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FEBRUARY 23 - FEBRUARY 27, 2026



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New Research: How Adult Educators Can Help Learners Prepare for Today's Workforce

WI Literacy Winter Conference

February 24, 2026

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Today's agenda

- About NSC
- Why we did these studies
- What we learned: Small businesses
- What we learned: Learners and workers
- How adult educators can use this data
- Your questions!



About National Skills Coalition

- Jobs that require skills training are the backbone of our economy.
- National Skills Coalition (NSC) fights for a national commitment to inclusive, high-quality skills training so that more people have access to a better life, and more local businesses see sustained growth.
- We are a big-tent, bipartisan coalition of education and workforce advocates, business and labor leaders, and state and local leaders



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Why we did these studies



We wanted to better understand the effects of two major trends:

- State efforts to track and evaluate **Quality Non-Degree Credentials**
- State government and private employer attempts to move toward “**skills-based hiring**” or “skills-first hiring”



We were curious about how these trends were affecting (or not) businesses and workers.



Our research asked two questions:

- How were **small businesses** approaching hiring and skills assessment?
- How were **learners and workers** approaching their decisionmaking about skills training?



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What we learned: Small businesses



We began this project in an uncertain economic landscape...



...and were pleasantly surprised at how many business leaders were eager to talk.





We talked to a wide array of businesses

- 75 small and mid-sized businesses (10 employees to 4,000, though most had between 200-600)
- Located in **40 states**; urban, suburban, exurban, and rural locations
- Primarily **manufacturing** and **construction** industries
- Spoke with CEO, Senior HR Director, or equivalent



We chose these industries because they were representative

- Widespread presence across the U.S.
- Hiring steadily (at time of our survey)
- Representing the broader **middle ground in demand for formal credentials** among entry-level workers, compared to outlier industries like retail (very few credentials) and healthcare (highly regulated)



Our findings can be grouped into two broad categories:





Adult educators can use both types of findings to advocate for the field

Findings: Part 1

What businesses want policymakers to do to support skills

Takeaway: Adult educators can point to these findings when advocating for increased funding

Findings: Part 2

Leading small businesses' hiring and skills assessment practices

Takeaway: Adult educators can use these findings to inform their outreach to employers and their own program design



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**What do businesses want
state leaders to do?**



**Business leaders
offered frank advice
for education and
workforce leaders
and state
policymakers:**





Expand support for foundational skills like math, English, and technology.



Takeaway for adult educators: Use this finding to demonstrate to elected officials that small businesses value investments in adult education.



Invest in upskilling first-line supervisors and helping all workers build digital skills.

