

Disseminating Labor Market Information: Insights from the State LMI Improvement Grants

Megan Hague Angus and Jillian Berk

In February 2009, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) into law to address the employment challenges facing America's workforce. Among other investments, the Recovery Act included \$500 million to support jobs (also known as "green jobs") in the energy-efficiency and renewable-energy industries. While 90 percent of the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Recovery Act green jobs funding went to support training programs for workers, \$50 million was reserved for grants to state workforce agencies to improve labor market information (LMI) on green jobs and enhance the labor exchange infrastructure that connects workers to jobs. LMI plays a crucial role in ensuring a well-functioning labor market. LMI includes information on which occupations are growing and what skills are required for these occupations. LMI can affect the education and training decisions of workers; the investment decisions of employers; and the economic development strategies of local, state, and federal government agencies.

LMI has the potential to impact a large number of stakeholders and key decisions, but the information will not have any impact unless it reaches its intended audience. The specific audience for LMI depends, in part, on the information collected. State workforce agencies used the LMI grants to create research products and career tools targeted at policymakers, educational institutions, job seekers, and other stakeholders. Grant products included occupational profiles, skills transferability tools, and enhanced labor exchanges (Laird et al. 2012). LMI grantees faced significant challenges in their attempts to disseminate LMI during the short 18-month grant period (Berk et al. 2012). This brief uses the experiences of the LMI grantees to offer some strategies to consider when planning future LMI dissemination efforts. While the LMI grantees were particularly focused on disseminating infor-

About This Series

In December 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded State Labor Market Information (LMI) Improvement grants (LMI grants) to 24 individual state workforce agencies (SWAs) and six consortia of SWAs. Grantees used these LMI grants, which ranged from approximately \$750,000 to \$4 million, to collect, analyze, and disseminate LMI and enhance the labor-exchange infrastructure for jobs and careers within the energy-efficiency and renewable-energy industries. In September 2010, DOL contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to evaluate the extent to which the LMI grant program had achieved its stated purpose. Mathematica was asked to broadly document the activities of all 30 grantees, provide a detailed description of the activities and partnerships of a subset of grantees, and identify grantees' challenges and promising practices. This brief is part of a series that explores lessons from the LMI grant program.

mation on green jobs, the lessons from these dissemination efforts are more broadly applicable.

Effectively disseminating LMI begins with strategic planning. LMI staff should work to 1) develop dissemination plans unique to each product, 2) start planning for the dissemination efforts early, 3) effectively leverage partnerships, and finally 4) measure the effectiveness of dissemination activities. In this brief, we highlight how one grantee, the Driving Change consortium, approached the planning of its key dissemination activity—an end of project conference.

Develop a Dissemination Plan for Each Unique Product

Grantee experiences highlight the importance of developing a dissemination plan that is clearly linked to each product. Plans should consider the following four factors: the appropriate audience for each product; the accessibility of the product; methods to reach targeted audience; and the timing of dissemination efforts.

- **Identify the appropriate audience for each product.** The federal guidance for the LMI grant recognized the potential for numerous “end users,” including job seekers; educational institutions; community-based organizations that offer training and support services; and labor, economic development, and industry organizations. Each of these end users may benefit from different pieces of relevant information. For example, LMI grantees collected data to understand employer demand for green workers and the existing skills of the labor force. Although this new LMI is relevant for multiple stakeholder groups, the precise questions of interest will vary. Job seekers may be interested in products that display a list of in-demand occupations, while community colleges may need information on skills gaps between employer demand and the skills of job seekers.

