



Bridging the Talent Gap Case Study: North Texas

Executive Summary

The Graduate! Network (TGN) is a leader of a national effort to increase college completion among adults, specifically those who have earned some college and have not yet finished their degree, or “Comebackers”. Bridging the Talent Gap (BTTG) is a nationally proven, local strategy that engages employers in local survey campaigns that can be flexed and adapted based on a community’s specific priorities, goals and requirements as they relate to a rightly skilled and educated workforce. In February 2020, TGN partnered with Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce to launch a BTTG initiative in the north Texas region. With the pandemic’s influence on the workforce, the survey relaunched in August 2020.

Findings

The North Texas BTTG Partnership was able to gather **150** employer survey responses.

The partnership is now working to leverage survey results through their BTTG Employer Priority List which TGN uses to identify priority businesses for partnering. TGN’s [Priority List algorithm](#) was used to identify the following groups of local employers with high intent.

- **41** employers interested in surveying their workers about upskilling opportunities
- **37** employers interested in partnering with their chamber on talent challenges
- **32** employers interested in partnering with institutions of higher education
- **8** employers interested in starting a tuition assistance program for employees

Successes

This was a unique and engaged partnership.

Dexter Freeman said that in his 10 years at the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce, he had never seen an initiative where there was more than one chamber or multiple higher education institutions at the table until now. Partners met on a bi-weekly basis to share successes and challenges, and to adapt their plans to fit realities on the ground. As a result of this collaborative campaign, this partnership currently consists of 11 organizations; four chambers, four institutions of higher education, and three economic development agencies.

Lessons Learned

Individual invitations are more effective than mass communications.

While mass emails yielded survey responses, individual invitations really helped to ensure additional surveys were completed.

Effective partnerships can be difficult to sustain

Having a clear start and end date, participation from partners started to wane. In an effort to reengage partners, the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce and the Dallas Regional Chamber plan to develop a more refined regional workforce strategy focused on adult learners and Comebackers that can help elicit greater partner buy-in, understanding of intended outcomes, and coordination.

Introduction

Bridging The Talent Gap (BTTG) is an initiative of [The Graduate! Network](#) (TGN), which is leading a national effort to increase college completion among adults — especially those who have earned some college credit but have not yet completed a degree. Today, 20 percent of the U.S. population falls into this highly promising yet undervalued group. In celebration of their commitment to their futures, TGN refers to these 45 million Americans as “Comebackers” to highlight the potential of this otherwise-hidden talent pool.

BTTG is focused on helping community and business stakeholders understand and meet the challenges of ensuring an equitably skilled and educated workforce. Through employer surveys, community dashboards and reports, and employee surveys, BTTG helps communities identify skill needs and implement solutions to address workforce talent gaps in their region.

North Texas Bridging the Talent Gap Partnership

In February 2020, the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce worked with TGN to launch a BTTG initiative in the north Texas region. Recognizing that the success of their initiative would hinge on broad community outreach to effectively engage and survey local employers at scale, Dexter Freeman, VP of Operations and Administration at the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce, invited other organizations from across Dallas County to partner in leading the project.

Shortly after the initiative launched, however, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the local partners to place the project on hold. During that time, representatives from the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce, the Dallas Regional Chamber, and the Fort Worth Chamber worked to expand the partnership to encompass the Dallas–Fort Worth Metropolitan Area. The North Texas BTTG Partnership relaunched the BTTG employer survey campaign with its expanded focus on North Texas in August 2020.

By September 2020, six partner organizations had signed a memorandum of understanding committing to provide support towards achieving the campaign goal of 1,000 completed surveys in their region-wide employer survey campaign through the following activities:

- Develop a campaign communication plan detailing outreach plans and an estimated number or percentage of members/employers projected to complete the survey.
- Include support for the campaign in newsletters, websites, sponsorship events, and as announcements in key meetings.
- Connect employers that request more info on incumbent worker trainings with local workforce boards, institutions of higher education, or other training providers.
- Meeting regularly as a group during the campaign to discuss, share, and revise strategies to promote the employer survey campaign to many local employers frequently and through multiple channels of communication.

