthening our schools and keeping students in school rather than spending money on those who are already out of school. Maintaining our competitive edge in today's global economy depends on keeping our schools strong not job training for those already in the workforce

Response: Education is key to motivating people and to successfully providing real opportunities for all of our families and children. We do not have enough quality education and skills development programs for those who are motivated. We need to expand these programs so that all our families and children are successful.

Strategic Summary: Supporters' Messages

- Top supporters' messages should underscore the following*:
 - **Education and skills development** is the best way to talk about job training. This phrase emphasizes the aspirational quality of job training and keeps the messaging at a values level.
 - Additional **education and skills development** helps people move out of minimum wage jobs and better support their families, buy a home and send their children to college. Getting people the skills they need to economically advance in the workforce is necessary to help more American families achieve the American Dream for themselves and their children.
 - Helping everyone achieve the best for themselves and their families is the right thing to do. It's only fair that people should be provided the economic opportunity to advance as far as possible. **Education and skills development** provides workers with what they need to get good jobs and support their families.
 - For most of the 20th century, a high school education was enough for a chance to make middle class wages. In a highly competitive and changing global economy, **education and skills development** for workers at all levels is just a part of the ongoing learning that is required to maintain a thriving middle class and also our competitive edge in the world.

*Note: language for supporters messages above is slightly different from the language tested in groups to reflect the best way to talk about "job training."

Dos and Don'ts

- Do use **education** as a frame for job training and workforce development: the public proves more receptive to this broader frame, which is a core value.
- Do talk about the advancement of **all** workers, not targeted programs.
- Do describe the potential to create more **marketable skills** and improve the **quality of life** for the worker and his/her family.
- Do emphasize the importance of **maintaining and creating a workforce that reflects the needs of today's changing economy**: the public recognizes the need for a workforce that is both diversified and competitive in the global marketplace.
- Do talk about the **aspirational quality** of education and skills development.
- **Do use language about economic opportunity not mobility.**
- Do use language that highlights the need for a **dynamic, adaptive and flexible workforce**.
- Do use the word "**partnership**" to describe the relationship between government and employers.
- Do talk about government as a **catalyst** not an investor in education and skills development.
- Do use values-based messages to help communicate the notion of **shared values** and eliminate the need for messengers as validators.

Dos and Don'ts

- Do not overstate the role of government but rather the need of employers to invest in their employees.
- Do not refer to poverty.
- Do not use personal stories that focus only on a specific individual but rather address systemic changes.
- Do not use too many facts but rather emphasize values.

Key Findings

Key Findings

Context – Today's Economy

- There is a sense that today's economy is constantly changing, and, as a result, employees need to be constantly adapting and maintaining their skills to keep pace. Voters feel that employees need to learn skills their entire life. Specifically, in these times with companies changing and employees moving around, having the right skills is even more important.
- Many participants add that some post high school education, if not a college degree, is critical to respond to the needs of the economy today.

Key Findings

Workforce and Job Skills

- Perceptions around the minimum level of education required to get a good paying job in today's economy vary depending on participants' underlying impression of what is a good paying job. However, **there is agreement that something more than high school is needed today.** Generally, participants associate at least some college education as a requirement to get a good paying job. However, there is some concern among participants that the U.S. public education system is too college-prep focused and fails to prepare vocational-track students for the workforce.
- **The phrases "economic opportunity" and "ladder of success" conjure positive reactions from most participants, though they tend to have different meanings. Overall "economic opportunity" is the better phrase.** The phrase "economic mobility" was only tested in Columbus and conjures up images of moving from job to job not upward. Mobility does not imply acquiring more skills or advancing. "Economic opportunity" means having different jobs and pursuing different careers and having the opportunity to advance financially, while "ladder of success" makes voters focus on personal initiative, moving up in the company they are in, and bettering oneself. African American participants in Atlanta have some negative associations with both terms and suggest that as a community, African Americans are held to different and unequal standards. Increasingly, there is a sense that opportunities exist for immigrant populations rather than native residents and citizens.
- **"Skills," "development," "training," and "education," for the most part, conjure up positive images for respondents.** Education and development tend to be seen as broader terms, while skills and training tend to be narrower in focus. However, **"workforce development" is not well received and is seen as a term companies use for programs that often do not work. Further, "job training" is seen as too narrow a term and only applies to getting training for the job you are currently in.** Additionally, some feel that the word training applies more to blue-collar positions, while development applies more to white-collar positions.

Key Findings

Job Training

- When they hear the definition provided to them around job training*, **some focus group participants feel calling it job training limits its reach**, as they feel it limits it to training for a specific job and not the broader reach that the definition is trying to capture – getting into the workforce and advancement. They feel that blue-collar jobs need job training while white collar and technical jobs need education.
- Many believe that job training does not necessarily work better at different skill levels, rather they feel it is up to the individual to make the most out of a job training program. Even so, some acknowledge that less skilled workers make up a larger percentage of the workforce, have more room to grow, and have more at stake, such as getting off of government assistance programs.
- Further, **participants do not want job training to be focused entirely on one type of skill level but rather see the value to investing in job training for low, middle and high skill jobs**. If forced to choose, many would put government funds into low-to-middle skill jobs as the sense is that high skills training will be provided by the employer to keep their employees' skills updated or that these individuals make enough to pay for the training themselves. Additionally, while some see low-to-middle skills employees as needing the help, they point out there will always be a need for low skill employees and that not everyone can continue to advance.

