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**TOWARD A NEW
TRADITION IN
"NONTRADITIONAL"
OCCUPATIONS**

WANTO REPORT 2021

Lessons from the Raising
Women's Success in Apprenticeship
and Nontraditional Occupations Network

COWS
Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership



ABOUT THIS REPORT

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OVERVIEW

Raising Women's Success in Apprenticeship (RWSA) is a network driving systemic change in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution to make these industries more open, accepting, and inclusive of nontraditional workers. Network partners with decades of experience in this work have come together to collaborate, learn, innovate, extend new models back to their communities, and document their knowledge and expertise for dissemination. Ultimately, the network partners aim to break down barriers women face in nontraditional occupations by building more responsive and supportive public policy, industry structures, and program design. The partners are devoted to the systemic change required to achieve these goals, but success for women will be distant so long as policymakers, industry leaders, and women themselves see these jobs as nontraditional. The task before all stakeholders is to raise success for women to such a level that women are understood to be relevant to the present and the tradition of these occupations. This report summarizes the network's work, identifies key factors of success for getting women into nontraditional jobs, and identifies the remaining challenges that will require a substantial change in policy and practice to make success for women the norm.

The RWSA project was launched by Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) with funding from the US Department of Labor. WRTP has a rich history of supporting women and people of color in high-quality careers, as well as connecting them with partners across the nation that share this agenda. The RWSA network formalized relationships with four organizations: WRTP, Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC), Midwest Urban Strategies Inc. (MUS), and West Oakland Job Resource Center (WOJRC). On their own, each of these organizations is a national leader and innovator in supporting and connecting women with careers in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and

distribution. This network has learned and grown together, taken their lessons to industry and workforce system partners, and identified challenges and changes at the system- and policy-levels that must be addressed for further success.

RWSA network founder and facilitator WRTP is a nationally recognized industry intermediary with a track record of helping women launch careers in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution. Through their annual industry needs assessment process, WRTP collects actionable information on everything from skill shortages to training needs to retention issues. This data creates value for industry partners and enables WRTP to provide hiring and recruitment services connecting employers to groups that have historically been excluded. RWSA and the Industrial Manufacturing Technician apprenticeship program (IMT) are just the latest examples of WRTP's decades of cutting-edge work responding to industry needs.

WRTP designed RWSA as a learning community capable of developing and extending work for the success of women. RWSA's focus was to achieve scale by supporting system-level change in how women connect to and are supported in apprenticeship and nontraditional occupations (A/NTO). Achieving change at scale is central to the structure of the project, from the industry- and demand-side focus to creating a learning community that stretches across the country and reaches these groups within their own local workforce systems.




FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S SUCCESS: START WITH THE JOBS

Understanding Nontraditional Occupations and Extending Good Jobs Through Apprenticeship

The federal definition of “nontraditional occupations”: any occupation in which women or men comprise less than 25 percent of the workforce. For women, nontraditional occupations include automotive, electronics, or welding careers; for men, careers in education or nursing are nontraditional. RWSA focuses on apprenticeship strategies to get women connected to these so-called “nontraditional” jobs.

The members of this network understand that the narrow definition of “nontraditional” is just a starting point. All women face substantial barriers and unique challenges at work and home as they move into these jobs. Women and men of color face similar challenges and additional obstacles associated with the racism of coworkers and managers. RWSA focuses on nontraditional occupations as defined by gender shares, but the network’s strategies do not only concern helping women succeed in apprenticeship and at the journey level. RWSA also prioritizes restructuring recruitment, training, and support through programs and into careers in which women and men of color have faced substantial barriers. Network partners pay attention to both race and gender dynamics as they actively work to build a future in these industries where all workers can thrive.

The strategies presented here have been developed in the context of construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution. Still, the principles can be applied in any industry where workers have faced exclusion based on race, ethnicity, and/or gender. The U.S. Department of Labor provides funding to help women in apprenticeships and nontraditional careers through the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO). WANTO grants help recruit, train, and retain more women in quality pre-apprenticeships and Registered Apprenticeship programs, and it encourages women to pursue nontraditional occupations. [Learn more about the WANTO grant program here.](#)



All network members are conscious of their dual responsibility to women and industry. The refrain of WRTP—"start with the jobs"—emphasizes the centrality of industry needs and relationships to the improvement of women's success in AV NTO. In unique ways, each RWSA organization finds ways to structure work in response to industry needs. "Starting with the jobs" means founding the work in the demand side of the labor market, understanding industry partners and their priorities, and considering the structure and context of the jobs. This approach allows for focus on the industry structures of recruitment and hiring, as well as the attributes of jobs—systems surrounding training, hiring, retention, and promotion.

