

# Career Pathways Building Tomorrow's Workforce Today



the  
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company

# Introduction

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Recent disruptions, such as the pandemic and the surge in conversation around social justice issues, coupled with acute talent shortages and record high-quit rates, have compelled organizations to put employee experience and health and wellbeing front and center. These unprecedented events have impelled organizations to refocus strategic priorities toward building a future-proof workforce, building agility into every aspect of recruiting, and designing irresistible experiences for their candidates, employees, recruiters, and hiring managers.

However, when it comes to talent, the complex and largely unsolved challenge that remains for organizations is around careers. People value career development twice as much as compensation and benefits.<sup>1</sup> Workers want better careers, and you need to answer several complex questions:

- What will you do to develop people's careers?
- How will you support the transition to more valued, in-demand, and better paying careers?
- What will you do in the present to build the workforce for your future needs?

The answer lies in creating career pathways. A "career pathway" is a series of career steps, designed through skills adjacencies, which show an individual how to move to a more valued, in-demand career. Through career pathways, organizations can support the development of new skills, helping individuals transition into credentialed new jobs or roles that offer better pay and business impact. Unlike "career paths," where people move within a cluster of jobs using their existing skills, career pathways enable organizations to tap into diverse talent pools—such as frontline workers and underserved populations. And by reskilling and developing new skills, career pathways also unlock growth.

Employers today need to provide guidance and support through both coaching and content for the jobs of their future organization (and what they want to be next). They need to illuminate the pathways to get to this future state, including job progression and the related education, learning, and experiences needed along the way. Also, employers need to

infuse these pathways with a culture that celebrates mobility. Importantly, this culture should include organizational processes that enable mobility by design, not by exception.

This report will unpack how organizations can bring together education, skilling, and career mobility to empower their workers to have better careers and better lives, and at the same time, build a talent pipeline for the future.

## Career Management Is Business Critical

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As a starting point, let's flash the torchlight on why career management needs to be the number-one priority for learning and development (L&D) in your company. At The Josh Bersin Company, we recently undertook a massive study on the current state of L&D practices across global organizations where we studied 94 L&D practices and surveyed over 1,000 organizations. This research finds the singular most-impactful practice for driving talent, business, and innovation outcomes is "creating extensive opportunities for career growth." In fact, five out of the top fifteen practices that are predictive of success are related to career management (see Figure 1 on next page).

The key underlying themes are loud and clear. Everything we do in L&D, HR, and leadership to enable learning, upskilling, and reskilling is a means to an end, not the end in itself. Employee self-directed learning is no longer enough—employer-facilitated career growth wins the business game. It is no longer only about investing in learning programs and resources to meet today's needs but also investing in people to solve tomorrow's problems. It is no longer just about caring for your people but also about truly caring for their careers, because that is what they care about the most.









## Defining Future Career Growth Potential

Careers today have evolved from lock-step progressions, where employees would spend their entire lifetime in a single occupation with a single employer to careers where they are

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<sup>1</sup> The Josh Bersin Company and Glassdoor research, 2019.

Figure 1: The Top 15 Most-Impactful L&D Practices

Practice	Element	Relative Impact
1 Create extensive career growth options	 Career Management	 <p>VERY HIGH</p>
2 Develop leaders as part of the company's brand	 Leadership Development	
3 Foster a culture of continuous learning	 Learning in the Flow of Work	
4 Create career pathways to move employees into high-priority areas	 Career Management	
5 Cultivate coaching skills as a key leadership capability	 Coaching and Mentoring	
6 Facilitate cross-divisional and cross-functional career growth	 Career Management	
7 Experiment with new learning tech and approaches	 L&D Capabilities	
8 Build a strategy for learning in the flow of work	 L&D Capabilities	
9 Refresh the company's learning and development (L&D) infrastructure with new tools and tech	 L&D Technologies	
10 Offer career coaching to employees regularly	 Career Management	
11 Curate and monitor content to make sure learning is relevant	 Learning in the Flow of Work	
12 Train and incent managers to work as coaches to others	 Coaching and Mentoring	
13 Enable access to learning as needed in the flow of work	 Learning in the Flow of Work	
14 Develop leaders at all levels	 Leadership Development	
15 Provide self-service tools to navigate career opportunities	 Career Management	MODERATE

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

untethered and, on average, change careers three to seven times<sup>2</sup> during their lifetimes. The modern worker can choose whom they work for, where they work, when they work, and how they work (see Figure 2).

Caring for your employees' careers starts with caring for where individuals want to be and where they can be. It starts with widening the aperture of where an individual can get to by developing critical and enduring skills. Employers must help employees develop a sense of what they want next, and then help them develop the skills to get there. It is an iterative, always-on process as they navigate pathways over the course of their career.

## Employees Need Opportunities

Skills define careers, and future skills define future career growth potential—rightly so, and a lot has been written about “skills as the new currency of work.” But in reality, most companies still need jobs and job architectures to translate these skills. The onus is on organizations to create opportunities for employees to cash in on this new currency. And one of the critical pieces of cashing in on skills that people develop is to ensure that the skills align with their

interests, aptitudes, and personalities in context. In short, organizations need to invest in skills that will help individuals have more meaningful experiences through their careers.

HR and business leaders need to give people the tools and insights they need to learn new skills but also create opportunities to apply those newly acquired skills in different areas of the business. Employers also need to pay for those skills. The bottom line: If your employees don't find opportunities inside your business, they will look for them outside. In fact, among U.S. workers who left a job in 2021, 63% say they left because there were no opportunities for advancement<sup>3</sup>.

Walmart creates various opportunities for frontline store associates to reskill and move into different areas of the business such as project management, cybersecurity, etc. “Our goal is to ensure that employees don't have to leave Walmart to have a different career. You might not have all the knowledge and skills of today, but if you have the capacity and the intention, Walmart will invest in you and show you the way,” said Beth Williams-Moore, Director, Live Better U at Walmart, the retail giant's award-winning career pathways program.

Figure 2: The Evolution of Careers



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

2 “How Often Do People Change Careers?” Dawn Rosenberg McKay/thebalancecareers, January 2020.