* Job training is defined as getting people the skills they need to get in the workforce and also to advance in a changing workforce.

Key Findings

Job Training

- **There is a sense that education and skills development for workers is especially critical given the weaknesses in today's K-12 education system.** While voters feel some may lack skills because of a poor education, there is a caution in that this can't appear to be too remedial, as voters will push it back to being accomplished in K-12.
- In the broad context, voters believe job training programs work and want these programs to succeed; however, some base their remarks on the programs they have seen first hand, and their sense is that these programs do not always work the way they are intended to work.

Key Findings

Benefits and Obstacles

- **Overall, participants maintain there is value in education and skills development for both employers and employees.** They say that employees get an opportunity to improve existing skills or gain new ones with the upshot of becoming more marketable and employers get a return on their investment in their employees. There is a sense that being a good employee equals being a good citizen and participants see real value in being a “contributing member of society.”
- People believe education and skills development also benefits the families of employees who go through training because it can have a positive effect on salary and, as a result, quality of life.
- Although some participants can readily offer benefits of job training, **some are uncertain about whether or not there are enough available opportunities.** Some participants are knowledgeable about training programs, but many say that they do not hear about available programs. Others maintain that it is incumbent upon the individual to seek out training programs and assert that there are many opportunities available – through the government in some instances - for ambitious employees or students.

Key Findings

Benefits and Obstacles

- **The drawbacks around job training programs mainly center on funding and individual responsibility.** Some participants have personally experienced training that was not valuable to their professional development and they note that some people will not take advantage of the benefits training has to offer. Attentive white women in Baltimore talk about the extraneous costs of job training off-site and also concerns around employee loyalty to a company following a job training program.
- Focus group participants cite **a lack of employee loyalty, a lack of personal motivation, and a shrinking skilled job market as barriers or obstacles to enrolling more people in job training and professional development programs. Personal motivation is raised several times in the discussion among white women in Baltimore.** They emphasize that you cannot train people who are not motivated, and, through personal anecdotes, some add that there are some people who will never be motivated enough to seek out job training programs.

Key Findings

Funding and the Role of Government

- Government funding is generally rejected as a source of funding for job training programs, and participants assert that there are other policy priorities. However, a few participants would like to see government partner with businesses to provide training for the workforce, though they are vague on the details of such a partnership.
- A few participants are somewhat receptive to a shared responsibility between government and businesses around job training, while others feel it is just semantics and see little difference between a partnership and shared responsibility.
- Generally, though, participants are tax-sensitive and resistant to too much government involvement. Many believe that businesses have the primary role in providing and funding job training and that government can help - at most - through tax breaks and incentives for companies.

Key Findings

Facts, Messages and Messengers

- When presented with a number of facts, the disparity between available jobs and the workforces' education proves most compelling to participants - 45% of all job openings will require more than a high school education, but less than a four year degree, yet 75 million Americans have no post-secondary education. Facts in general tend to help shed light on the issue and have a role to play in the discussion.
- Opposition messaging around other spending priorities, including education, and lack of motivation is somewhat persuasive to participants.
- Supporters' messages that emphasize the promise of the American Dream, doing the right thing, guaranteeing a basic level of skills and education, and extending education are well-received. Participants also respond to language about regional partnerships and the priorities of bolstering the middle and working classes.
- There is some pushback on the word "poverty" among participants in Columbus and a message that says even the best programs cannot help Americans in low-wage jobs get out of poverty has a little traction since some believe it is not always possible for job training to accomplish this.

Key Findings

Facts, Messages and Messengers

- Personal stories centered around education and skills development work in Columbus. However, if personal stories are used then the emphasis needs to be on systemic change broadly, rather than focusing on one “heroic” individual.
- Messages around immigrants and how workforce training does not work prove less effective.
- Less successful messages focus on prioritizing funding for low-wage workers, the challenges of the 21st century economy, and outsourcing. The Atlanta businesspeople also reject the sector initiative message, which was well received by women in Baltimore.
- When considering organizations and individuals that may provide information or speak out in support of job training and workforce development, politicians are generally distrusted, while teachers and successful entrepreneurs like Bill Gates are credible. Respondents also say they would like to hear from business leaders who have experience with job training and can say how it has helped their business and their employees.

Key Findings – Text of Top Messages Tested in Focus Groups

[American Dream] Additional education and job training help people move out of minimum wage jobs and better support their families, buy a home and send their children to college. Getting people the skills they need to economically advance in the workforce is necessary to help more American families achieve the American Dream for themselves and their children.

[Right Thing] Helping everyone achieve the best for themselves and their families is the right thing to do. It's only fair that people should be provided the opportunity to move up the economic ladder as far as possible. Job training offers people the skills they need to get good jobs and support their families.

[Ongoing Learning/Education] Job training and skills development is just an extension of education today. For most of the 20th century, a high school education was enough for a chance to make middle class wages. In a highly competitive and changing global economy, job training for workers at all wage and skill levels is just a part of the ongoing learning that is required to maintain a thriving middle class and also our competitive edge in the world.