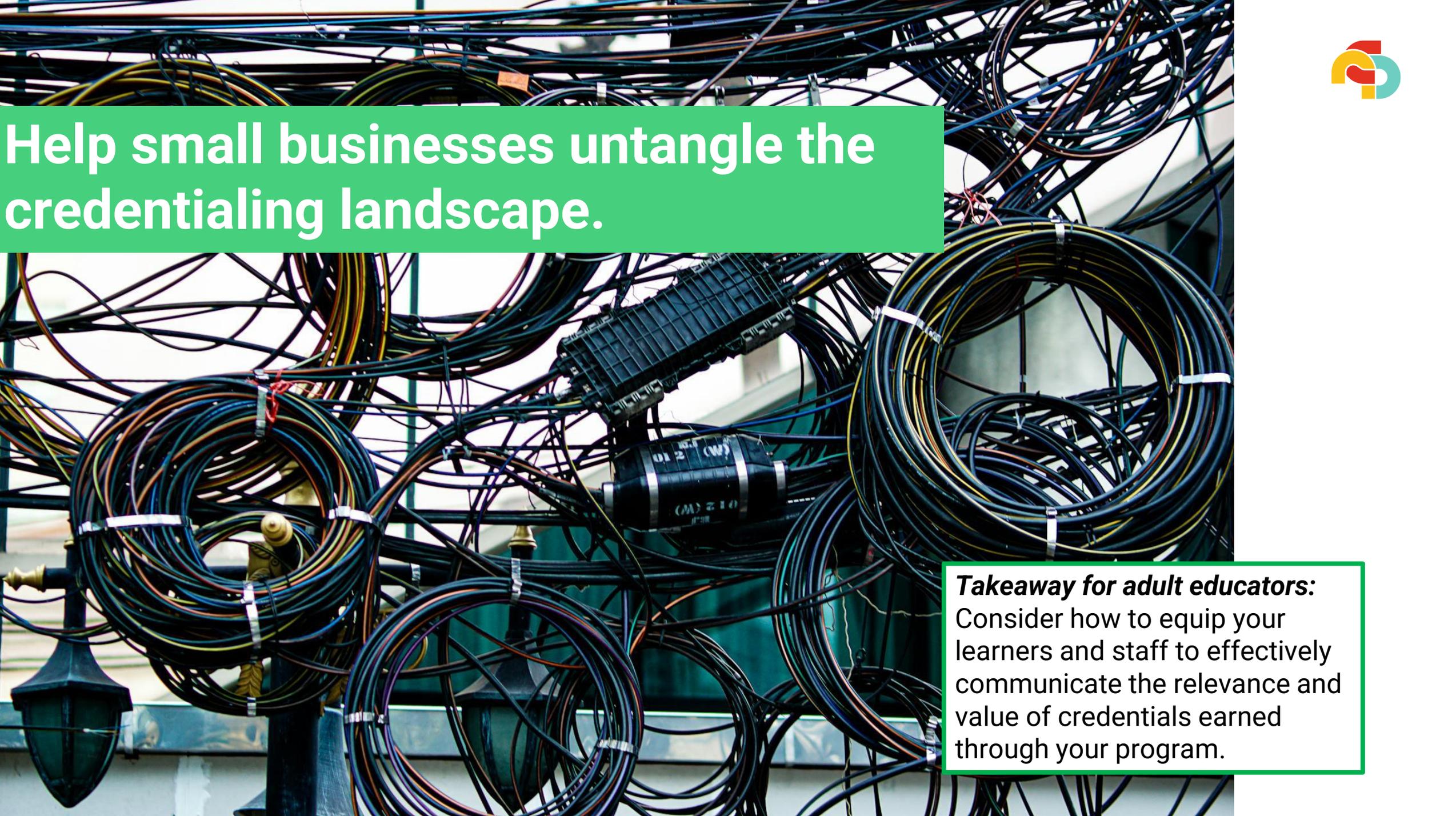


Takeaway for adult educators:
Use this finding to advocate with state agency leaders about how to expand or redesign programs to reach more learners and businesses.



Provide more opportunities for new workers to get hands-on experience.

Takeaway for adult educators:
Use this finding to encourage policymakers to invest in work-based learning programs, IETs, or pre-apprenticeships.



Help small businesses untangle the credentialing landscape.

Takeaway for adult educators:
Consider how to equip your learners and staff to effectively communicate the relevance and value of credentials earned through your program.



Increase funding for skill-building and make it easier to access.



Takeaways for adult educators:

- Consider if your organization has successful small business partnerships that state agencies can learn from.
- Consider how to make it easier for small businesses to access available incumbent-worker adult education and training programs.



Build additional technical assistance capacity to serve *smaller* businesses.

Takeaway for adult educators: Consider whether your organization might play a role in helping state agencies build out this capacity.



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How do leading small businesses approach hiring and skills assessment?



**Let's dig into
what we
learned.**





Overall, small businesses vary in their capacity for hiring and skills assessment

- Most businesses are still **works in progress** when it comes to implementing strong hiring and skills assessment practices
- Adult educators should **consider businesses' capacity** when deciding which small companies could be effective partners



Some businesses are especially effective at hiring and skills assessment

- A subset of small businesses we interviewed had adopted a **cohesive set of strong hiring practices**
- These leading businesses did not use the terms *job quality*, *good jobs*, or *worker voice*, but they did identify as wanting to be **employers of choice** in their local communities, seeing it as a competitive advantage



Leading businesses have:

1. Clear, standardized job descriptions with **well-defined skills and competencies**
2. Meaningful **connections to education and workforce systems**
3. Opportunities to collaborate with industry peers
4. A rigorous **definition of interpersonal (soft) skills** that connects to the company's core mission and values
5. A robust feedback loop that allows for worker input into key issues
6. A collaborative approach to solving common work-life challenges that can affect turnover



Adult educators can use these findings to identify the small businesses that are best positioned to be effective partners.

