



# H-1B TECHHIRE

PROMISING PRACTICE

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## INTEGRATING EMPLOYER FEEDBACK INTO TRAINING

Strategies from Two TechHire Grantees

### INTRODUCTION

In the H-1B TechHire Partnership grant announcement, the U.S. Department of Labor required all applicants to submit evidence of partnerships with at least three local employers in H-1B industries such as IT, advanced manufacturing, and health care. These industries are at the center of TechHire projects, with employers informing grantee training and certifications; offering applied learning opportunities through on-the-job training, paid internships, and Registered Apprenticeships; and interviewing and employing TechHire training graduates. Two years into the grant, continued close coordination with local employers has proven essential for executing grant activities as grantees expand their base of employer partners.

This brief summarizes the approaches that the colleges participating in the MechaWA TechHire and TechHire Montgomery projects take to engaging with employers. It addresses how these two TechHire grantees solicit feedback from employers, the areas on which they receive input, and how that feedback is incorporated into the TechHire training programs.<sup>1</sup>

## COLLECTING FEEDBACK

Both grantees have set up informal and formal mechanisms for collecting employer feedback. Both have an **employer advisory committee**, which brings together a group of industry leaders to periodically advise the project on curriculum and job placement. Both also employ individuals who meet one-on-one with employers to promote the TechHire program. Both grantees partner with their **workforce development boards** and are actively trying to grow those partnerships by identifying opportunities for collaboration like work-based learning.

**MechaWA TechHire** is a collaboration of five Washington state colleges (Everett Community College, Renton Technical College, Shoreline Community College, North Seattle College, and South Seattle College) led by the Center of Excellence for Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing at Everett College. MechaWA focuses on entry-level mechatronics training, producing technicians that are adept at the maintenance of machinery used in the aerospace industry. Demand for mechatronics technicians is driven by the growing importance of automation in aerospace manufacturing at companies like Boeing, a manufacturer of commercial jetliners; defense, space, and security systems; and America's biggest manufacturing exporter.

**TechHire Montgomery**, hosted at Montgomery College in Maryland, focuses on training participants for careers in information support and services and networking. The Maryland Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MI-BEST) model supports English language learners in achieving CompTIA A+ certification, with other tracks serving students with established English language proficiency. Demand is driven by Montgomery County's proximity to federal agencies, including the Federal Aviation Agency, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security, which in turn fuels a cluster of IT contractors.

The TechHire Montgomery project has two **full-time job opportunity and development specialists** funded by the grant. They ask employers to complete a form that captures high-level information about their workforce needs, and then schedule one-on-one conversations. Specialists meet with employers before and after students are placed there for internships and job positions, to explore the opportunities for internships, open positions, and their workforce needs as a whole. In addition to employers, the TechHire Montgomery project receives input from the college's **Information Technology Institute instructors and staff**, who teach in the continuing education side of the college. They are current practitioners in the IT field and provide up-to-date information about relevant certifications, consult on IT terminology, and provide an informal perspective from the field.

TechHire grantees “need to make sure that industry partners understand the value of the pipeline they’re creating. From a business perspective, we can streamline our processes internally if we see standard outcomes coming out of the programs that we help develop as industry partners and subject matter experts.”

*Essentia Rivera,  
workforce development staff analyst,  
The Boeing Company*

Because MechaWA is a consortium of colleges, employers are engaged at the project level by the Center of Excellence for Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing as well as by the member colleges. Each college's mechatronics program has its own **advisory panel** to advise on the specific needs of the industry. The advisory panel is composed of the college program's most committed partners, since joining an advisory panel can be a large commitment for a small employer. MechaWA career navigators also collect employer feedback through:

- ✓ **Job fairs** that introduce employers to current (and potential) TechHire students. One college hosts an annual Aerospace and Engineering Technologies Job Fair where program staff can hear directly from employers about open positions, direct workforce needs, and workforce needs of their suppliers. This college also hosts Try a Trade workshops—lunch panels at local high schools where students can hear from employers and TechHire program graduates. Another member college recently hosted a 3-day “National Manufacturing Day” event with 20 employer representatives and 450 high school students, partnered with over 500 high school students on Lean projects, testing ideas for eliminating waste from the manufacturing process.
- ✓ **Inviting employer partners to visit the campus** to meet with students and instructors. Students can hear directly from employers about open positions, what work in aerospace is like, and how to set themselves up for success in the workplace. These visits also allow the career navigator to get employers' candid off-the-record conversations assessing how well the current crop of students would meet their workforce needs.
- ✓ **Internships** also allow employers to preview the soft and hard skills of MechaWA TechHire students. One career navigator creates “structured internships” to maximize the students' and employers' investments. These internships involve a formal job description, specific learning objectives, and mid- and post-internship evaluations.

#### ***Everett Community College National Manufacturing Day***

Over three days, 450 high school students toured the college's Advanced Manufacturing Training and Education Center and participated in a Lean project. Teams of 10 students were challenged to assemble a water-jetted clock in 2 attempts. Participating employer representatives assisted the students in improving their time, organization, and efficiency. After the project, each student was able to talk to the employers about jobs in the field and take home their own clock! See video at:

<https://www.facebook.com/AMTEC/EVCC/videos/179169883025375/>

MechaWA member colleges get indirect feedback on the curriculum by asking their **graduates who have become employed** how the training prepared them for the workplace. The feedback so far: the training has been “dead on.”

## AREAS FOR INPUT

Both grantees have benefited from employer feedback specific to training structure, equipment and technology alignment, credentials offered, interview preparation, and soft skills for employment. In Washington, employers reviewed the **proposed curriculum** that all MechaWA TechHire colleges would use (the modularized, hybrid curriculum for maintenance technician training designed by the [Advanced Manufacturing Technical Education Collaborative](#) [AMTEC] at the Kentucky Community and Technical College System) and its associated competency-based **assessment certification**. The **training labs** at each member college were built out based on AMTEC specifications, with additional feedback gathered at that stage to reflect local industry preferences.

At TechHire Montgomery, employers have provided feedback about **training tracks and certifications**. Initially, the college projected database management would be a good career fit for the skills and competencies of TechHire students, and students experienced a 100 percent pass rate on certification exams. But employers have indicated that employees need at least two years of experience to be viable candidates for open positions. The internship or on-the-job training opportunities through TechHire would not be sufficient to make students competitive. As a result, Montgomery College ended that track, but is coordinating with employers on other foreseeable needs, such as revisiting course offerings and incorporating more hands-on work to build future training programs.

Employer partners of both grantees have also provided valuable feedback about how TechHire students should **prepare for the job search to showcase their technical skills and problem-solving capabilities**.

Employers know that a certificate represents an intellectual understanding of the topic, but many want to see tangible evidence of an applicant's skills. TechHire Montgomery prepares IT students to demonstrate practical knowledge in a portfolio or by whiteboarding a solution during an interview. For advanced manufacturing students at MechaWA, the internship is an important proving ground and it is imperative to highlight relevant experience and competencies on the resume. Employers in both industries want to know that an applicant has the **soft skills to succeed as an employee and can fit the company culture**—e.g., the pace of the workplace—and use the interview as an opportunity to judge an applicant's behavior and articulateness in a business setting.

“In general, smaller companies are more focused on soft skills because employees will be ‘jacks of all trades’ and may be put in client-facing roles. Larger companies look for highly skilled specialists who can follow detailed instructions, while smaller companies look for independent critical thinkers to be field technicians—who can apply what they know to unique problems in the field.”