- **Consider the accessibility of the product.** LMI staff should consider the appropriateness for the targeted audience of both the level of detail and the relevance of the findings. If the information has several target audiences, effective dissemination may require packaging the information in multiple forms. For example, a white paper may be appropriate for policymakers tasked with making key decisions. To meet the needs of a job seeker, on the other hand, the same information may be more useful if packaged in an interactive tool. Regardless of the audience, grantees found that disseminating long technical reports can be challenging.
- **Identify methods to reach targeted audiences.** Just as the type of product might differ depending on the targeted audience, so might the method for getting the product or information out. Disseminating LMI often requires using multiple methods. For example, the New Jersey grantee utilized several methods to market an enhanced labor exchange funded by the grant. To reach frontline staff at American Job Centers, the grantee held trainings to show staff how to utilize and access the tool. To reach job seekers, the grantee printed bookmarks that listed the URL address of the product and distributed the bookmarks to community organizers and local leaders. Other grantees, including the Driving Change consortium, hosted conferences to reach targeted audiences (see Box 1).

Box 1.

Driving Change Used a Conference to Reach Stakeholders

Driving Change, a consortium of states representing LMI agencies from Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio, worked together to organize a conference to disseminate the grant’s major research findings. Driving Change’s experience with conference planning highlights the importance of strategic planning. The Driving Change Conference served as one of the consortium’s key dissemination activities. Scheduled at the end of the grant period, the conference gave the consortium and its partners an opportunity to present and demonstrate their completed work. Conference topics included the greening of automotive technology, an overview of auto manufacturing and technology jobs, the emergence of new green employers in the auto industry, and presentations from project staff on career tools for dislocated workers.

The grantee determined that holding a conference would be the most effective way to reach their diverse stakeholders. By hosting a conference, Driving Change was able to distribute its work directly to auto-industry leaders, unions, educators, and workforce-development professionals and to foster collaboration between the grant’s key stakeholders.

Hosting a conference allowed Driving Change to present research findings in a more accessible format. Instead of reading long reports, stakeholders could attend presentations on the findings from the consortium’s research projects. For conference attendees who wanted additional information and for those who could not attend the conference, the grantee packaged the final report as separate chapters to make it easier for users to find portions of interest. In addition, to make the information presented at the conference and in the reports more tangible, the grantee scheduled interactive “tours” during the conference. On these tours, interested stakeholders participated in technology demonstrations and factory visits to help them understand the jobs available in the greening automotive industry.

- **Consider the timing of dissemination efforts.** The dissemination plan should consider any key decisions to be made in the state/region. In addition, consider tying dissemination with already planned events, such as conferences. Releasing LMI to coincide with established conferences can play a role in ensuring that relevant stakeholders receive key messages.

ing a realistic timeline and cost structure and anticipating ongoing efforts or costs associated with dissemination can lay the foundation for effective dissemination.

- **Develop a realistic timeline.** Planning for successful dissemination takes time. Successful dissemination efforts may require more than a year of planning (see Box 2), particularly if the dissemination effort requires coordination with partners.