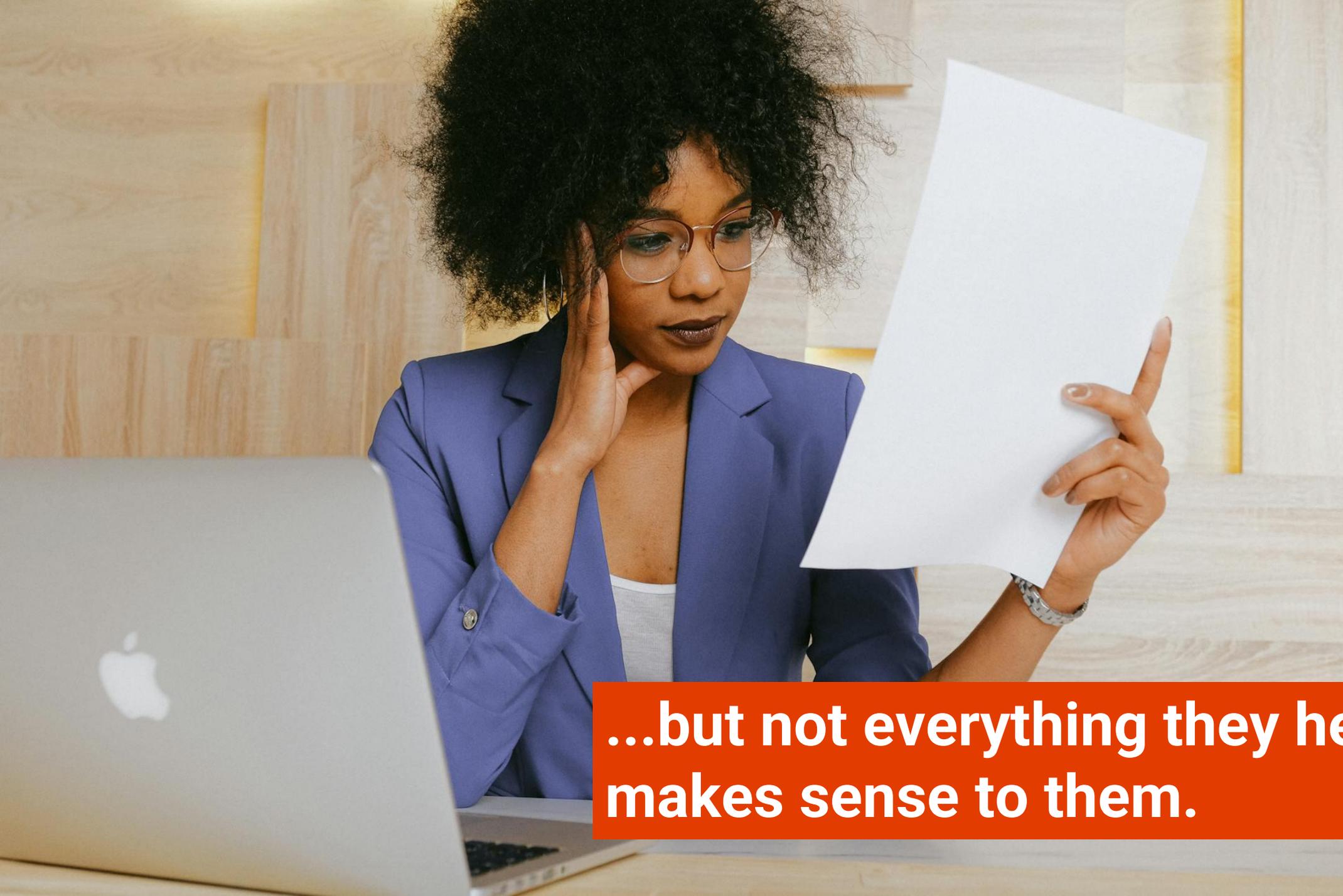


Our findings on non-degree credentials also have implications for adult educators

- There is a substantial gap between *how educators talk about short-term credentials* versus *how small businesses understand them*
 - Understanding this gap can help educators to **reconsider how to communicate** the value of credentials
- Businesses that have a **strong relationship** with an education or workforce partner are **more likely to trust the credentials** they produce
 - Knowing this fact can help educators to prioritize building employer relationships as part of overall program sustainability efforts



Overall, small businesses hear a lot about credentials...



...but not everything they hear makes sense to them.



