CLOSING THE DATA GAP:

WORKFORCE BOARD CAPACITY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

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Overview

The Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC) conducted a national assessment in partnership with the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) to understand how local workforce boards currently access and use labor market information (LMI), the capacity they have in place for data collection and analysis, their confidence in working with the data, and barriers they face in doing so effectively. The survey ran between February and April 2026 and received 52 responses from workforce development boards spanning 26 states. Survey respondents represent a diverse range of organizational sizes, governance structures, and annual budgets.

This landscape scan was conducted as part of a national initiative supported by Lumina Foundation and the findings inform a broader technical assistance strategy under the Ascendium Education Philanthropy co-investment initiative and provide a baseline for measuring progress in building data-driven decision-making across the workforce ecosystem.

Key takeaways from this landscape survey reveal enthusiasm about data and utilizing AI-assisted tools. However, this interest is limited by staff and financial capacity, gaps that could be mitigated through targeted technical assistance and peer learning networks. This report is organized into three sections: key findings from survey data, recommendations for next steps, and detailed summary statistics in the appendix.



Key Findings

The workforce boards that responded to this survey represent a field with strong motivation to use data more effectively and clear indication of where support is most needed. Across organizational sizes, governance structures, and budget levels, boards consistently identified the same pain points and priorities, which offer insights for future technical assistance design and program investment.

Finding 1: Capacity Constraints Reflect Structural Challenges

Staffing shortages and funding gaps consistently emerge as the biggest barriers to effective data collection and analysis for workforce boards, indicating a systemic condition rather than an isolated circumstance. Seventy-five percent of respondents cited limited staff capacity as a barrier, and sixty-seven percent cited limited funding. These constraints are not isolated but rather reinforce each other. Boards cannot dedicate staff to data analysis without sufficient financial resources, and they struggle to make the case for additional funding without demonstrated data capacity.

The problem is most pronounced among smaller boards. About 70% of boards with one to five total staff report having no dedicated data personnel, and this group represents the largest share of respondents at 38%. Among these boards, 55% operate with zero or fewer than one full-time equivalent dedicated to data work. As a result, other staff absorb data responsibilities alongside their core responsibilities.

Boards without dedicated data staff express stronger interest in building data capabilities than those with staff already in place. Ninety-six percent of these boards expressed interest in data communication and visualization, and eighty-eight percent expressed interest in statistical methods. This indicates a substantial gap between motivation and existing capacity. Technical assistance focused only on training is unlikely to reach boards that lack the staff bandwidth to apply new skills. Effective support requires pairing skill building with investments in organizational capacity.

Finding 2: Data Capacity Needs Vary by Stage of Organizational Development

Hiring dedicated data staff is an important milestone, but it does not eliminate resource constraints. Among boards with dedicated data staff, limited funding (63%) ranks above limited staff capacity (56%) as the leading barrier. Once boards cross the staffing threshold, they are able to pursue more advanced data work, and funding becomes the primary factor shaping how far those efforts can go.

The challenges boards face also evolve as their capacity grows. Boards without dedicated staff display initial constraints - they often cannot access the data they need, lack internal expertise, and do not have the resources to hire staff to address these gaps. Boards with dedicated staff have moved beyond these initial barriers and instead face more complex challenges. These include inconsistent data definitions, restrictions related to privacy and data sharing, and difficulties with integrating multiple systems. Such challenges tend to emerge only after a board has established ongoing data practices.

This progression has important implications for how technical assistance should be designed. A board working to hire its first data staff member requires a different type of support than a board seeking to formalize data sharing agreements or integrate multiple systems. Future technical assistance efforts should provide targeted support that aligns with each stage of capacity rather than applying a single approach across all boards.

Finding 3: Confidence in LMI Analysis is Independent of Organization Size

Seventy-three percent of respondents rated themselves either confident or very confident in their ability to analyze labor market information accurately. This level of confidence does not appear to depend on organizational size or budget.

Boards with one to five staff report the highest combined confidence rate in the sample at eighty percent, exceeding all larger staff size categories. These boards have developed meaningful analytic capacity by focusing limited staff on data-related roles and maintaining strong relationships with their state LMI agencies. Several operate with annual revenue below $2 million and still report high levels of confidence. This suggests that targeted investment in one or two data focused positions, combined with active use of state LMI resources, can produce strong analytic confidence regardless of overall organizational size.