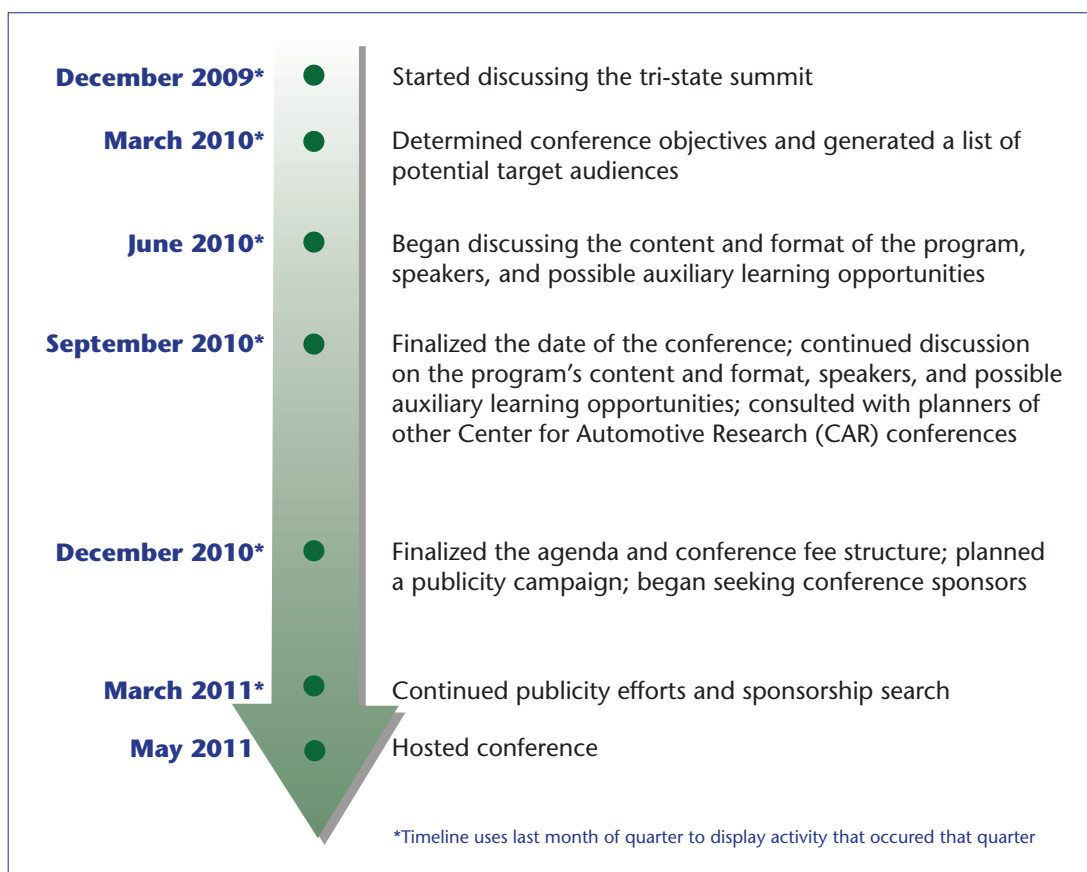
Start Planning Early

Planning to disseminate LMI findings from very early in the project can set the tone for successful dissemination. Develop-

Box 2.

Planning the Driving Change Conference

The planning for the conference began early and continued throughout the grant period. In fact, the Driving Change consortium began planning for the conference in its statement of work. In the original grant application, Driving Change proposed to hold a one-day conference to present the main findings from the work performed under the grant. Once funding was awarded, the consortium worked every quarter to plan for the conference. The consortium’s quarterly progress reports illustrate the timing of some of the key conference planning activities.



While the grantee did not know the particulars of the conference when preparing its grant application, a one-day conference was included in the initial budget. When the length of the conference was expanded from a one-day conference to a one and a half day conference and the location and host of the conference was determined, Driving Change requested a contract modification to reallocate grant funds. In addition, to offset the costs associated with the conference, registered participants each paid \$200 dollars to attend the full conference (lower registration fees were charged to those attending a portion of the conference.)

- **Include production and dissemination efforts in the budget.** While grant budgets often consider the many phases of data collection and analysis, production and dissemination efforts sometimes are overlooked. The grant application required grantees to budget for dissemination. However, grantees reported that they underestimated costs related to production. In addition to production, the products need to be disseminated. Grantees reported using social media, distributing research reports on flash drives, making presentations, and hosting conferences. All of these methods have associated costs that need to be considered when budgeting dissemination.
- **Plan for efforts and costs associated with ongoing dissemination.** Whereas some LMI is static in that a report is published and produced, other LMI needs to be continually accessible to users. LMI staff needs to plan for the costs of these ongoing efforts. For instance, some LMI grantees used green portals to reach job seekers. These portals include information on green careers, training programs, and job listings. Many of the portals were developed by outside vendors and will have ongoing fees. In another instance, Oregon sought to utilize social media to make stakeholders aware of LMI. To maintain and grow its audience, Oregon’s LMI shop regularly tweets and updates the blog. Effective use of social media is an ongoing process and may have staff time costs associated with it.