3 “Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected.” Kim Parker and Juliana Menasce Horowitz/Pew Research Center, March 9, 2022.

## Employers Need Talent

In today's highly constrained labor market, every business and every industry are faced with talent shortages. Almost 70% of employees are looking for new jobs<sup>4</sup>, and almost every employer has more job openings than they can find the talent to fill. And the supply of talent will continue to be sparse in the future; while more and more jobs are being created every single day, there is a projected deficit in college graduates expected from both the drop in college enrollment during the pandemic and the demographic shift coming out of the Great Recession.

For long-term business success, organizations need to start building the workforce for their future needs today. They need to invest in skills development and think about careers more diligently. They need to hone in on career management best practices and use careers as a lever for attracting and retaining talent in the present and creating a pipeline of talent for the

future. The next section provides a quick overview of career management practices that differentiate talent and business outcomes for highly successful organizations.

## Leading Practices in Career Management

Our most recent research establishes that among almost 100 L&D practices, career management is what matters the most. As shown in Figure 1, the most important practice is to “create extensive career growth opportunities.” The subsequent practices in Figure 3, listed in order of impact, crystallize “how” organizations can enable extensive career growth for its workforce. Figure 3 illustrates that the most-impactful approach for creating extensive career opportunities is developing career pathways—moving people into high-priority

Figure 3: Essential Career Management Practices and Current State



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

<sup>4</sup> "66% of Americans are thinking about changing jobs. Here's what you should do with your 401(k) if you make the switch," Robert Exley Jr/CNBC, August 10, 2021.

areas within the organization. Other impactful practices include coaching, tools, and transition-support programs for people changing careers.

Most companies are not particularly good at any of these practices. Only one out of five organizations provide extensive career growth options to their workforce, and only one out of ten organizations is developing career pathways to move employees into high-priority areas. The disparity between the importance of career pathways and most organizations' current state of success in these areas substantiates this is a complex and largely unsolved challenge for most organizations.

Let's take a closer look at career pathways and specific examples of organizations that are leading the way.

## Career Pathways: From Jobs to Life-Long Careers

Career pathways are one of the most important new initiatives in HR, and skills and job data now make this possible.

A career pathway is not a "career path." Career paths help employees grow within a career domain, whereas career pathways unlock doors to new and aspirational career domains. Walmart, for example, has built career pathways in its Live Better U program to help store associates develop through training, rotation, and educational assistance, and then move into positions critical to the future of their business. Target, Disney, and Amazon have similar programs to build pathways to high-priority roles.

Career pathways include a series of carefully designed development steps, such as education, certifications, degrees, learning programs, experiences, gigs, mentoring, and new roles that take an individual from their current role to a higher-demand, often higher-paying job. For employees, it's critical that they don't just see the next step of the job they want to apply for right away but also that they are applying to a job to learn about what is possible. And these employees are more likely to stick around when they feel like they have a decent shot at advancing to a new job in the future<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> ["Rejected internal applicants twice as likely to quit,"](#) Julie Greco/Cornell Chronicle, August 31, 2021.

## Career Pathways

### We define a career pathway as:

- A **job or career path** that improves pay, growth potential, and business impact
- A **credentialed new career** that carries value in the outside marketplace
- A **company-directed path that drives retention**, engagement, and employment brand
- A **very high ROI solution** to organizational change and business transformation
- A **complex problem** that cannot be solved by standalone solutions

### Career pathways have many benefits, such as:

- **Unlocking growth opportunities** while building talent for **critical, future business needs**
- Enabling individuals to thrive in their new role and job, resulting in higher **engagement, retention, and performance**
- Enabling companies to **attract talent** in any market and any role
- Supporting equitable career growth and building more **diverse talent**
- Helping companies redesign their services very quickly and with scale, fostering **organizational agility** and reducing recruiting costs
- Bringing tuition benefit and other investments into business focus, accomplishing **ROI** on the investment
- Taking wasted L&D spend and reallocating it effectively for **skill development**



## A Wireframe for Career Pathways

Career pathways include clearly defined tracks that show a progression across different roles in different job groups and corresponding reskilling and educational milestones that employees need to accomplish to move to these roles. Organizations need to envision the start and end points of a potential career pathway, as well as the progression of roles, skills, credentials, or academic requirements needed to enable the progression. Figure 4 (below) provides a wireframe for helping organizations think through each of these elements.

Career pathways start with entry-level roles or “feeder roles” that serve as the starting point (e.g., health screeners or technicians). These are roles that are declining in priority because of decreased demand, or because of automation and augmentation. They also represent a population who would be 62% more likely to stay at their company if there was a prospect of upward mobility<sup>6</sup>.

“Gateway roles” serve as the transition point toward developing skills and experiences for a different career in the long term. These “stepping-stone” roles have historically helped workers transition from lower to higher wages and

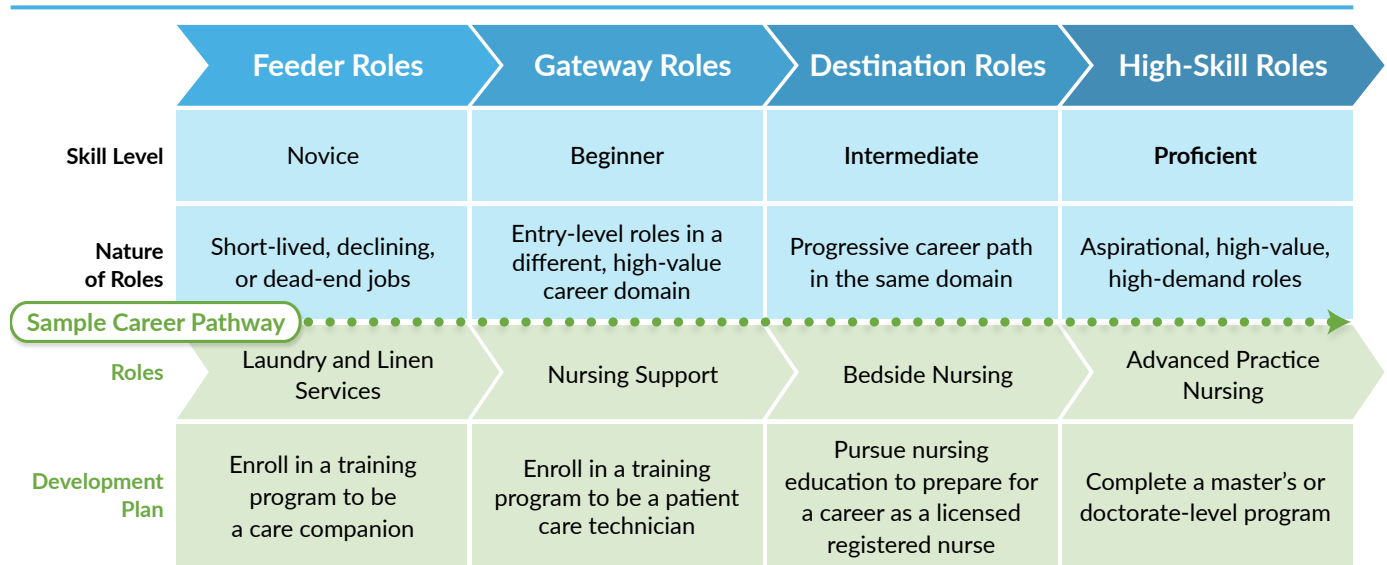
helped with creating a more stable and diverse workforce.