This finding has clear implications for technical assistance design. Boards do not need to reach a certain size or funding level before investing in data capacity. Supporting smaller boards in making deliberate staffing decisions and strengthening their relationships with state LMI agencies can lead to near-term gains in confidence. Organizational size is not a prerequisite for progress.

Finding 4: Existing State LMI Relationships Provide a Foundation for Expanding Data Access

Ninety-six percent of boards report having an existing relationship with their state LMI agency, and forty-four percent describe that relationship as strong. This near universal connectivity represents a significant asset and opportunity. Workforce boards do not need to build these relationships from the ground up but instead can focus on strengthening those already in place.

For instance, just one respondent reported having a formalized relationship with its state LMI agency through a data sharing agreement beyond standard quarterly reporting. Transitioning even a portion of the boards that report strong relationships into formal agreements would expand access to more detailed localized data, without requiring additional staff or funding.

For the small number of boards without an existing relationship, establishing that foundation will take more time. However, most boards are already close to the point where formal data sharing arrangements are achievable.

Finding 5: Data Communication is the Starting Point for Capacity Building

All respondents expressed interest in improving how their organizations communicate and visualize data. No other capability area in the survey reached this level of consensus. This points to a clear and immediate entry point for technical assistance investment.

Boards already communicate data through newsletters, presentations, board meetings, and annual reports. These activities occur regularly regardless of staff size or budget. As a result, improvements in data visualization skills and tools can produce visible benefits quickly across a wide range of organizational contexts. Stronger visualization also enables stakeholders to interpret data more easily and supports more informed decision making. Resources developed in this area are likely to reach the broadest audience. Providing practitioner ready templates, accessible tools, and peer learning opportunities focused on visualization can drive early adoption and build momentum for broader capacity building efforts.

Interest in statistical methods (88%) and in collecting and managing organizational data (73%) is also high. However, these areas show greater variation in existing capacity and are likely to require more tailored and sophisticated forms of support.

Finding 6: AI is Viewed Primarily as a Capacity Enhancement Tool

Sixty-three percent of respondents identified data analysis and report automation as the most promising applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workforce system. These tasks currently require significant staff time and often create bottlenecks in organizations with limited resources. They reflect an immediate operational need to reduce the time burden of routine data tasks for staff who are already stretched thin.

This pattern is consistent across staff sizes and budget levels. Boards with one to five staff selected data analysis as their top AI priority at the same rate as larger organizations, and report automation ranked second across all staff size categories. Boards without dedicated data staff are slightly more likely to prioritize data analysis at 40% and report automation at 24% than those with dedicated staff. This reinforces that AI is viewed primarily to close capacity gaps rather than to extend existing expertise.

The preference for operational AI tools over direct service applications is notable. Career consultation/guidance and customer service chatbots, which are often highlighted in national workforce system discussions on AI, each received only 8% of responses. Boards are focused on how AI can support internal workflows that enable existing staff to produce higher quality analysis and reports more efficiently rather than direct interaction with participants. This suggests that near-term investments should focus on back-office functions, with direct service applications introduced later as operational capacity improves.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The findings from this landscape scan point to a workforce board community that is motivated, engaged, and clear about is needed to better utilize data. Across organizational sizes, governance structures, and budget levels, boards consistently identify the same core challenges: insufficient staff capacity, limited funding, and gaps in data expertise that compound one another over time.

The data also reveals optimism: strong existing relationships with state LMI agencies, near-universal interest in building data communication skills, and broad willingness to participate in peer learning all indicate that the field has the foundation it needs to make progress. What boards require is not a push to demonstrate the importance of data, but targeted, well-sequenced support that meets them where they are in their capacity development and helps them take the next step.

Recommendation 1

***Design technical assistance around capacity stage, not organizational size*.** The survey data shows that boards at different stages of data capacity development face fundamentally different barriers. Boards without dedicated data staff need foundational support: help accessing data, building basic skills, and making the case for investing in data roles. Boards that have crossed that threshold need support with systems, governance, and data infrastructure. A tiered technical assistance model that distinguishes between these stages and offers differentiated support at each level will deliver more value than a single program designed for the average board.

Recommendation 2

***Prioritize data communication and visualization as the starting point*.** Every board in the sample expressed interest in improving how it communicates and visualizes data. This unanimity makes data visualization a strong starting point for any field-wide initiative. Developing practitioner-ready resources including templates, accessible tools, and examples that boards can apply immediately will generate broad uptake and build early momentum. Peer learning structures where boards share visualization approaches with one another are well suited to this capability area and do not require deep technical expertise to facilitate.