A staff member of an RWSA partner framed it this way: "If we don't understand the needs of the industry, employer, or trade, then we can't then help women get a quality job or career. When I left construction for workforce development, prioritizing industry needs didn't sit right with me. I thought, screw the employers, they're only out for themselves; they don't care about anybody. But if you go to them and say, how can we help you make more money? How can we make this work for you? You put it that way, and then once you're working together and they like what you're doing, and you've built that relationship with those employers or sectoral organizations, it's easier to say, "this is what we feel like you need to change, and this is why we feel like you need to hire women" (WRTP, 1:55:28).

This focus on substantive relationships with industry has helped RWSA network members change industry practices so that women can become the answer to current and future human resources needs. It is critical to note that network members must leverage their deep relationships and understanding to secure such changes without meeting resistance. People outside the industry simply could not facilitate such changes in the structure of jobs. The RWSA members' industry-wide relationships, quantitative and

qualitative research on industry dynamics and needs, and partnerships with employer and union leaders are all critical to making success for women possible.



"If we don't understand the needs of the industry, employer, or trade, then we can't then help women get a quality job or career."

FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S SUCCESS:

SUPPORT, REPRESENT, AND CONNECT WOMEN IN THESE JOBS

Although essential, our focus on industry needs is not the only quality that makes RWSA programs work: we also understand women's interests. Women who enter careers conflicting with social and gender norms are taking on considerable risks; programs need to support women and help alleviate these risks. This is why it is imperative to understand women's interests in these jobs and the ways the industry must adapt to make careers for women possible.

One of the ways network members have supported women's access and success in these projects is by effectively depicting the reality for women. Doing so deepens the connections between women already working these jobs and women just entering the jobs. Recruiting women apprentices in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution is more effective when done by people who share life experience with candidates.

A WRTP member spoke about recruiting: "We did three intentional career fairs, one targeting African-American workers, one targeting Latino workers, and one targeting women workers. And of course, with each of these career fairs, we made a request to the trades and to the contractors that their representative identifies with the group they were going to present to... the message is more meaningful if it's someone they identify with saying "you can do this too"" (WRTP, 1:03:48). A MUS staff member concurred: "If you're looking at recruitment information and all you see are men in hardhats, then you might not even see that path as something that's viable for you, just because you don't see yourself there. It's really quite simple, but it's one of those things that's so obvious that you don't even know that it's something you should be thinking about...if you want to recruit more women to be electricians, you better have a female electrician at your recruitment event, and you better

have a female mentorship program with electricians to retain them" (MUS, 21:59, 24:36).

The need for representation extends to marketing outreach. AJAC's team spoke at length about the issues with how these careers are marketed to women and how the results could be improved. A woman member of the AJAC team gave her thoughts on the images used to recruit women into A/ NTO occupations: "We put all these images out there... of this tattooed up, bandana-wearing rockabilly girl who's jackhammering. But I don't identify with that woman. She's awesome, but I'm not like her, so I'm not considering that career. We are constantly building this image of the bulletproof woman going into the building construction trades. But it could look like a lot of different things. In advanced manufacturing, it could look like a woman in a lab coat doing measurement or inspection. It's a whole different scenario" (AJAC, 37:15).

Using the resources made available through the RWSA project, AJAC produced marketing material geared toward women that featured "real apprentices, not a bad-ass stereotype of Rosie the Riveter" (AJAC, 37:15). AJAC's marketing director discussed how he used the time and resources provided by RWSA to make outreach to women more effective: "The women that we featured for the RWSA grant, they just look average. If I showed you a picture of them, you would have no idea what this person does for a living. It's a 20-year-old woman from Tacoma, Washington, with a median household income. Part of my mission is to have women to relate to other women, and not everyone relates to the stereotype we have of women in construction" (AJAC, 38:36).

