

# CHICAGO'S TALENT ADVANTAGE

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WORKFORCE, OPPORTUNITY & GROWTH



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# INTRODUCTION



## CHICAGO'S WORKFORCE ECOSYSTEM

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Chicago offers a network of publicly and privately funded organizations that help employers hire, train, and retain talent.

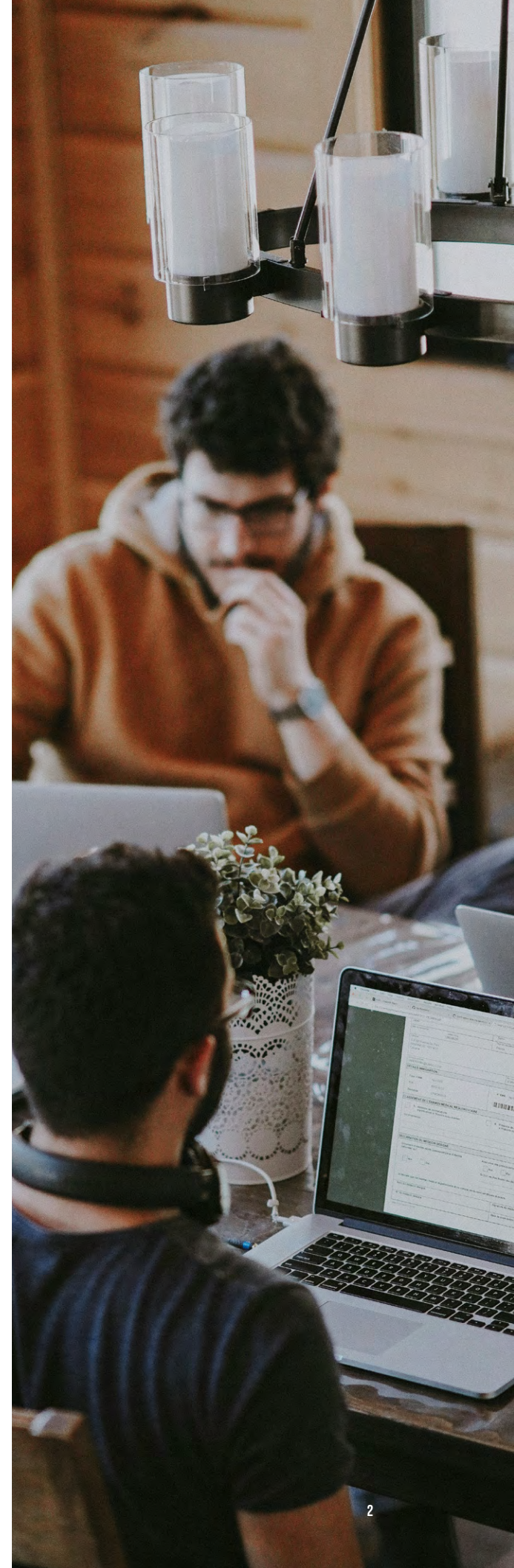
This collaboration—spanning educational institutions, nonprofit partners, and government agencies—is designed to be an extension of your hiring and training capacity. These institutions can connect you to qualified candidates, support onboarding and skill development, and help reduce the time and cost associated with building these capabilities internally.

For employers, the value is straightforward:

- Access a broader pool of qualified candidates—including individuals often overlooked by traditional hiring channels
- Reduce time spent sourcing, screening, and training
- Offset direct costs through subsidized wages, training reimbursements, and tax credits
- Improve retention through better job fit and support

This is not a new system to learn or build from scratch. It is existing infrastructure, already funded and designed to support business needs, that you can tap into based on your priorities.

These partnerships expand access to economic opportunity across the region by strengthening both business performance and Chicago's workforce.



# ACCESS TO UNTAPPED TALENT

Many qualified candidates are overlooked in traditional hiring processes. Chicago's talent network extends beyond traditional hiring channels, connecting employers to candidates not typically reached through standard recruitment processes.