Recommendation 3

***Formalize state LMI relationships*.** Nearly all boards maintain working relationships with their state LMI agencies, but few have formalized that relationship into a data-sharing agreement. Helping boards with strong existing relationships to take that next step, particularly around access to substate employment projections, would meaningfully expand analytic capacity without requiring new hires or significant funding. Practical support such as model agreement language, facilitation guidance, and examples from boards that have already formalized their agreements would lower the barrier to action considerably.

Recommendation 4

***Pilot AI tools focused on data analysis and report automation*.** Boards are not asking for transformational AI applications. They want tools that help existing staff produce better analysis and reports in less time. A structured pilot would involve a small cohort of boards testing specific AI tools for data analysis and report automation over a defined period, documenting what works, and sharing results across the broader network. Built around the tasks that currently consume the most staff time, it would directly address the field's most pressing operational need. The 35 boards that expressed willingness to join a focus group provide a ready cohort for pilot recruitment. Selecting participants across a range of budget levels and staff sizes will produce insights that apply to the broader field rather than only the most well-resourced organizations.

Recommendation 5

Establish a peer learning network to sustain momentum. The engagement readiness reflected in this survey, 67% willing to participate in a focus group, signals that boards want to connect with and learn from one another. A structured peer learning network would allow boards to share promising practices, work through common challenges, and build relationships that outlast any single grant-funded initiative. To be effective and inclusive, the network should accommodate boards at different capacity stages and design participation requirements that do not place an unreasonable burden on smaller-staffed organizations. Documenting and disseminating what boards learn through the network will extend the impact beyond direct participants.

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Appendix A: Detailed Survey Results by Topic

This appendix presents summary statistics organized into seven sections. Each section includes frequency tables for questions in that topic area.

- Respondent Profile
- Data Access and Provider Use
- Organizational Data Capacity
- Barriers to Data Use
- Capability Development Interests
- Technology and AI Opportunities
- Engagement and Outreach

Respondent Profile

The survey drew responses from workforce boards across 26 states, ranging from small rural boards with fewer than 5 staff to large metropolitan boards with 50+ employees. Approximately half operate as governmental entities and half as nonprofit organizations.

Staff Size

Total staff supporting all board activities (n=52)

Staff Size	# of Boards	% of Total
1–5 staff	20	38%
6–15 staff	15	29%
16–30 staff	9	17%
31–50 staff	5	10%
50+ staff	3	6%

Annual Budget / Revenue

Organization annual budget/revenue (n=52)

Annual Budget	# of Boards	% of Total
Less than $2M	7	13%
$2–4.9M	11	21%
$5–14.9M	16	31%
$15–24.9M	9	17%
$25–49.9M	6	12%
$100M+	3	6%

Data Access & Provider Use

State agencies are the most consistently used data source, with all 52 boards accessing them at least annually and 44% doing so weekly or daily. Federal agencies follow a similar pattern. Commercial providers such as Lightcast and Geographic Solutions are used intensively by the boards that rely on them but are not used at all by a significant share of respondents, indicating uneven access across the field. Nearly all boards maintain some relationship with their state LMI agency, though only one reported a formalized relationship represented by a data-sharing agreement.

Data Provider Frequency of Use

How frequently respondents or anyone in their organization uses each provider. (n=52)

Data Provider	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Annually	Never
State agencies (LMI, Dept. of Ed.)	9	14	25	4	0
Federal agencies (Census, BLS, etc.)	7	10	21	12	0
Lightcast	10	13	6	3	15
Geographic Solutions	15	2	3	3	22
Chmura JobsEQ	5	4	2	2	30
National Labor Exchange (NLx)	1	6	8	2	23

State LMI Agency Relationship

Nature of relationship with state labor market information agency (n = 52, multiple selections allowed)

Relationship Type	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Currently have a working relationship	27	52%
Have a strong relationship	23	44%
No relationship but interested in building one	6	12%
Have a formal data sharing agreement	1	2%

Organizational Capacity

The field is nearly evenly split on dedicated data staffing, with 52% of boards reporting at least one dedicated data position and 48% reporting none. Among boards with dedicated staff, most operate with only one to two FTE in data roles. Overall confidence in LMI analysis is relatively strong, with 73% of respondents rating themselves as confident or very confident, though a quarter of the field reports limited confidence.