Women also need support on the jobsite. Peers and mentors are especially important to help women navigate the stress

and risks women workers face on the job. Women workers who have reached journey-level can be perfect mentors for new women apprentices, but journeywomen can be hard to find. Frequently, when trainees reach the journey level, “they lose all their supports, and they don’t get jobs, even when quota systems are in place to incentivize employers to have a higher threshold of hiring of women” (AJAC, 17:49). Women in these jobs face a bias on and off the worksite that makes mentoring and support networks critical: “I’ve always felt like for women, we used to have support groups where we would meet once a week and just vent and encourage one another. We no longer have as many of these kinds of groups, but it’s still important to address the psychological impact women face” (WOJRC, 59:10).

A director at WOJRC emphasized that “one of the major blind spots we have when it comes to women in nontraditional

work environments is, a lot of the time, you’re the only one. Not only might you be the only woman, you might be the only person of color on the team [and] you’re entering a space that’s not accustomed to having women present. There’s a psychological aspect to this we don’t ever look at. We just tell women: ‘you can do it! Go out and do it! You belong!’ But what does that look like? How do women maneuver in these spaces? How do you stay confident when you’re the only woman around a bunch of guys, and you’re still learning the job?... What’s it like when you show up and realize you’re the only woman on the night shift?” (WOJRC, 56:24, 1:00:56). It’s critical for employers, unions, and intermediaries to address this issue, said one WRTP coordinator: “One of the questions we have for our partners is, do you have other women there? Are new women employees going to feel alone?” (WRTP, 52:00).



CHALLENGE FOR WOMEN'S SUCCESS: THE INDUSTRY/WOMEN WORKER BALANCING ACT

Characteristics of Successful Industry Partnerships

1 Industry partnerships organize firms in a common industry or production cluster to achieve greater scale and leverage in labor market reform, improve incumbent worker training systems, and develop employee and public sector connections to industry. By creating an ongoing conversation among industry leaders, the public sector, technical colleges, job centers, and schools, industry partnerships can develop solutions for sector-wide problems. A successful partnership harnesses the energy and experience of a representative cross-section of industry leaders to surface new ideas, relationships, and approaches.

2 For employers, these partnerships generate opportunities for cross-site learning and economies of scale in training, reduce the free-rider problems created when companies “poach” skilled labor rather than training incumbent workers, and improve competitiveness by reducing employee turnover rates. For the public sector, industry partnerships provide clear, forward-looking, and representative input from industry leaders that increases the public sector’s ability to efficiently provide services. For workers, these partnerships develop clearly identifiable pathways of access to quality careers, facilitate access to career ladders, and create an even playing field by reducing dependence on informal sources of career information.

3 Conveners of industry partnerships must arrange resources to staff the functions of the partnership and facilitate ongoing communication between stakeholders—employers, training providers, service agencies, funders, and workers. The role of convener is

essential but far from simple. At their best, conveners understand production processes, product lines, and emerging HR practices in their industries. At the same time, they know how to help firms see shared problems and agree to joint solutions. Beyond that, conveners must understand the public system and help build the interface between the industry partnership and public resources. The role of convener, done well, provides a foundation for economic and workforce development strategy in key regions and industries. Good conveners are worth ongoing support because good industry partnerships are essential for the workforce and economic development strategy. They need resources to keep conversations, relationships, and knowledge flowing so that opportunities for training and skill-building can be efficiently identified.

4 Regional industry partnerships must have a foundation in labor-market analysis and research engaging multiple firms in an industry. This foundational research defines key shared industry issues and skill needs and verifies local the private sector demand for those skills. There is both art and science to this work—hard data and a growing web of relationships are both required.

5 Given the information gathered and relationships developed with industry leaders, conveners work to develop solutions to industry skill problems via training and education. Often, training will be targeted at incumbent workers. Though, whenever possible, identify future workforce needs and increase economic opportunity for un- and under-employed workers by developing and promoting middle-skill jobs

within the targeted industry sector.

6 Training should prioritize transferrable, industry-recognized skills—not skills specific to just one firm. To do so, investments should aim at training and curriculum that connects to accredited education and training partners. This will develop training that moves workers along a career pathway toward credentialed technical skills. This requires close coordination between partnerships, the convener of these partnerships, and the state’s technical colleges. We know that for both workers and firms, broad credentialed skills pay off in productivity and pay.