These can include:

- Career switchers and reskilling workers
- Individuals trained through nontraditional pathways
- Veterans, individuals with disabilities, and justice-impacted individuals seeking stable employment
- Residents of historically underinvested neighborhoods

For employers, this represents access to a broader and more flexible talent pool—particularly for roles that are difficult to fill through traditional methods.

Each year, Chicago's workforce network engages more than 150,000 individuals across training, job placement, and career services—creating a steady and accessible pipeline of job-ready talent.



# THE REGION'S TALENT ADVANTAGE



Chicago offers one of the largest and most diverse labor markets in the United States, giving employers access to talent across industries, skill levels, and career stages.

# WORKFORCE AT SCALE

According to the World Business Chicago Research Center, Chicagoland's labor force includes approximately 5 million people (as of April 2025), creating a deep and continuously replenished talent pool across frontline, middle-skill, and technical occupations.

Each year, regional colleges, universities, and training providers award more than 151,000 degrees and certificates across fields including healthcare, business, technology, logistics, advanced manufacturing, and the skilled trades.

That talent pipeline continues to grow. From 2020 to 2024, the region recorded an 8% increase in total completions, including a 38% increase in certificate completions. Growth has been concentrated in STEM and skilled-trade pathways, reflecting increasing employer demand for specialized technical skills, industry credentials, and applied learning opportunities.

**45,583**

**BACHELOR'S DEGREES**

**38,009**

**NON-DEGREE CERTIFICATES**

**20,811**

**ASSOCIATE DEGREES**

**44,594**

**GRADUATE DEGREES**



Photo: City Colleges of Chicago

## INDUSTRY-ALIGNED TALENT SUPPLY

Employers across Chicago are working with training providers, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to strengthen talent pipelines aligned with real hiring needs.

Increasingly, businesses are helping shape programs that prepare candidates for day-to-day roles, not only academic benchmarks. Many are also collaborating on apprenticeships, certifications, internships, and other work-based learning models that respond to changing industry demands.

Programs across the region support talent development in areas including:

- Healthcare
- Information technology and cybersecurity
- Advanced manufacturing
- Logistics and supply chain
- Infrastructure and construction trades
- Business operations and professional services