Effectively Leverage Partnerships

The experience of the LMI grantees highlights the value in leveraging partnerships to disseminate LMI. In the original grant solicitation, the LMI grantees were encouraged to develop strategic partnerships with research entities, Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), employers, and educational institutions. Grantees developed a wide variety of partnerships

to realize grant goals, and they reported that these partnerships provided real value to the grant, with partners playing key roles in the creation and the dissemination of the LMI products.

When planning dissemination efforts, consider how to use existing partnerships to enhance the dissemination efforts. Partners may bring different perspectives, access to stakeholders, and flexibility in dissemination.

- **Seek partner perspective on products.** Partners may bring an important perspective on the accessibility of the LMI products and the planned dissemination strategies. Educational partners, for example, may have perspective on how to package and distribute LMI to community colleges to ensure that it is affecting both the planning decisions of the schools and the career planning decisions of the students.
- **Use partners to access stakeholders.** Partners often have access to different stakeholders. They may maintain large mailing lists that reach different users than the mailing lists maintained by LMI shops (see Box 3). Partners may be able to disseminate information at conferences or planned trainings.
- **Take advantage of partnership flexibility.** As the LMI grantees learned, partners outside of state government may have additional flexibility that facilitates quick dissemination. It may be easier for partner organizations to secure and design new websites, issue press releases, and use social media.

Measure the Effectiveness of Dissemination Activities

Developing tracking methods to quantify the reach of dissemination efforts allows LMI shops to improve dissemination efforts over time.

Box 3.

Working with Partners to Enhance Driving Change’s Dissemination Efforts

The grantee’s key partners played a significant role in the planning and hosting of the conference. In addition to the three states in the consortium, the consortium’s key partners—the Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC), the Center for Automotive Research (CAR), and Case Western University—presented or moderated sessions at the conference. These partners played a significant role in the development and coordination of the LMI products and played a role in presenting at the conference as well. One of the partners, CAR, which has connections to important target audiences, hosted the conference.

The IBRC took an active role in other consortium dissemination efforts. IBRC took a leadership role in designing and maintaining the project website (www.drivingworkforcechange.org), issuing press releases and leading the social media strategy. Consortium members noted that IBRC faced fewer political constraints and bureaucratic challenges that might have slowed dissemination efforts.

- **Monitor distribution of products.** For printed LMI products including brochures and reports, tracking the number of products distributed and the location of distribution provides a basic understanding of the reach of the dissemination efforts. The New Mexico grantee tracked the number of requests for its publications as well as the number of LMI publications distributed by partners and used this information to understand how LMI was reaching customers.
- **Track website traffic.** Tools such as Google Analytics or other tracking software can determine how many times a website was visited, for how long pages were viewed, and the number of times a document was downloaded. LMI staff could track website traffic to determine if user traffic increased as a result of a marketing campaign (see Box 4). The Mid Atlantic Regional Consortium, a consortium of Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, hired a for-profit partner to develop reporting capabilities to track web traffic and other information on users' access to the website. Website analytics like these can also indicate how individuals reached a website which may provide additional information about the success of existing dissemination efforts and suggest possibilities for future dissemination.
- **Use customer surveys.** LMI shops are already required to assess customer satisfaction. A survey of job seekers or

American Job Center customers may indicate job seekers' utilization or familiarity with particular LMI tools or products. The survey could include questions designed to understand how job seekers were exposed to specific career tools or other LMI products to assess the effectiveness of outreach efforts.

References

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For more information, please contact Jillian Berk at jberk@mathematica-mpr.com.

Box 4.

Measuring the Impact of the Driving Change Conference

Driving Change measured the impact of its dissemination efforts by monitoring conference attendance, website traffic, press coverage, and social media followers. The conference was well attended. Due to the marketing efforts of Driving Change and its partners, the conference attendees included auto industry leaders, unions, educators, and workforce development professionals, and provided the auto industry with a forum to showcase its greening efforts. Over 230 registered participants attended.

The consortium tracked website traffic and press coverage. After the conference, the consortium tracked website traffic to determine if the conference had increased traffic to and downloads from the website. Web analytics confirmed a significant spike in traffic after the conference and press coverage of the event.

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