7 Industry leaders should drive the process. That’s where problems are identified and shared solutions originate. But the convener of the partnership must be truly independent of and well-connected with the range of public resources—from WDBs to technical colleges to K12 and beyond—that might solve the problem. The challenge for the convener is to build the best possible solution to industry problems using local resources. The convener can’t favor any agency or provider, and the convener must connect with and understand multiple partners. Where many partnerships exist, the convener and industry partnership leaders provide a backbone for a multi-sector, regional leadership framework to leverage financial resources and in-kind support.

8 Employer commitments must be documented to work. Resources should be expanded to provide clear data on employer commitments to the partnership and its projects. This means more than simply naming firms that may have attended a meeting. Demonstrated investment—of staff time in leadership, supervisor and worker time in skill identification and program development, space and equipment for meetings or training, sending incumbent workers to training classes, paying for that training, and paying the workers wage

during training—all are clear, measurable indications of employer commitment and can be used to help industry partnership find better ways of connecting with employers. This data is also essential for developing future programs.

9 Project members must invest in evaluating and documenting outcomes for large training investments and produce industry reports, cluster analyses, and guidebooks disseminating industry partnership best practices. The training of field staff, policy leaders, and private sector partners is a critical element of success, as are data and reports on key middle-skill opportunities, advice on industry partnership work, and guidelines for state agencies on supporting industry partnerships. In the future, this focus should be expanded to secure the data (as on employer engagement above) that can help improve programming and build support for ongoing and expanding investments.

10 Project members must develop and utilize a standardized review procedure before funding training to guarantee that Workforce Development Boards or other conveners have laid the necessary foundation for industry partnership training before receiving public funds. This foundation includes research on industry health and growth, prospective demand, and program development with strong evidence of private sector interest in skill development and career pathways as a solution to skill needs.

The RWSA partners rely on their deep relationships with employers and union partners to prepare and support women as they move into apprenticeships for careers in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution. RWSA partners also have meaningful relationships with women workers, both those the partners help prepare for the industry and those who have participated in programs in the past. As is clear from the statement of “foundations for women’s success,” deep commitments and connections in both directions are necessary: sustainable solutions must address the needs of both workers and employers. An MUS staff member framed the issue: “What we’re doing benefits both sides of that equation. That’s really the heart and soul of what makes something scalable in the workforce development ecosystem” (MUS, 16:23).

However, it is not easy to find solutions that address the needs of workers and employers simultaneously. Changing industry practices and social presumption about what work and workers are “appropriate” takes a range of strategies and attention to scale. An MUS representative reflected on the demand for women in A/NTO careers: “There’s been an incremental change, but not as much as you’d expect” (MUS, 57:60). They described the inertia of the system this way: “It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: when all you see are men, it must be men that are supposed to do this job. When the only people you see making it through this system are white men, then it must be that this system is meant for white men. [One-off interventions] never create the need for the system to reflect on itself. That requires policy change, some sort of external pressure to force that system to think about itself differently. Otherwise, it just continues in the way that it has because people will keep doing what’s comfortable for them. There will be some organizations that have good intentions, but if you’re reliant only on goodwill, you’re going to be in the same place 30 years from now” (MUS, 1:18:15).

RWSA partners noted that industry partners are often tentative about their commitment to new workers and uneven in their interest in change. One WRTP representative

recalled a conversation with a union representative, “I asked, how come you have no women, and he replied, well, they just don’t like earning money! I was shocked. What woman wouldn’t want the chance to earn six figures? We have to get the employers and the unions to realize that there are real problems they have to address” (WRTP, 52:00).

Change usually starts at the top for employers, but it must be embraced throughout the organization to be meaningful. Too often, leadership’s desire for change doesn’t reach critical people who interact with frontline workers: “One of the big places where there’s a need to do some work, and this is most especially true in the construction industry, but also in the technology sector, is with middle managers who are doing the hiring and who are doing the training of folks. In the construction industry, that would be the foreman. They oftentimes are still of that old guard. And that is usually where people from nontraditional backgrounds get to a certain point in their apprenticeship program or employment. They just hit a wall because those folks have not changed because there’s no structural system in place to help them change” (MUS, 54:12). RWSA network organizations seek a culture change in the industry that is communicated, owned, and reinforced at every level of the organization. As a WOJRC staff member put it, “people in the chain of command must be trained and have to be recognized and rewarded for being able to change their culture” to make their workplace one where women can thrive.