# THE EMPLOYER BUSINESS CASE

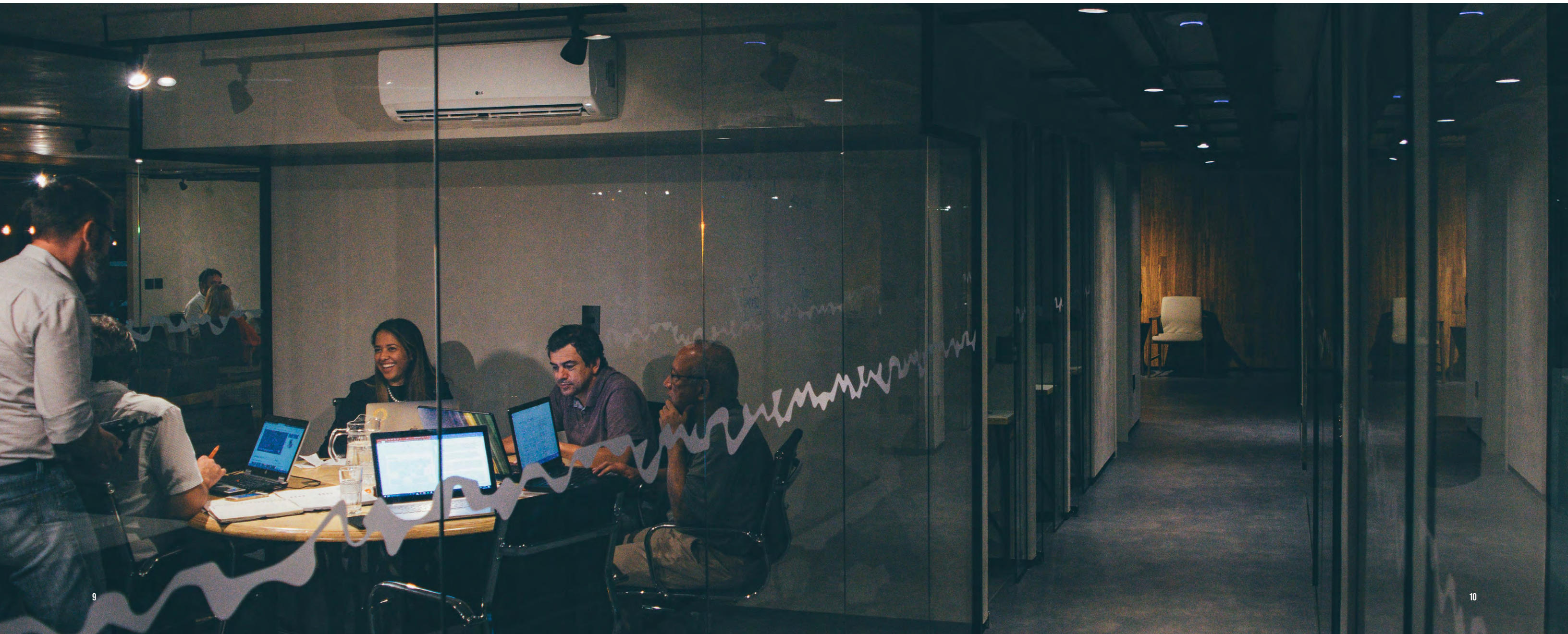
Chicago's talent network helps employers address core business challenges, often at low- or no-cost. While leveraging these solutions requires coordination and adjustment, many employers have successfully navigated the process, offering practical examples others can learn from.

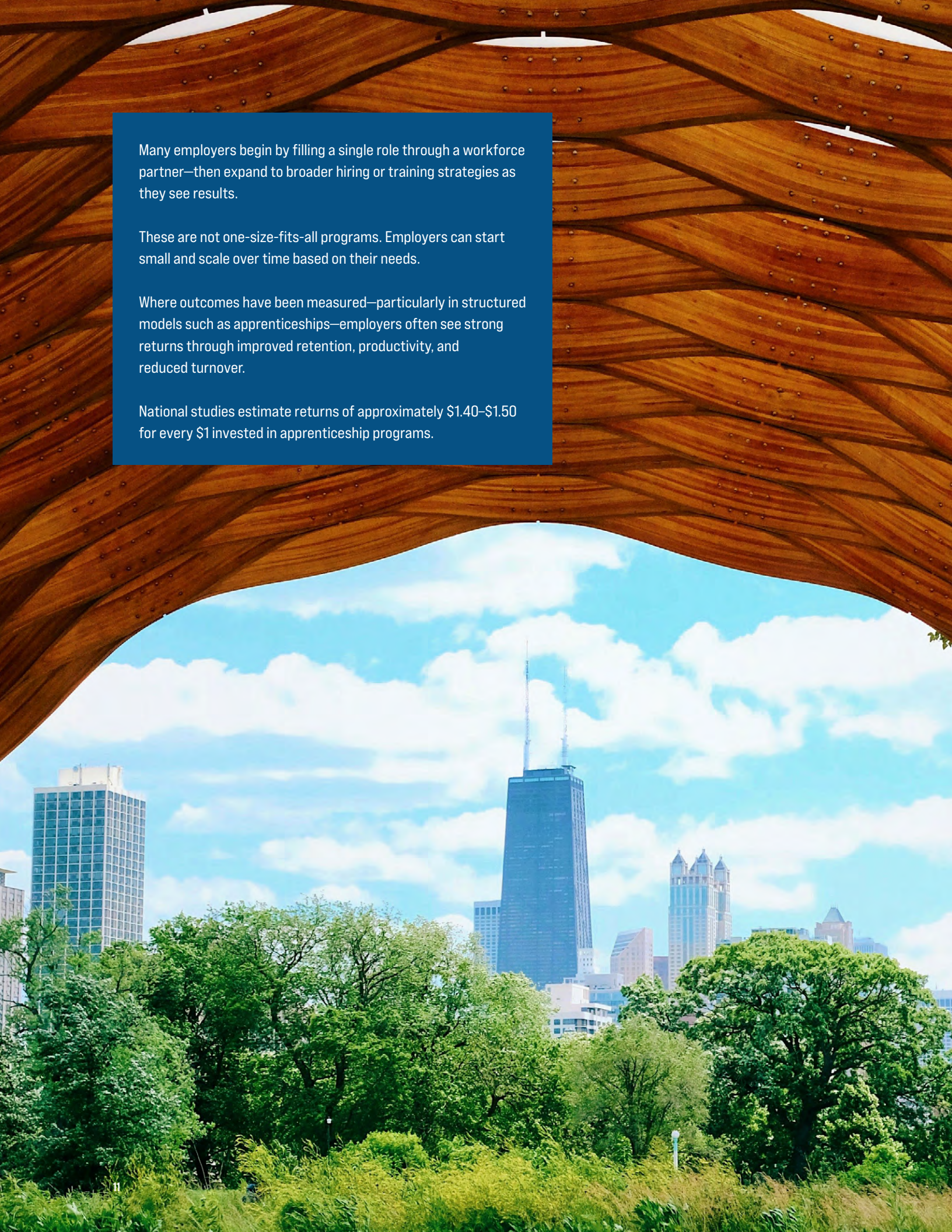
Through partnerships with workforce organizations, employers can access support for hiring, training, and retention without expanding internal HR capacity. Most services are subsidized through a combination of public funding at the city, county, state, and federal levels, along with private philanthropy. This makes them significantly more affordable than traditional recruiting or training