What are the major takeaways for adult educators?

- Small businesses **value foundational skills** and want to see more public investment in programs that teach them
- Businesses value education and workforce partners who put in the “shoe leather” to understand their skills needs and **make it easy** to collaborate
- The small businesses *that have strong hiring and skills assessment practices* are **best-positioned to be allies** for adult education



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Using this data to advocate



Use your knowledge of andragogy and adult learning theory to present information.





Connect the dots to help **policymakers** see how businesses rely on adult ed to prepare workers.





Reach out to local media to show how your program supports a strong economy.



Don't forget to give **your own board** talking points on how small biz needs adult ed.





Check out the full report & the 2-pager

➤ [Full report](#)

➤ [2-page summary](#)

BIG INSIGHTS FROM SMALL AND MID-SIZED BUSINESSES

What local employers say
about hiring challenges —
and how policy can help

By Jeran Culina and
Amanda Bergson-Shilcock
with Brooke Valle

OCTOBER 2025



<https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/big-insights-from-small-and-mid-sized-businesses/>



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What we learned: Learners and workers



Many adult learners want to pursue skills training

- Understanding the ups and downs of skills training experiences can help adult educators to better **advise learners**
- This research can also **inform program design** for adult educators who are launching Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs



We talked to adults across the US

- 34 people in total
- All were working age; two-thirds were specifically between the **ages of 25-44**
- Fifteen were **parents**
- Self-reported race and ethnicity included Black (13 people), white (7), Hispanic/Latine (6), or Asian/other (4)
- Training programs were in IT, health care, solar energy, manufacturing, and other industries



People were hungry to tell their stories

- We got **300 applications** for 35 slots
- People shared personal stories and vulnerable details during focus groups
- Many were **passionate about wanting policymakers and higher-ups to understand** what life is really like for them, and having their experiences shape better policies



People see skills training as a path to better jobs and brighter futures.





Frustration with ghost jobs, scams, and low-wage work drives people to training.