Harassment of new workers, especially women and people of color, is too often tolerated on jobsites, even when leaders are committed to increasing access to their jobs. Mitigating harassment is challenging and often adversarial work that can be difficult to pursue even when an organization’s partnership with industry is deep. Still, RWSA partners see the need for a change to the range of strategies, from policy to advocacy to organization. Partners note it is especially important for new workers to ascend to supervisory levels: “If you’re promoting from within, if you can get women into leadership roles and start building up that scale, it does affect

change” (MUS, 56:24).

RWSA leaders know that demographics will help make these jobs more accessible. Quite simply, the traditional focus on recruiting white men will not bring in enough apprentices to replace retiring workers. The industry will need to hire and advance more women and people of color to remain in business: “The folks that are already there, a lot of them are retiring. Employers are trying to get more folks into these opportunities, but they’re just not catering to new groups of potential employees. These recruitment practices used to be, and to an extent still are, based on something similar to nepotism, people hiring sons and brothers of existing workers. And some of them want to reach out to new people, but they don’t really know how to make it work” (WRTP, 9:54).



CULTURE CHANGE ALSO REQUIRED

To maximize the impact of the RWSA project’s efforts, cultural shifts need to occur both within industry and society at large. “Culture dictates behavior, and culture is extremely difficult to change. Policy alone will never change culture. Culture

dictates what the policy is going to look like and how that policy is going to be implemented. Policies can all be interpreted in different ways, and it depends on what the culture and the value of that individual that is presiding over that policy or presiding over those laws to choose how they want to have implemented. Culture and values in our current society don’t really support women entering nontraditional employment” (WOJRC, 1:08:25). However, culture is not insurmountable, and American culture has met the challenge of integrating women into nontraditional occupations in the past. Several participants mentioned the success women had in nontraditional occupations during World War II: “What has fascinated me was when we look back historically when men go off to war, you have Rosie the Riveter and all of that, and I want to know, how did we shift to women being unable to do this work?” (WOJRC, 1:13:44).

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF RAISING WOMEN'S SUCCESS IN APPRENTICESHIP

One of the RWSA leaders' most important realizations was that increasing women's success in A/NTO careers will make those jobs better for all workers. For instance, reducing hostility and hazing on jobsites is essential for improving retention of women and people of color, but it also humanizes the worksite environment for all workers. As those who exhibit these unsavory behaviors are removed, longer-term workers will be less likely to carry on toxic traditions. The same is true of workplace policies regarding the caregiving responsibilities usually assumed by women. Although women workers are more likely to need policies that allow them to handle sudden child care needs, all parents benefit from that change. In these ways, the changes these projects are pursuing have had a positive impact on all workers.

At a system level, RWSA is a network intended not only for joint learning but for raising the profile of the work itself and synthesizing knowledge on women's success—knowledge deeply rooted in local projects but representative of the entire RWSA community. This learning community structure is well-positioned to accommodate new partners because the practices and habits of teaching, sharing, and participating are already in place. While networks exist between organizations of the same type, "there is no network connecting different types of organizations, and that's why integrating women into them has proven so difficult" (WRTP, 45:44, 48:30). RWSA has already taken important steps toward building this network, but we must develop it further to ensure women's success in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution.

CONCLUSION

For decades, a handful of women have been celebrated as pioneers in a set of skilled A/NTO careers. Despite years of work on the issue, these occupations remain "nontraditional" for women and people of color and present unique barriers and challenges. The RWSA partners have made significant progress toward supporting women's success in apprenticeship by creating a strong network for sharing best practices, supporting mutual learning, and driving system change. In addition, the partners have identified lessons and worked toward clarity and stronger partnership at the local level. This is critical work and progress.

RWSA partners also are looking for a new tradition in which women and people of color are no longer pioneers but understood to be an essential part of the workforce. This goal requires a mix of strategies, including the work these partners do so well and culture and policy change.



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