“Destination roles” are highly valued roles that enable people to become specialists in the area. “High-skill roles” represent the highest level of proficiency in the domain and allow people to continue to grow their career beyond their destination roles. For example, a laundry service employee (feeder role) could start as a nurse assistant (gateway role), continue to develop expertise and become a registered nurse (destination role), and with deep expertise and experience, can grow into the role of a nursing manager (high-skill role).

Forward-thinking employers create formalized career pathways for their workers. They recognize that one of the biggest barriers to scaling career pathways is the lack of available gateway roles for internal candidates without years of relevant experiences. These employers are moving to create more gateway roles that can help people get started on the journey that will likely lead them into in-demand roles in other job families.

While only 11% of organizations offer career pathways, companies that do so understand return on investment in terms of increased employee engagement and retention, a sense of inclusion and belonging, trust in the organization, and a strong employee sentiment of feeling supported in their

Figure 4: A Wireframe for Constructing Career Pathways



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

<sup>6</sup> “Guiding low-wage workers on the upward mobility path is a win for employees and companies,” Laura Aka/WorkingNation, February 10, 2022.

growth and development. Beyond employee results, these organizations are also better able to meet customer demands and perform well financially.<sup>7</sup>

### Examples of Career Pathways

Rocket Central, in partnership with Guild, launched Rock Academy—a strategic education and skilling program open to both part-time and full-time team members who have been with the company for over six months. The program provides access to more than 200 personal and professional skills development courses ranging from certificates to master's degrees, and access to new career pathways in multiple areas such as marketing, technology, product strategy, and sales. The education and skilling programs offered through Rock Academy are aligned to support advancement along these pathways. Through always-on career coaching and career navigation support, Rocket Central employees can select pathways that align with their aspirations and develop new skills that will support their new career trajectory at Rocket Central.

Bon Secours Mercy Health, a large healthcare system, has constructed career pathways with clearly defined start and end points, explaining how an individual can get from an entry-level point in their career to a specialized, high-skill

and higher-paying job by building specific strategic skills and relevant certifications or degrees. The organization has partnered with Guild to offer five career pathways where the organization will pay 100% of the associates' tuition and textbook fees upfront. These pathways include nursing, nursing support, lab managers/technical roles, respiratory therapist, and medical assistants. Figures 5 and 6 (see below) show a visual trajectory of careers in nursing and medical laboratories as examples. "We've always talked about empowering people to own their careers, and with these career pathways, I feel like we have finally given them the right combination of tools, insights, and direction to be able to do that," said Joe Gage, CHRO, Bon Secours Mercy Health.

### The Role of Education: The Great Equalizer

Once an organization has identified rising and declining roles, skills requirements, skills adjacencies, and has developed career pathways that flow in progression, the critical enabling step is creating access to the right academic programs and educational opportunities for reskilling in addition to learning

Figure 5: Nursing Career Pathway at Bon Secours Mercy Health

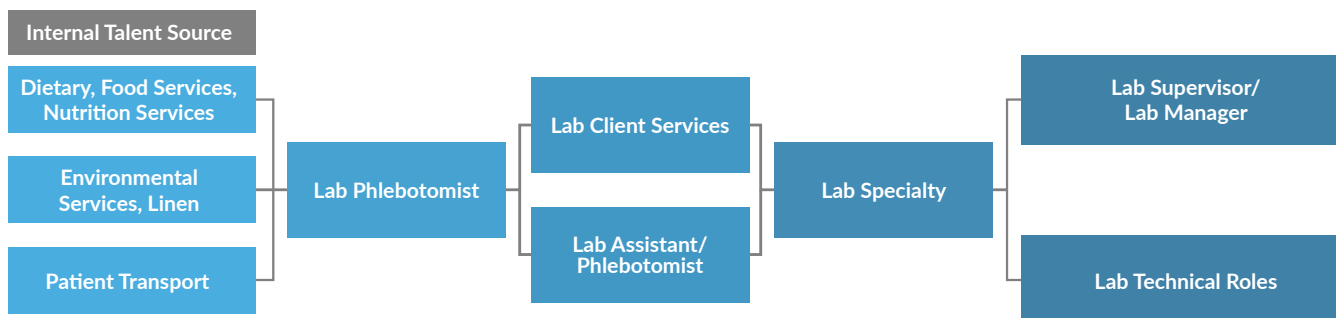


Source: Guild Education and Bon Secours Mercy Health, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Corporate Learning at Scale, Josh Bersin/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.



**Figure 6: Laboratory Career Pathway at Bon Secours Mercy**



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

programs and coaching. Under the covers, vendor partners like Guild are making this easy: by connecting employers and education institutions at scale and enabling forward-thinking employers to empower their entire workforce with education programs and career pathways. In this way, organizations can unlock life-changing opportunities for personal and professional growth for their employees.