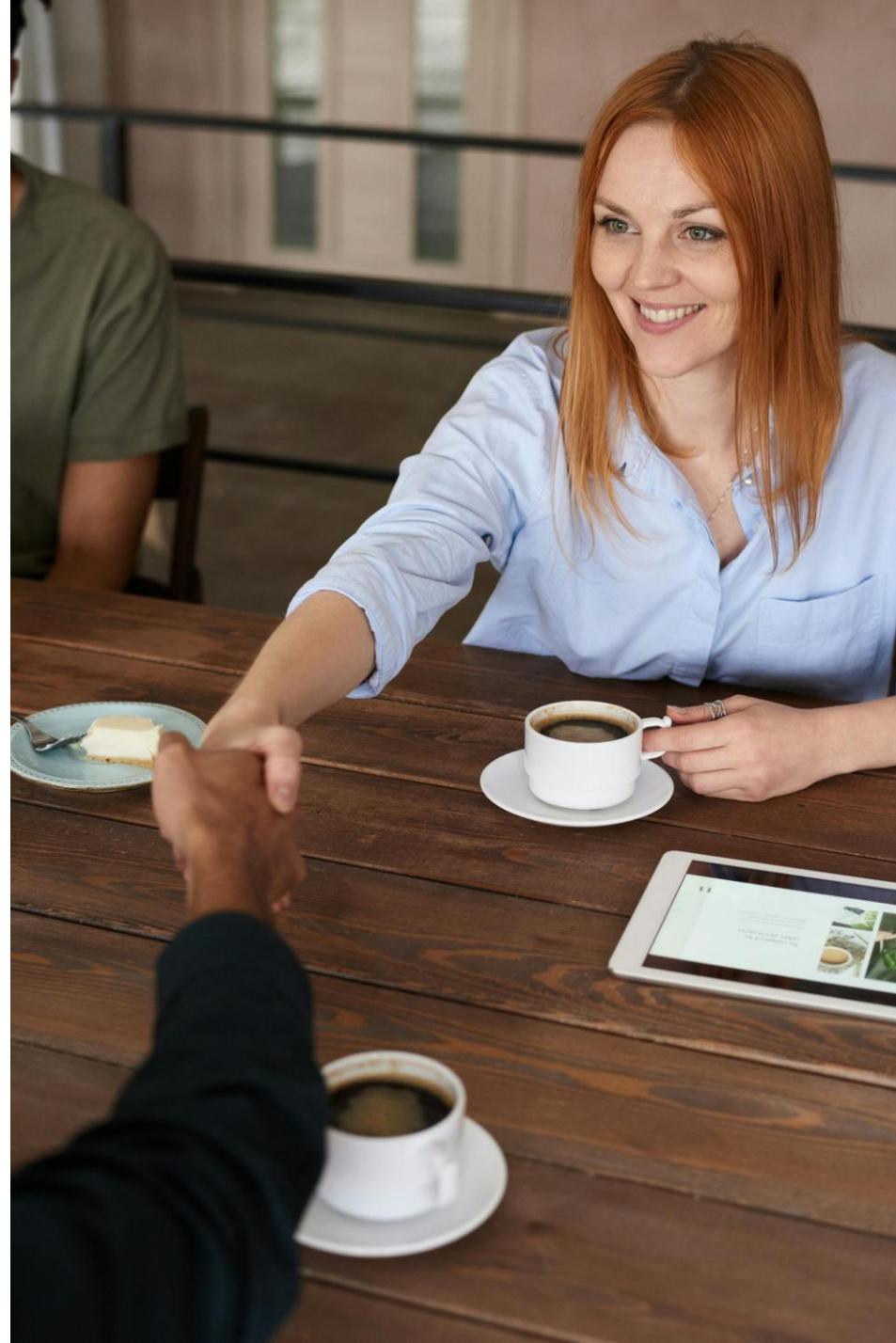


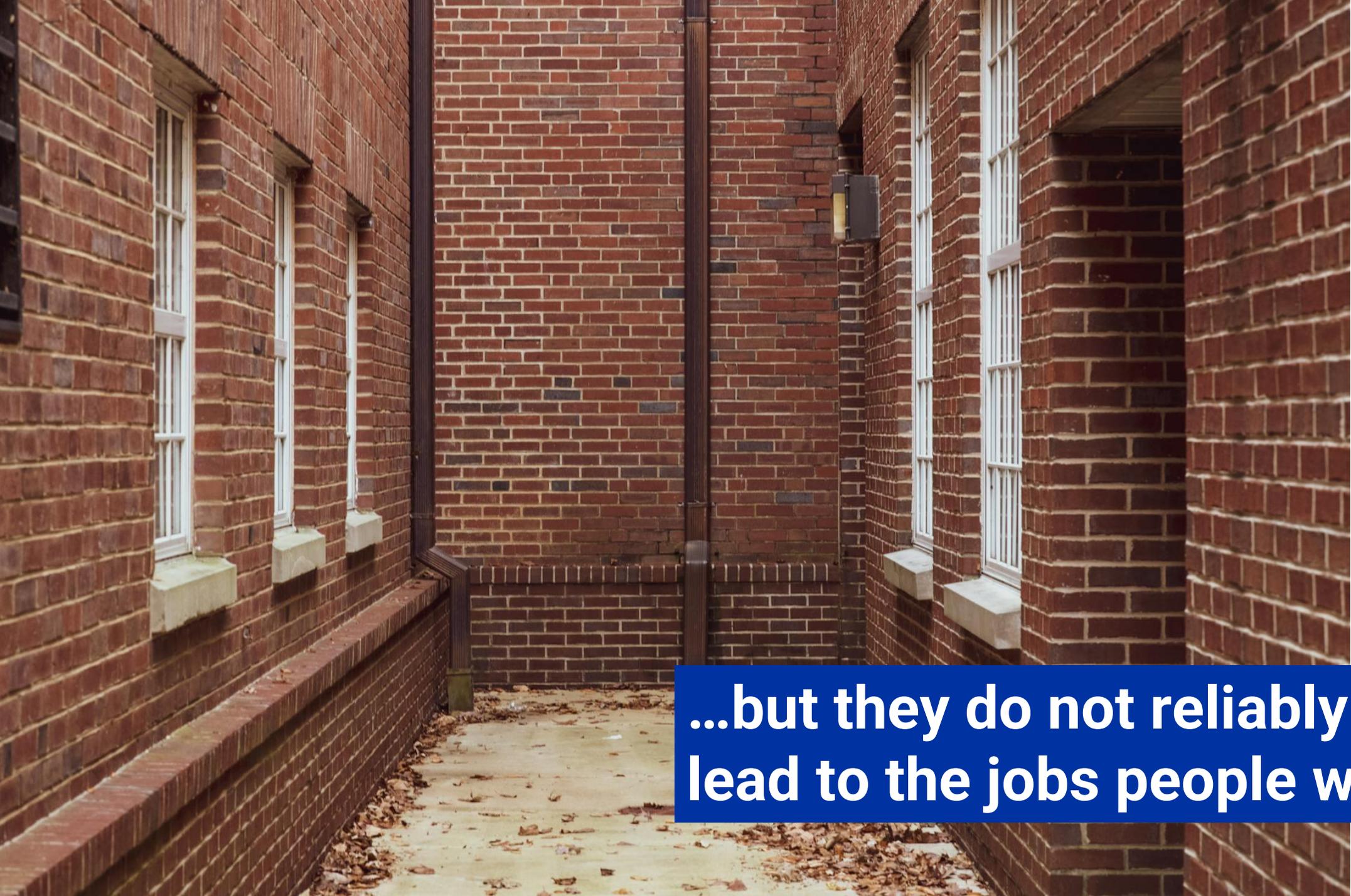
People choose training programs that are flexible and affordable.



