Summary of Workforce Conversations with Business, Education, Workforce, Government, Nonprofit, and Thought Leaders during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Background

The Oregon Business Council hosted a series of online meetings in the summer of 2020, inviting business leaders, policy partners, stakeholders, and thought leaders to identify the trends, challenges, and opportunities for recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The sessions asked: How can Oregon come out of the pandemic crisis stronger, more resilient, more prosperous, and more equitable? This summary captures themes from the three sessions about workforce issues, which were conducted in collaboration with Oregon's Workforce and Talent Development Board and ECONorthwest.

Overarching Takeaways

- The challenges described below are not going away any time soon. Many industries and jobs will look different after the pandemic than they did before the pandemic.
- Some industries will not fully recover from this recession until well after a vaccine is developed and deployed.
- The workforce system is underfunded and siloed; the current crisis presents an opportunity to improve the system and make it more equitable.

Themes, Issues, and Their Implications

The pandemic and physical distancing are disproportionately affecting certain industries and workers

- Many unemployed workers (e.g., in leisure and hospitality and passenger transportation) are unlikely to return to their previous occupations in the next 18 months
- The leisure and hospitality industry could experience permanent changes (e.g., low-touch customer experiences)
- Some employers are having a difficult time finding people to work (e.g., in manufacturing, food processing, healthcare, construction)
- Major effects could still be coming for some industries

Businesses are innovating while facing many challenges

- For example, many restaurants have transitioned to offering take out and/or community food programs
- Training and support can help with innovation (e.g., microcredentials on sanitation and take-out processes; training for employees enforcing mask-wearing and taking on other new roles; automation training to help people learn the different ways people are ordering and approaching businesses)

- Many employers are trying to hire employees back but some workers are wary of losing the extra $600/week they're receiving
- Businesses need better ways to communicate with each other (e.g., regional LinkedIn pages)

Workers and dislocated workers need services and a safety net that works when they need it
- Mental hurdles to working (i.e., concerns about safety) can be as great as physical hurdles
- Dislocated hospitality workers can't easily or quickly switch to work in healthcare
- People need a place to live, enough to eat, transportation, access to healthcare, and childcare; work/school/training is an afterthought if these aren't in place
- We can't go back to the fragmented child care system we had before
- Employers need to share responsibility for work-life balance with their workers
- The world of work has traditionally been built around white cis-gender head of household males and their needs; employers could provide services such as child care and small loans as a step toward breaking that mold
- In the short term, dislocated workers could do practical work subsidized by the federal or state government (e.g., making doors automatic; making needed changes to bathrooms)

Access to technology and high-speed internet is essential
- The pandemic has amplified existing issues and inequities: many, many people across Oregon do not have consistent access to a computer and internet
- A strong urban/rural divide exists: rural connectivity must be accelerated
- Technology infrastructure should be treated like a public utility, provided to all citizens
- A benefit of technology is that it can be more inclusive than face-to-face (no need for long-distance travel)

The pandemic and physical distancing are disproportionately affecting certain communities and individuals
- Following the last recession, most underserved individuals did not fully recover and are now experiencing a new wave of disproportionate effects
- Racial disparities are prominent in access to education, training, and jobs that are resistant to automation
- Underserved communities and Black, indigenous, and people of color should be a major focus of investments in training/retraining
- A multigenerational approach to reform is required to break down systemic racism and discrimination that result in disparities

Education and training systems/programs have to adapt to the new conditions
- Short-term credentials should be as small and approachable/accessible as possible; at the same time, longer term credentials should not be discouraged and need to be accessible to all

- Microcredentials are most successful when industry leads the effort and sees value in the credentials
- Training needs to focus on problem solving and critical thinking skills, emotional intelligence, soft skills, personal aptitudes and interests, and business acumen
- Not everyone is interested in switching to a different kind of work than they're used to
- If distance education continues for a long time, different staffing models (with relatively more support staff) will need to be considered
- CTE is much better, and better integrated with business, in other parts of the world
- Union-provided training is more available/accessible to people in urban areas than in rural areas
- Training programs are beginning to use virtual reality courses

Apprenticeships could play a much bigger role than they currently do
- Employers can often recoup the cost before the apprenticeship is even over
- It can be complicated to set up and register apprenticeships but intermediaries and "group sponsors" (one entity overseeing hundreds of apprenticeships) can help
- Oregon needs to build the constituency for apprenticeships
- The state could provide training to build reading, verbal, and math skills through the UI system (tying some benefits to course completion) to help people prepare for skilled apprenticeships
- Apprenticeships are currently focused in Portland and not serving regions equally well

The workforce system needs to become a people-centered system that helps people reach individual career goals
- Fragmented funding and a decentralized approach make change hard
- The system needs to better inform people about opportunities, make educational opportunities more available and accessible, and incentivize higher education institutions to reach out to more people
- Entities need to own different parts of the continuum and hold each other accountable
- The workforce system and community colleges need to be more integrated and focused on the individual's needs rather than the institution's needs
- Local workforce programs need flexibility in order to meet broader target outcomes and need to understand demand by sector
- Better data sharing across agencies would improve the system's capacity to help and serve people

Concluding Reflections
- The uncertainty around schools and businesses being open (or not) in the fall is affecting the recovery
- Other parts of the world have been in situations like this before, the U.S. hasn't; great opportunities can follow crisis events like this
- We need to set a path for the future we'll be proud to look back on