Recently, retail giants like Amazon<sup>8</sup>, Target<sup>9</sup>, and Walmart<sup>10</sup> have announced more than \$2 billion of investment in employee education benefits for frontline workers and hourly associates. Companies have woken up to the fact that frontline workers (retail, store employees, operations staff, drivers) are the most important and difficult workers to attract, so they're investing in them like never before. And indeed, developing career pathways is one of the key engagement factors for critical “deskless” workers (as we describe in *The Big Reset Playbook: Deskless Workers*<sup>11</sup>).

Additionally, the federal government provides another driving factor and powerful incentive for companies to invest in their workers: allowing employers to classify their expenses for education and skills training as a general trade or business deduction. There is no cap or limit on the dollar amount of this deduction.

However, employees who take advantage of their employer's educational assistance program may be subject to a tax. Under Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code, employees may only exclude from their gross income up to \$5,250 per year for employer-provided educational assistance at the undergraduate or graduate level, regardless of whether the education is related to the employee's job. Section 132 of the Internal Revenue Code, on the other hand, allows employees to exclude from gross income an uncapped amount but only if the education or skills training directly relates to the employee's current job responsibilities.

## The Equity Imperative: Removing Barriers to Education

The murder of George Floyd and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and people of color surfaced deep-rooted systemic racism and inequities in our society. Corporate America can help reduce those long-standing inequities through action. The most effective way to drive diversity in the workforce is to focus on equity and inclusion (as we describe in *Elevating Equity: The Real Story of Equity and Inclusion*<sup>12</sup>).

8 Press release: [Amazon to Pay Full College Tuition for Its Front-Line Employees as Part of \\$1.2 Billion Investment in Education and Skills Training for U.S. Workforce](#), Amazon, September 9, 2021.

9 “Offering Debt-Free Degrees to More Than 340,000 Target Team Members? Now, That’s a Smart Move,” A Bullseye View/Target, August 4, 2021.

10 “Walmart To Pay 100% of College Tuition and Books for Associates,” Walmart, July 27, 2021.

11 *The Big Reset Playbook: Deskless Workers*, Josh Bersin, Kathi Enderes, PhD, and Nehal Nangia/The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

12 *Elevating Equity: The Real Story of Equity and Inclusion*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

Providing access to tuition-free education and removing the barriers to education for underserved and disadvantaged communities is a big step in the right direction. Forward-thinking businesses are on board with this mission and are investing in education not just with a focus on career growth but also on equitable career growth.

Access to education can set the stage for equitable career growth and cultivate diversity in an organization, but only when companies tie their massive investments in education to career pathways. Through career pathways, organizations unlock the economic benefits for their workers and for their business, fostering diversity beyond the frontline, and serving as an engine for economic mobility.

“*Equity is at the heart of everything. You have to understand where all of your people are coming from—their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations. Only then you can create equitable growth for everyone, and truly maximize the potential of your company.*”

KimArie Yowell, Chief Learning Officer,  
Rocket Central

## Underserved Employees: An Untapped Talent Pool

Another motivation at play is the acute supply chain shortages of talent. Hourly associates and frontline workers are often workers who belong to underserved communities and may have been deprived of access to education. Businesses realize that the lack of opportunity is not synonymous with lack of ability. Forward-thinking organizations are committed to tapping into this large pool of workers to allow them to create better lives for themselves and to enable businesses to build the workforce they'll need in the future.

These investments pay off in more than just employee engagement and retention. The cost of education is a fraction of the cost of replacing an employee, which can be 50% to 200% of a person's salary, which includes lost internal knowledge, lost customer relationships, survivor syndrome effects, and the high cost of advertising and recruiting new people.

## Tuition Reimbursement: An Unused Benefit

Most organizations have been offering educational benefits in the form of tuition reimbursement for decades. Tuition reimbursement programs, however, are mostly frill programs offered to white-collar workers to help with an MBA or other advanced degrees. Additionally, these programs lack strategic alignment with the skilling needs of the business—or who needs to be reskilled in the first place.

Our Corporate Learning research reveals that tuition reimbursement is among the most underutilized benefits in an organization. In fact, 50% of all surveyed organizations indicate they offer an educational benefit to all employees, yet only 10% indicate that the benefit is widely adopted. Even when employees use the benefit, only 20% of organizations say it is highly valued (see Figure 7 on the next page).

## The Real Issue with Tuition Reimbursement

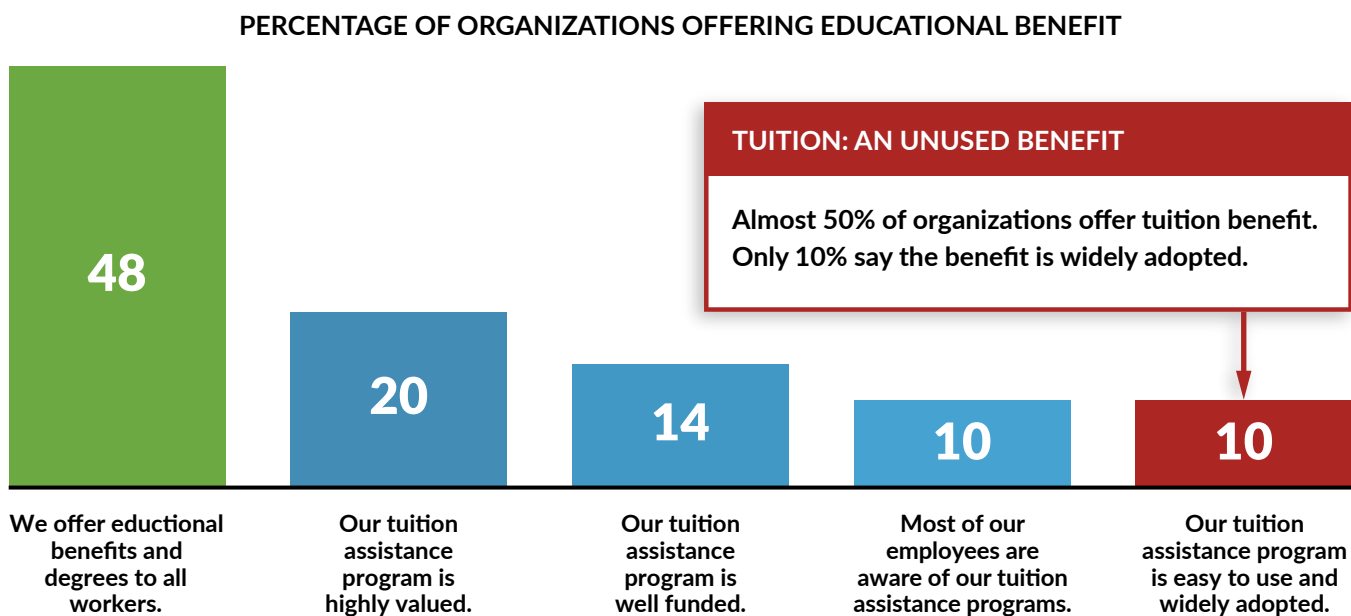
Tuition reimbursement programs fail to address financial barriers to education. These programs do offer a wide array of academic programs including degrees and certifications from which employees can choose. While this may sound like a benefit everyone would want to take advantage of, it is widely underutilized for a reason.