People want to know which programs pay off, but outcome data is hard to find.

**Training programs
help people gain
skills and
confidence...**





**...but they do not reliably
lead to the jobs people want.**



Work-based learning and employer partnerships are keys to strong outcomes.



Highly regulated fields like healthcare are more likely to lead to employment.



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What are the takeaways for adult educators?

Prioritize building strong partnerships with businesses.



Takeaways for adult educators:

- This affirms the importance of models like sector partnerships and emphasizes that IET and other skills training programs should make sure to have meaningful connections with local employers
- Check out NSC's [***Big Insights from Small Businesses***](#) report for more on this topic.



Make program outcome data as practical and accessible as possible.



Takeaways for adult educators:

- Learners often struggle to find data on program graduation rates, job placement rates, and other key outcomes.
- Consider how to improve awareness and accessibility of this data, especially for IET programs.

Get creative about ensuring your learners have access to supportive services.



Takeaway for adult educators:

Childcare (and dependent care generally) is fundamental to supporting learner persistence and long-term success. But your program doesn't have to solve the problem alone. Connect with organizations in your community who are tackling this issue as their main focus.



Go beyond the classroom to consider how your program can connect learners with work-based learning opportunities.



Takeaways for adult educators:

- WBL was a major variable in finding a job
- But programs often don't put enough emphasis on WBL
- Note that online-only WBL ***doesn't*** yield the same results
- Adult education providers should connect with experienced WBL partners in their community to ensure access for their learners

Explore braided funding streams to help make skills training free or affordable to learners.



Takeaway for adult educators:

Look beyond WIOA/AEFLA funds for ways that learners can tap into different funding sources to cover training **and** externship/ apprenticeship costs (*such as tuition, books, materials/tools, childcare, and transportation*)



Educators play a key role in reducing barriers faced by workers.

Takeaways for adult educators:

- Recent changes to Medicaid and SNAP have ripple effects for learners and workers.
- Your organization's internal policies can make things easier (or harder) for learners affected by these new requirements.



Learn more about these findings:

➤ [Full report](#)

LOOKING FOR CERTAINTY

What People Have to Say
about Short-Term Skills
Training and the Path to
a Good Job



<https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/looking-for-certainty/>

Time for your
questions!





Stay in touch

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Complete our survey, please!

The image shows a screenshot of a Zoom meeting end screen. At the top left is the Zoom logo, and at the top right are links for "Support" and "English" with a dropdown arrow. The main content area is a white box with the following text: "Thank you for attending the Meeting. Please click Continue to participate in a short survey." Below this, it states "you will be leaving zoom.us to access the external URL below" followed by the URL "https://forms.office.com/r/2PVx189yEX". A question "Are you sure you want to continue?" is followed by two buttons: a blue "Continue" button and a grey "Stay on zoom.us" button. At the bottom of the white box, there is a small blue speech bubble icon. Below the white box, the footer contains copyright information: "Copyright ©2025 Zoom Communications, Inc. All rights reserved." and links for "Privacy & Legal Policies", "Your Privacy Choices" (with a checkmark icon), and "Cookie Preferences".