approaches, and in many cases, there is no direct cost to participate.

Employers use these partnerships to:

- Fill roles faster by reaching qualified candidates outside traditional recruiting channels
- Reduce hiring and training costs through subsidized services, wage reimbursements, and tax credits
- Reduce internal recruiting and onboarding workload
- Improve retention through better job fit and support during early employment





Many employers begin by filling a single role through a workforce partner—then expand to broader hiring or training strategies as they see results.

These are not one-size-fits-all programs. Employers can start small and scale over time based on their needs.

Where outcomes have been measured—particularly in structured models such as apprenticeships—employers often see strong returns through improved retention, productivity, and reduced turnover.

National studies estimate returns of approximately \$1.40–\$1.50 for every \$1 invested in apprenticeship programs.



# FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

In addition to service support, employers may be eligible for financial incentives that directly offset the cost of hiring and training. These vary by role and program, but workforce partners at the State, County and/or City can help identify and access the right opportunities.

Some employers have found that the amount of paperwork required to receive these subsidies can be significant. The effort may be worthwhile with multiple hires, or if you are able to secure assistance from a workforce partner.

## SUBSIDIZED TRAINING PROGRAMS

Subsidized Training Programs increase access to skilled, productive workforce.

Employer-Based Training Opportunities include:

- On-the-Job Training
- Customized Training
- Incumbent Worker Training
- Apprenticeships

## RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Various tax credits, wage subsidies and other incentives may be available for hiring individuals from targeted groups or geographic zones to offset initial hiring risk and onboarding cost. Target populations frequently include individuals with disabilities, Veterans, youth (ages 16-24), justice-involved individuals, and mature workers.

### Example: Training Wage Subsidy for New Hires

The City's Chicago Youth Works program enables employers to host a youth employee for a typical six-week, 20-25 hour-per-week experience, with wages fully covered by the City.

# WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE



## APPRENTICESHIP AS OPPORTUNITY—AND BUSINESS STRATEGY

For many employers across Chicagoland, apprenticeships and workforce partnerships are no longer viewed primarily as community initiatives or philanthropic programs. Increasingly, they are business strategies: practical, scalable ways to develop talent pipelines, address labor shortages, improve retention, and align workforce-skills directly to operational needs.

That shift is happening at a pivotal moment. Illinois now ranks No. 1 in the Midwest and No. 3 nationally for workforce development, according to Site Selection Magazine's 2026 Workforce Development Rankings. At the same time, industries ranging from technology and energy to advanced manufacturing and infrastructure are confronting growing workforce gaps as demand accelerates and experienced workers retire.

Across the region, employers are recognizing a simple but powerful truth: Talent is everywhere, even if opportunity is not.

That philosophy is reflected in a workforce video series launched by World Business Chicago, spotlighting employers, workforce organizations, and apprentices whose stories demonstrate what becomes possible when companies invest directly in people and potential.

At ComEd, the Power Up Academy prepares adults for entry-level design technician and project coordination roles through a 14-week program focused on technical training, collaboration, and professional development. For many participants, the program represents far more

than job training. It creates access to careers and corporate environments they may never have previously imagined possible.

One apprentice described entering the program without a college degree and initially questioning whether she belonged in the industry at all. Today, she proudly works alongside colleagues she once believed were out of her professional reach. Her message to employers was direct: "You're sleeping on people by not taking opportunities and looking within your own communities."

That same emphasis on access and untapped talent is central to the work happening at Gensler through the Gensler Apprenticeship Program, known as GAP. The paid apprenticeship creates an alternative pathway into architecture and design for individuals who may lack the financial means, educational access, or professional networks traditionally associated with the field. For apprentice Miguel Rodriguez, the opportunity allowed him to reconnect with a childhood dream of becoming an architect after remote learning and financial pressures disrupted his college plans. Through GAP, he entered the profession through mentorship, hands-on work, and paid experience — an approach rooted in the historic apprenticeship model on which architecture itself was originally built.

**“The talent is everywhere. But oftentimes the opportunity or the ability to realize that innovation, I don’t think that we have normalized that just yet. And so to me, as long as there’s a gap between sort of talent and opportunity, I think that we have a lot of work to do.”**



**Omowale Casselle, Vice President of Xchange Program,  
*SDI Presence, LLC***

Leaders at Gensler describe the initiative as an intentional effort to open doors for talented individuals who might otherwise never have the opportunity to help shape the built environment. In doing so, the firm is not only expanding access to careers, but also helping ensure the profession better reflects the diversity and lived experiences of the communities it serves.

At SDI Presence, the Xchange Program demonstrates how neighborhood-based workforce investment can simultaneously address talent shortages, operational needs, and economic opportunity. Founded through a partnership among the Comer Science and Education Foundation, P33, SDI Presence, and community organizations, Xchange focuses on connecting South Side residents to careers in one of Chicago's fastest-growing sectors: technology.

Participants receive training in cybersecurity, software development, testing, and professional skills, while also gaining direct exposure to employers and apprenticeship opportunities that can lead to long-term careers. Since launch, the program has trained and hired 84 workers, with approximately 80% coming from surrounding South Side neighborhoods, generating more than \$3.25 million in family-sustaining wages and benefits.

Several apprentices described arriving with strong interest in technology, but uncertainty about whether they truly belonged in the field or had the connections needed to enter it. Through mentorship, technical training, and direct industry exposure, participants gain both practical skills and the confidence to see themselves in careers that once felt inaccessible.

Importantly, apprenticeship models are increasingly being recognized as solutions not only for workers, but also for employers themselves. Companies gain access to motivated talent, improved retention, workforce pipelines tailored to evolving operational needs, and opportunities to "grow their own" employees in alignment with company culture and business demands.