The biggest caveat is the employees' ability to pay that tuition fee upfront, as well as wait for a period of six months to multiple years before they are reimbursed. Often, people who need access to education the most—people from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities—do not have the ability to pay this fee. People who typically utilize the benefit are people who already have the paying capacity, further widening societal inequities.

“*One of the real challenges in America is access to education for underrepresented groups, and while tuition reimbursement programs may seem to offer a solution, they exclude people who do not have the ability to pay for the classes upfront or wait until the end of the course to get reimbursed by their employer.*”

KimArie Yowell, Chief Learning Officer,  
Rocket Central

Figure 7: Current State of Tuition Benefit Offerings and Adoption



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

The way that a typical tuition reimbursement program is set up is counterproductive to the whole idea of serving the underserved.

Another issue is a lack of strategic ownership. The tuition benefit often sits buried in the benefits department, isolated from the companies' learning priorities. Companies fail to make the strategic link between the power of education as a lever for reskilling and insourcing talent, especially in a highly constrained talent market and with the often-lamented impact of automation and augmentation accelerating job eliminations

## Tuition Assistance: Equitable Access to Education

Organizations like Hilton, Disney, Target, Walmart, Rocket Central, or Bon Secours Mercy Health realize that tuition reimbursement programs do not support their vision. Instead, for these leading organizations, the new paradigm is tuition "assistance," rather than "reimbursement."

Tuition assistance is an employee benefit aimed at supporting employees to obtain degrees or certificates to help them further their career and allow the organization to retain and build talent for the future. It also allows more employees to

benefit from this support because the company pays for the education directly.

When Rocket Central switched their tuition benefit offering from a reimbursement program to an assistance model, the participation in the program increased by more than five times within sixteen months. Companies like Disney, Walmart, and Amazon have been offering tuition assistance for years and have supported career changes for many employees to move from lower-paid frontline jobs to technical or customer support work. As employees do not need to pay out of pocket for the tuition benefit, it helps bring more equitable access to education and economic mobility (see Figure 8 on next page).

## Constructing Career Pathways: Five Strategic Steps

The war for talent is real, and it is likely to get worse. Engaging and retaining talent is hard, and finding talent externally is even harder. The best talent is inside your organization, and you need to nurture your it. Career pathways can help you do that.

Figure 8: Tuition Reimbursement vs. Assistance

Tuition Reimbursement	Tuition Assistance
Employee pays tuition out of pocket at the start of the program.	Employee does not have to incur any upfront out-of-pocket expense.
Employee pays tuition directly to the academic institution.	Employer pays tuition directly to the educational institution.
Employer reimburses tuition upon completion of the program.	Tuition is free, already paid for by the employer.
Excludes people who do not have the ability to pay a lump sum fee upfront.	Includes everyone, irrespective of capacity to pay for education.
Adds to student-loan debt.	Provides debt-free access to education.

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

Included below are five strategic steps for constructing career pathways for your workforce (see Figure 9). Solution providers like Guild Education can connect employers and education institutions at scale, synthesize skills data and identify adjacencies, and support career mobility and the development of career pathways through each of these steps.

**1 Develop** a thorough understanding of the jobs you will need in the future and the jobs you have today. You can do this by:

- **Understanding the business strategy.** Partner closely with the business to understand strategic priorities and the

combination of jobs and skills needed for advancing those priorities. Pay close attention to how transformations or new products or offerings may require completely new skills in your organization in the future.

- **Predicting future jobs:** Lean on your workforce planning team to predict future jobs and the skills and capabilities that will be most critical for the organization in the future. Consider internal and external trends influencing these priorities. Cultivate an understanding of emerging jobs and the unique skill sets needed to excel in those jobs. Consider where high demand will exist, as well as where you can expect automation to displace talent you could use elsewhere.

Figure 9: Five Steps to Constructing Career Pathways



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

Job	Role	Capabilities	Skills																																												
<p><b>A Job</b></p> <p>Job Title Job Family Description Goals Level Pay</p>	<p><b>A Role</b></p> <p>Goals Activities Projects Teams Outputs</p> <p><b>A Role</b></p> <p>Goals Activities Projects Teams Outputs</p>	<table border="1"> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> </table>													<table border="1"> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> </table>																																
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**2 Determine** the skills that are needed for those high-demand jobs and the skills existing in your workforce today. You can do this by:

- To identify emerging jobs, these insights have to go deep into your industry so you can define new roles, structures, and career pathways for your future needs. Talent intelligence not only lets you “see around the corners” on what is next in your industry but also helps you prepare for it. Organizations must designate a “skills and job architecture” team that can help you set up your talent intelligence strategy.

- 3 Devise** a developmental plan for acquiring those skills—including academic programs, certifications or degrees, and other L&D solutions. You can do this by:

- **Operationalizing a strategic education and skilling program.** Consider partnering with a strategic education and upskilling solution provider to forge relationships with academic institutions, bootcamp providers, and leading universities to provide relevant degrees, certifications, and programs to help build the skills needed to move along a career pathway. Adopt a cost model that offers tuition assistance and not reimbursement. Through these partnerships, employers can pay for education directly to the academic institution.