As a result of this collaborative campaign, this partnership currently consists of 11 organizations; four chambers, four institutions of higher education, and three economic development agencies including:

- Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce
- Dallas Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce
- Metrocrest Chamber of Commerce
- Dallas College
- University of North Texas–Dallas
- University of Dallas
- Midwestern State University–Texas
- North Texas Commission
- North Central Texas InterLink
- On The Road Garage

Employer Survey Data Findings and Next Steps

Data from the employer survey was anonymously aggregated into a dashboard tool that was made available to industry and community leaders. The dashboard is organized into three sections: business landscape, skills needs landscape, and learning landscape. Dr. Dan Ash, TGN's Research Director and co-creator of BTTG, walked the partners through the dashboard and showed them how to leverage the data to identify opportunities to work towards key outcomes. You can view the dashboard [here](#).

The results of the employer survey were used to populate various action indices for North Texas. The action indices are a way for the Dallas–Fort Worth Metropolitan Area to set goals for supporting education-friendly employers; for example, through creating more employer-learning provider partnerships, working with employers to create more education-friendly policies, partnering with employers who want to work on the education and upskilling of their workers, etc. You can view the action indices [here](#).

The North Texas BTTG Partnership is now working to leverage survey results through their BTTG Employer Priority List which TGN uses to identify priority businesses for partnering. TGN's [Priority List algorithm](#) was used to identify the following groups of local employers with high intent:

- 41 employers interested in surveying their workers about upskilling opportunities
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Partnership Successes and Lessons Learned

Successes

This was a unique partnership. Dexter Freeman said that in his 10 years at the Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce, he had never seen an initiative where there was more than one chamber or multiple higher education institutions at the table until now. For these North Texas partners, their BTTG employer survey was a unique and valuable experience that holds further potential as all three of the four chamber partners expressed interest in reconvening this working group in the future.

This was an engaged partnership. Partners met on a bi-weekly basis to share successes and challenges, and to adapt their plans to fit realities on the ground. For example, given a slow start and low response rate, the group decided to extend the survey deadline from August 31 to September 18, 2020. When the survey closed, they had 89 responses. Wanting to reach at least 10 percent of their original goal, the partnership decided to re-open the employer survey for a three-week “invitational period”. They used the invitational period to do individual outreach to employers and drive the total number of responses up to 150, enough to provide viable data.

“BTTG also helped to catalyze a conversation around workforce that needed to happen in our community. It helped to highlight an issue that many employers (pre pandemic) had not considered at all or deemed relevant. Through BTTG, employers have begun to see upskilling more as an economic imperative as oppose to a threat on their labor force.”

- Dexter Freeman II, Vice President of Operations & Administration,
Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce



Lessons Learned

Individual invitations are more effective than mass communications. During the initial employer survey campaign, partners relied on mass communications, such as email marketing, advertising in email signatures, and digital flyers, to promote the survey. This outreach was only moderately effective, resulting in 89 survey completions. Accounting for lead time and the deadline extension, the partners spent about eight weeks promoting the survey to employers via mass communications. Once partners began extending individual invitations to employers to complete the survey, however, the response rate increased: an additional 61 employers completed the survey during the three-week invitational period.

Effective partnerships can be difficult to sustain. Following the close of the employer survey campaign in September, partner engagement immediately began to wane. The survey presented a clear project with a defined start and end. In an effort to reengage partners, the

Greater Irving–Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce and the Dallas Regional Chamber plan to develop a more refined regional workforce strategy focused on adult learners and Comebackers that can help elicit greater partner buy-in, understanding of intended outcomes, and coordination.

If you'd like more information about The Graduate! Network's Bridging The Talent Gap initiative, please fill out our interest form [here](#).

This Case Study was made possible with funding from Walmart.



THE GRADUATE! NETWORK.

Founded in 2005, The Graduate! Network is a non-profit organization that helps communities build and grow programs that specifically serve adults with some college credit who have not yet earned a degree, also referred to as Comebackers. Today, we have worked with over 40 communities across the country to build a supportive system that has helped thousands of adults return to college.

Our Vision: Every adult who aspires to earn a college degree has access to the resources and supports they need to start and complete their degree.

Our Mission: We believe everyone should have an equitable chance to achieve the education and career they desire. The Graduate! Network collaborates with a range of stakeholders to build, nurture, and assess structures and systems that support adults to attend and complete their degrees.

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