This mirrors a broader movement happening across Chicago and Illinois. Employer-led apprenticeship programs are expanding in technology, infrastructure, manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services as companies rethink traditional hiring requirements and invest more directly in workforce development. Increasingly, employers are recognizing that four-year degrees are not the only indicator of talent or long-term success.

**87**  
**TRAINED**

**84**  
**PLACED**

**7**  
**COHORTS**

**Skills developed:** business analysis, IT generalist, cybersecurity, software testers and software development.

**Key Economic Indicators:** Salaries/ benefits: \$5.3M; Building investment \$20M : Home purchased: 4

**Key Employer Partners:** WEC Energy Group, Northern Trust, City of Chicago, AON.

Taken together, these programs demonstrate how apprenticeships can simultaneously strengthen business performance and expand economic opportunity. Participants gain wages, mentorship, skills, confidence, and career pathways. Employers gain workforce stability, loyalty, and access to talent that might otherwise remain overlooked.

World Business Chicago's workforce video series was created not simply to celebrate these efforts, but to help more employers learn from them. As the series expands into additional industries aligned with Chicago 2050 | A Plan for Economic Growth & Jobs, it is intended to serve as a growing resource for companies exploring how apprenticeships, workforce partnerships, and nontraditional hiring strategies can help address workforce challenges while creating broader economic mobility across the region.



# HOW EMPLOYERS GET STARTED

## GETTING STARTED DOESN'T REQUIRE A MAJOR COMMITMENT.

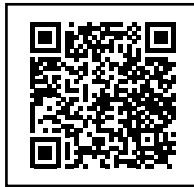
Most employers begin with a single role or hiring need, then expand as they see results. Chicago's talent network offers multiple entry points, allowing employers to engage based on hiring needs and capacity. Workforce partners vary in approach and capabilities, so the goal is start with a single need and expand over time.

You don't need to navigate this alone. Tools and partners are available to help you identify the right fit and move quickly.

# CHOOSE YOUR ENTRY POINT

## 1. DIVE INTO PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Request a copy of *Talent Connections: Your Guide to Leveraging Chicago's Workforce Investments*. Get advice based on years of experience in the Chicago and Cook County workforce development ecosystem, and backed by the real-world experiences and advice of employers.



TalentConnectionsBook.net

## 2. CONNECT WITH AN EXPERT

If you're unsure where to start, Origami Works Foundation provides complimentary, employer-focused support to help you: so you can focus on results, not navigation.

- Identify the right partners based on your hiring needs
- Clarify your starting point—whether filling one role or building a longer-term strategy
- Make direct introductions to vetted organizations

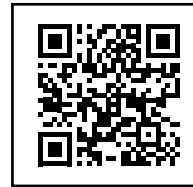
Contact: [Connect@origamiworks.org](mailto:Connect@origamiworks.org)



Origami Works Foundation Employer Inquiry Form

## 3. EXPLORE INDEPENDENTLY

Use Talent Solutions Connector to identify and connect directly with workforce partners aligned to your hiring needs.



TalentSolutionsConnector.net

## 4. SCAN TO EXPLORE CHICAGO'S TALENT PIPELINE.

This WBC Research Center report tracks Chicagoland's 2024 program completions, national ranking, STEM growth, graduate retention, City Colleges data, top programs, in-demand skills, and major workforce partnerships. The data shows how the region's education and training systems are preparing talent for current and emerging industries.



Talent Pipeline Intelligence, WBC Research Center



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This guide was developed by World Business Chicago in partnership with Origami Works Foundation, with data and analysis provided by the World Business Chicago Research Center. We acknowledge the employers, workforce partners, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and public-sector agencies whose work and examples are referenced throughout the report, including ComEd's Power Up Academy, Gensler's Gensler Apprenticeship Program, SDI Presence's Xchange Program, City Colleges of Chicago, the Comer Science and Education Foundation, P33, WEC Energy Group, Northern Trust, the City of Chicago, and Aon.