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- **Shifting Ownership to L&D.** Your educational benefit program needs to be owned by the L&D function and closely targeted on skilling needs and tied to career pathways and career navigation support for workers. The L&D function needs to adopt a product mindset, focusing heavily on increasing the adoption of the program across the organization. This includes building communication, awareness, and designating champions across the organization. Bring your CEO and CFO along on the mission of creating equitable and tuition-free access to education.

**4 Define** career pathways to move people from low-demand or declining jobs to high-demand or rising jobs, through a combination of developmental plans and intermediate roles, assignments, and mentoring-coaching You can do this by:

- **Gathering data on popular career pathways:** Career pathways unlock growth opportunities for your workforce that organically align with what is good for the business as well as the worker. To define these career pathways, use data rather than speculations. Look into your human capital management (HCM) system for data around jobs and programs that people commonly explore when looking to transition roles internally. For example, people in nursing roles often look for roles as nurse supervisors. Use this information to create tracks that emerge organically.
- **Defining career trajectories:** Powered by an understanding of skills adjacencies and capabilities needed in the future, create career pathways to build a pipeline of talent to meet those needs. Clearly define educational and skilling milestones at each step in the career pathway. Companies like Bon Secours Mercy Health, in partnership with Guild, are creating data-driven career pathways to develop new skills in telemedicine, informatics, patient care, and leadership. These pathways should aim to open as many career opportunities as possible for each worker, contingent on their interests and aspirations, helping them navigate alternative careers within the organization.

**5 Drive** placement of people into new jobs with talent marketplaces and other talent mobility solutions. You can do this by:

- **Insourcing and mobilizing best-fit talent.** Consider using psychometric assessments to match a person's suitability

for various roles and then identify individuals who are best suited for roles that will be critical in the future. Train recruiters to insource talent and pursue these individuals for potential jobs in the same way they would in the external market.

- **Simplifying the internal mobility process.** Organizations like Bon Secours Mercy Health are in the process of eliminating the internal job posting process. This alleviates stress for program graduates and eliminates the need for them to create resumes and apply for positions. At the same time, it frees up capacity among recruiters to focus on external hiring. Internal career mobility is good for the business and good for the employee. You need to make it simple.
- **Addressing organizational barriers to mobility.** Even after employees are reskilled, they may be up against systemic barriers that keep them from accessing new job opportunities. Establish metrics and a cadence to monitor the progress of people along career pathways and address any barriers that come in the way of their progress. At Walmart, the organization is scrutinizing experience and degree requirements in job descriptions, as well as opening more gateway jobs to ensure the facilitation of mobility. Walmart is also actively working to make their managers advocates of movement, as well as ensuring their hiring managers are aware of the talent coming out of their Live Better U program to increase the likelihood of hiring internal talent. Bon Secours Mercy Health has eliminated the need for people in career pathways to apply for jobs and ensure their placement into new roles as soon as positions become available.

## Conclusion

Career pathways are indeed pathways to unlock opportunities—for both your business and your workforce. Through career pathways, organizations can empower their entire workforce with access to education, skilling, and career mobility, thereby enabling them to have better careers and better lives. Career pathways are a much-needed approach for charting a way forward and transforming how companies compete for, inspire, and invest in talent to fill the jobs of today and shape the workforce of tomorrow.



# Bon Secours Mercy Health Creates the Future Workforce through Career Pathways

## A Not-for-Profit Faith-Based Health System

Bon Secours Mercy Health (BSMH) is one of the United States' twenty largest-healthcare systems, formed in 2018 by a merger between Bon Secours Health System and Mercy Health. Bon Secours Mercy Health's mission is focused on improving the health and wellbeing of the communities it serves, especially people who are poor, dying, and underserved. BSMH provides care for patients more than 11 million times annually through its network of more than 1,200 care sites, which includes 50 hospitals. In 2021, BSMH provided more than \$600 million in community investments, ensuring that cost is not a barrier to healthcare for patients in need. In addition to charity care, BSMH invests in programs that address chronic illness, affordable housing, access to healthy food, education and wellness programs, transportation, workforce development, and other social determinants of health that directly affect the communities it serves.

## Addressing Future Workforce Needs

With a workforce of 60,000 associates, Bon Secours Mercy Health is not immune to the acute talent shortages impacting the entire healthcare industry in the United States. These shortages are expected to worsen in the next ten years, based on projections of needing more than three times the current number of healthcare workers in the next decade. To address these shortages and build a workforce that will support Bon Secours Mercy Health's future talent needs, the organization needed to devise a long-term talent strategy.

"Being an employer of our size, we have the ability and resources to create the workforce of the future. We need to attract talent straight out of high school and help them grow to their highest level of proficiency and potential within the organization," said Joe Gage, the chief human resource officer (CHRO) at Bon Secours Mercy Health. As part of the long-

term talent strategy, the organization will create opportunities for continuing education and skill-building. In addition, the health system is committed to building career pathways that will allow people to grow into new roles that utilize their freshly acquired education and skills, securing career pathways that will provide growth and economic mobility.

### Summary

#### Challenge

- Addressing the acute talent shortages impacting the entire healthcare industry in the United States.
- Building a workforce that will support Bon Secours Mercy Health's future talent needs.

#### Solution

- BSMH launched an educational program to 48,000 of its associates to build future talent through education and skilling in two ways: academic programs and career pathways.
- Academic programs: Associates can choose from over 120 clinical certifications, undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, and nursing degrees at over 15 leading universities and educational institutions.
- Career pathways: Associates have access to clearly defined tracks with start and end points, explaining how an individual can get from an entry-level point to a specialized, highly skilled and higher-paying job.

#### Results

- Within a few weeks of the soft launch, over 2,000 associates, including more than 400 nurses, enrolled in various academic programs and clinical pathways.
- By facilitating access to education, upskilling, and formally designed career pathways, the healthcare system is building a workforce that will be ready to provide care to its communities in the future.

## Pathways for Creating the Future Workforce

In October 2021, BSMH announced a collaboration with Guild—which connects employers and learning providers to drive education, skilling, and career mobility at scale. Guild offers partnerships with academic institutions and a curated catalog to help socioeconomically disadvantaged communities with education and upskilling.