Dedicated Staff for Data Collection and Analysis

Does your organization have staff dedicated to data collection and analysis? (n=52)

Response	# of Boards	% of Total
Yes	27	52%
No	25	48%

Number of Data FTE

Full-time employees dedicated to data collection and analysis (n = 52)

FTE Range	# of Boards	% of Respondents
0	11	21%
Less than 1	11	21%
1–2	17	33%
3–5	10	19%
6+	2	4%
Contractor only	1	2%

Confidence in Analyzing LMI Accurately

How confident is your organization in its ability to analyze labor market information accurately? (n=52)

Confidence Level	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Very confident	10	19%
Confident	28	54%
Slightly confident	12	23%
Not confident at all	2	4%

Barriers to Data Use

Limited staff capacity (75%) and limited funding (67%) are the two dominant barriers across the field and co-occur frequently, creating a cycle that is difficult for boards to break without external support. Lack of internal expertise (52%) is the third most common barrier, particularly among smaller boards. Process-level barriers including lack of standardized data collection, privacy restrictions, and technical challenges are more prevalent among boards that already have dedicated data staff, reflecting the challenges that emerge as capacity grows.

Barriers to Data Collection and Analysis

What barriers or challenges prevent effective data collection and analysis? (n = 52, multiple selections allowed)

Barrier	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Limited staff capacity	39	75%
Limited funding or resources	35	67%
Lack of internal data expertise	27	52%
Lack of standardized data collection processes	21	40%
Privacy, confidentiality, or data-sharing restrictions	20	38%
Technical challenges (systems, software, integration)	19	37%
Limited access to timely or high-quality data	17	33%
Unclear or inconsistent data definitions	15	29%
Data not readily available from partners	14	27%

Capability Development Interests

Interest in expanding data capabilities is high across all four areas surveyed. Data communication and visualization stand out as universal priority, with all 52 boards expressing at least some interest. Statistical methods (79% interested or very interested) and own data collection (73%) also show strong demand. Public data gathering shows the highest rate of existing proficiency, with 21% of boards indicating they already have that skill covered.

Interest in Data Capability Areas

Level of interest in developing each data-related capability (n = 52)

Capability Area	Very Interested	Interested	Somewhat Interested	Neutral	Not Interested	We Have This Skill
Communicating and visualizing data	34	13	0	0	0	5
Statistical methods for unique insights	27	14	5	3	0	3
Collecting and managing own data	24	14	4	4	2	4
Gathering and utilizing public data	18	17	4	2	0	11

Technology and AI Opportunities

Boards see AI primarily as a tool for improving internal operations rather than transforming service delivery. Data analysis (40%) and report automation (23%) together account for nearly two-thirds of responses, reflecting a pragmatic focus on reducing the time burden of routine data tasks. Interest in AI for direct service applications such as career guidance and customer service chatbots is comparatively low, suggesting that near-term AI investments should target back-office functions first.

Most Promising AI Applications

What do you see as the most promising opportunities for using AI tools within the workforce system? (n = 52)

AI Application	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Data analysis	21	40%
Report automation	12	23%
Data visualization	8	15%
Career consultation and guidance	4	8%
Customer service chatbots	4	8%
Multiple or all of the above	2	4%
Other	1	2%

Engagement and Outreach

Sixty-seven percent of boards expressed willingness to participate in a focus group, providing a strong foundation for cohort-based engagement. Boards rely heavily on participant wage records and follow-up surveys to measure program effectiveness, and on job postings and direct employer input to track labor market skill needs. These established practices offer natural connection points for introducing more systematic and data-driven approaches to performance measurement.

Focus Group Willingness

Would you be willing to join a focus group to discuss your organization's capacity and data use further? (n = 52)

Response	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Yes	35	67%
No	17	33%

Program Effectiveness Measurement Methods

Methods used to measure the effectiveness of workforce initiatives and programs (n = 52, multiple selections allowed)

Method	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Participant wage record reports	40	77%
Participant follow-up survey	34	65%
Training provider performance results	34	65%
Employer satisfaction survey	27	52%
Return on investment tool or assessment	20	38%
Employer interviews	15	29%
Not applicable	2	4%

Employer Skill Needs Tracking Methods

Methods used to track employer skills needs and gaps in the current workforce (n = 52, multiple selections allowed)

Method	# of Boards	% of Respondents
Job postings	41	79%
Broader stakeholder engagement	34	65%
Direct employer input (surveys, interviews, focus groups)	33	63%
Worker profiles or skill assessments	11	21%