—*Career navigator at a MechaWA college*

## INCORPORATING FEEDBACK

At TechHire Montgomery, the program manager has incorporated feedback from employers directly into training design, as noted above. At the MechaWA member colleges, career navigators disseminate employer feedback to a broader group of project stakeholders. **Students** hear feedback from hiring managers about what makes a successful candidate, employment opportunities, and employer visits to campus, which program staff can share in class or via email or social media. **Program faculty** receive employer input about the training in staff meetings or in informal conversations with the career navigators. **College administrators** get updates about employer engagement via internal reporting and program meetings. Finally, **referral partners** such as high schools learn how the project leads to employment and the names of specific businesses that have employed graduates. Getting employers to participate in events such as Mechatronics Day demonstrates the depth of the partnerships.

## SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT

Involving employers in program design and staying on top of industry needs is intensive work that requires dedicated staff time but is key to completing the training-through-placement goals of TechHire grants. The program manager at TechHire Montgomery anticipates that the “job opportunity and development specialist” roles will be sustained by the college to facilitate ongoing employer engagement. At MechaWA colleges, career navigators perceive that this engagement proves the value of two-year colleges to local employers. Having the colleges as a source of entry-level employees with a common baseline of training reduces businesses’ hiring costs and builds partnerships between schools and employers to meet longer-term workforce needs.

## EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

### ***Matt Washburn, training manager at Senior Aerospace AMT, Arlington, Washington***

While Senior Aerospace AMT has its own robust in-house training system, Matt Washburn recognizes that hiring people directly from the MechaWA TechHire project allows them to hire employees who can immediately step into more advanced entry-level positions, such as Machine Technician II. Washburn appreciates that having a partnership with MechaWA means that his company has access to a pipeline of qualified job applicants and confidence in the skills they will bring. Before their partnership with MechaWA and other community colleges, Senior Aerospace AMT had no influence on workforce training trends, and no pipeline for new hires—just postings for job openings on Glass Door.

Senior Aerospace AMT was an early employer partner of MechaWA, one of those whom the Center of Excellence for Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing approached to vet the AMTEC curriculum. With the assessment of employer needs, “I already felt like I was part of the program, and we hadn’t even had an intern here yet.” Senior Aerospace AMT did go on to host a MechaWA intern, hiring them along with another MechaWA graduate as a Machine Technician II. Washburn is also a member of the MechaWA employer advisory committee, which allows him to have an ongoing role in the development of the program. He recognizes that smaller employers with limited staff often cannot afford to send representatives to advisory committee meetings, so larger businesses will have more representation. Building the relationship, he says, “is about meeting people, shaking hands, and sharing stories.”

### ***Essentia Rivera, workforce development staff analyst, The Boeing Company, Seattle, Washington***

With over 140,000 employees worldwide, Boeing’s workforce development team is focused on identifying skillsets that are in short supply. Boeing’s critical skill demand is for high-grade mechanic maintenance and electronic technician maintenance positions with 7-10 years’ experience. The MechaWA partnership, then, is a source for bringing promising talent into the company to potentially grow into those positions. While recruiting and relocating is often necessary, MechaWA supplements transplants to Washington with “homegrown talent.”

Early review of the AMTEC curriculum and input on the technologies and equipment that MechaWA students would be trained on was key to Boeing feeling invested in the success of the project. The company also provided input on implementation of the certification assessment, incorporation of hands-on learning through internships, and interview preparation. To Rivera, mock interviews with industry insiders are a crucial part of interview preparation, preparing graduates to answer detailed questions from strangers in a high-pressure situation. Employers, she knows, are “looking for people who can talk shop—make me believe you know how to do the troubleshooting. If you have all these skills on your resume but can’t speak to the hand tools that are necessary, do you really know the skills?”

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A TechHire technical assistance coach performed interviews with program managers at each college and two employers in Washington state in October 2018, approximately two years after the TechHire projects had been launched. One employer respondent represented The Boeing Company; the other represented Senior Aerospace AMT, a manufacturer of structural parts for original equipment manufacturers in the large business and regional jet markets.

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