Through this collaboration, BSMH launched an educational program that covers 100% of tuition and is available to all associates—part-time and full-time—from the first day of employment. The program supports education and skilling in two ways: academic programs and career pathways.

### Academic Programs

Associates can choose from over 120 clinical certifications, undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, and nursing degrees at over 15 leading universities and educational institutions. The program also offers personalized coaching support from day one all the way through graduation to optimize participant success.

### Career Pathways

Supplementary to the learning programs, in partnership with Guild, BSMH has mapped out career pathways that foster internal mobility. These career pathways clearly define tracks with start and end points, explaining how an individual can get from an entry-level point in their career to a specialized, highly skilled and higher-paying job by building specific strategic skills and with relevant certifications or degrees. For example, the health system has developed clinical pathways where an environment services technician can grow into nursing, medical assistants, and lab services roles.

## A Closer Look at Bon Secours Mercy Health's Career Pathways

BSMH's career pathways extend beyond educational assistance by clearly defining career avenues that open up for an associate once they have developed a particular set of skills through education.

### An Analytics-Based Approach

BSMH constructed these pathways using a data- and analytics-driven approach. There are three key components that can inform the development of specific tracks and pathways:

- **Workforce planning to predict future jobs:** The workforce-planning team did a long-range analysis on jobs and skills that will be most critical for the organization in the future.
- **Data on popular career paths:** Using Workday as their human capital management solution, the organization tracks popular jobs and programs that people explore when looking to transition roles internally. This information provides examples of tracks that emerge organically (e.g., people in nursing roles looking for roles as nurse supervisors).
- **Psychometric data on best-fit jobs:** The organization uses a psychometric tool for new applicants to the ministry that measures and matches their suitability for various roles based on their intellectual capabilities and personality traits. This data can potentially help people define their own personal career pathways.

Through this approach, the health system defines jobs that will be needed in the future, identifies pathways for getting to the jobs most in demand, and focuses on the most suitable people for filling those roles.

## Progression Across Roles

Powered by data and analytics, Bon Secours Mercy Health crystallized a series of career pathways with clearly defined tracks and progression across different types of roles. Figure 11 (below) shows a wireframe of how these career pathways are developed. These career pathways start with entry-level or feeder roles that serve as the starting point (e.g., health screeners or technicians). Gateway roles serve as the transition point toward developing skills for a different career in the long term. Destination roles can be reached when a person becomes a specialist in that defined area. Finally, highly skilled roles represent highly valued roles individuals can attain once they have reached the highest level of proficiency. “We’ve always talked about empowering people to own their careers, and with these career pathways, I feel like we have finally given them the right combination of tools, insights, and direction to be able to do that,” said Gage.

## Fully Funded Pathways Through Tuition Assistance

The program in partnership with Guild offers tuition “assistance” in addition to “reimbursement.” Assistance means

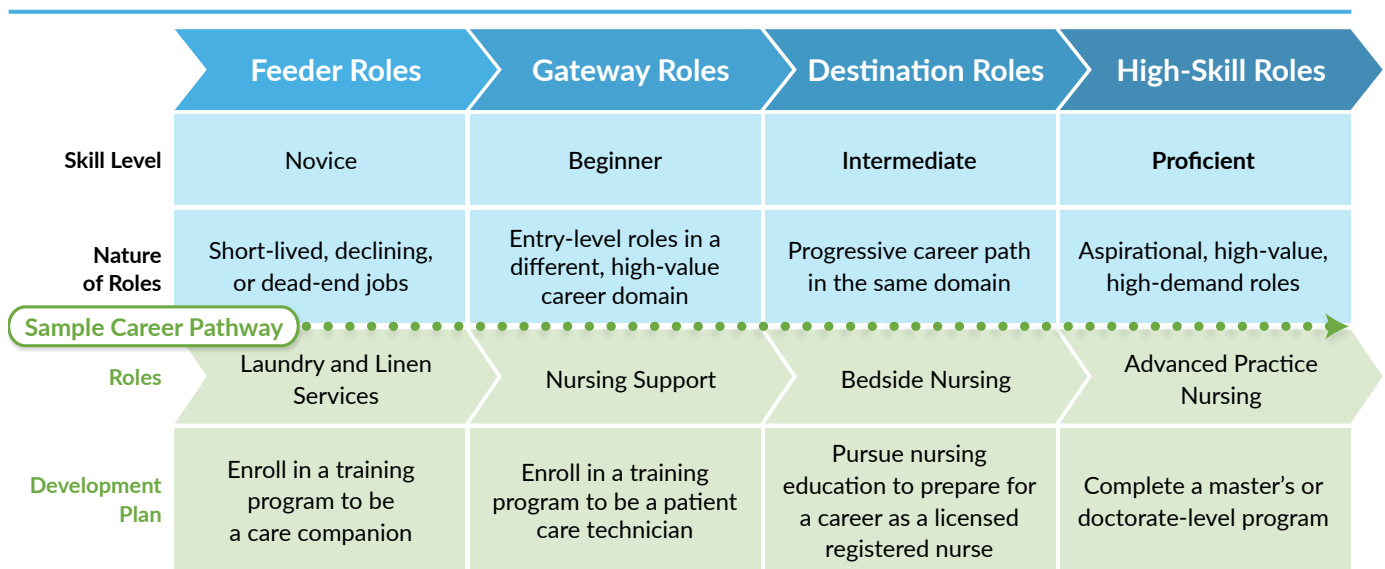
that associates are not required to pay any upfront tuition cost to enroll in a program. Bon Secours Mercy Health will directly pay for education to partnering educational institutions, therefore supporting the needs of those associates who may not have the funds to pay upfront. This is different from “reimbursement” programs that require program participants to pay partial or full program fees upfront and then be reimbursed later, often creating a barrier to entry.

The organization will pay 100% of the associates’ fees upfront across five career pathways, which include nursing, nursing support, lab managers/technical roles, respiratory therapist, and medical assistants. As an example, Figure 12 on the next page shows a visual trajectory of a career in nursing.

## Next Steps: Eliminating the Internal Posting Process for Program Graduates

The initial roll out of the program in October 2021 was intended to be a soft launch without active communications and promotion. After a tremendous response and participation

Figure 11: Progression of Roles across Career Pathways



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022 (Developed in partnership with Guild Education and Bon Secours Mercy Health)

in the first phase, the organization formally launched a broad-based campaign to expand the reach and awareness of the program in early 2022. In addition to communication and promotions, Bon Secours Mercy Health will train its recruiters to insource. This will involve actively identifying individuals who are best suited for future jobs and initiating conversations about potential career pathways, as well as mapping them to the right skilling and educational programs.

“The goal is to eliminate the internal posting process for program graduates so that when an associate enrolls in a program, they’re already prequalified and preplaced in better jobs in the future. They don’t need to interview or apply for positions. Whenever they are ready, we are ready to place them in the promised roles,” said Gage. He explained further

in an interesting analogy: “I want them to have a sense of certainty. For example, at a deli counter, once you’ve taken your ticket, you’re in the queue, you can see the slots moving, you know exactly how far you are in the waiting list, and you know you will get there soon.”

This groundbreaking approach will not only positively impact BSMH’s workforce but also will create several strategic benefits for the organization. It will build an internal pipeline of talent for future roles, while also alleviating associate stress related to applying for internal positions. This approach will help recruiters fortify their role as trusted partners who encourage associates to get to the next stage in their careers, simultaneously freeing up a substantial number of recruiting resources that can be focused on external hiring.

**Figure 12: Nursing Career Pathway at Bon Secours Mercy Health**



Source: Guild Education and Bon Secours Mercy Health, 2022

## A Pipeline of Talent to Provide Care to the Future Community

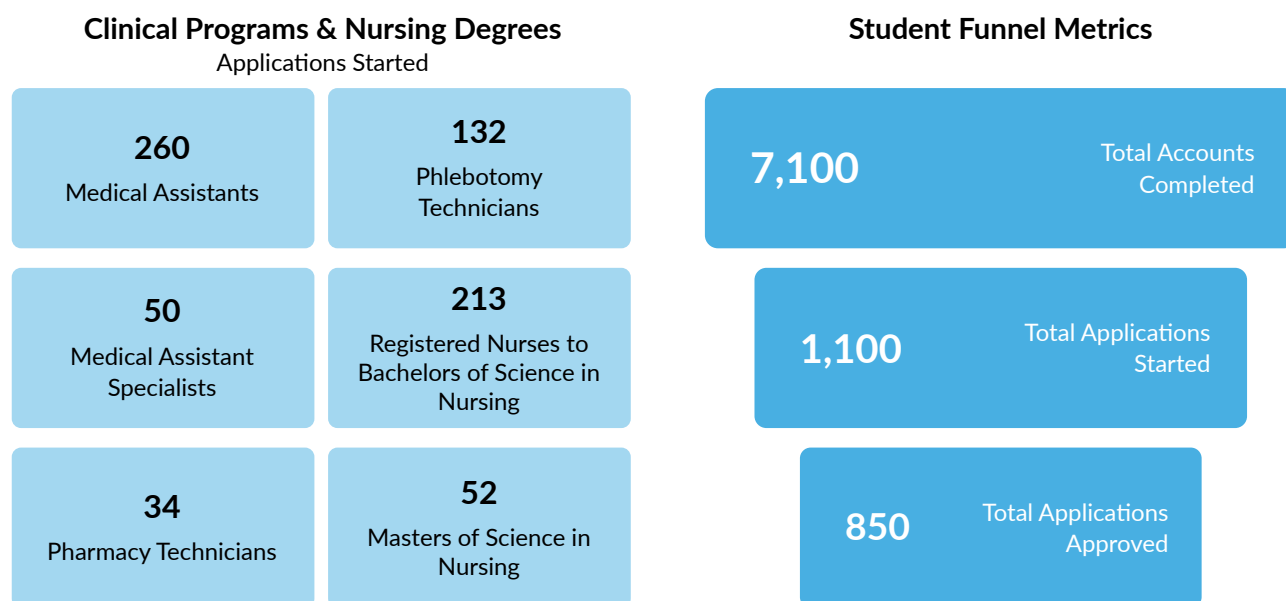
Within a few weeks of the October 2021 soft launch, over 2,000 associates, including more than 400 nurses, enrolled in various academic programs and clinical pathways (see Figure 13). The demand, as well as the tremendous reception of the program, has been a testimony to Bon Secours Mercy Health's approach to upskilling and education for building the workforce of the future. It serves the mission of the organization to expand care to the underserved communities through access to education and better careers and also helps create a workforce that will be ready to provide care to these communities in the future.

“

*Our approach to educational assistance and career pathways gives us the ability to change people's lives by providing access to education and upskilling, secure and future-proof careers, benefits, and the environment and support they need to unleash their full potential. It also creates a workforce supply for us, which is the biggest challenge in the healthcare industry as of today.*

Joe Gage, CHRO, BSMH

Figure 13: Student Engagement Summary



Source: Guild and Bon Secours Mercy Health, March 2022

# Rocket Central Enables Equitable Career Growth and Mobility through Education

## A Detroit-Based Professional Services Company

Rocket Central is a Detroit-based professional services company. Part of the Rock Family of Companies, it comprises nearly 100 separate businesses spanning fintech, sports, entertainment, real estate, and more.

Rocket Central provides services (across human resources, technology, accounting, marketing, legal services, to name just a few) to support the diverse needs of each company under the Rock Family umbrella. Rocket Central acts as the central pillar supporting its partners with innovative and effective solutions to achieve and exceed their strategic priorities. One of its primary goals is to empower its more than 30,000 team members<sup>14</sup> nationwide and unleash their maximum potential with world class career growth and development.

## Tuition Reimbursement: An Unused Benefit

The company has long offered a tuition reimbursement program linked to U.S. universities and colleges. The program was aimed at providing access to professional courses and degrees to develop critical skills for advancing its team members' careers within and outside the organization. However, participation in the program was extremely low, and the learning team received multiple requests from business leaders to create courses that were already covered under the tuition offering. The learning team wanted to do a root-cause analysis to determine why there was such low participation in the tuition-reimbursement program.

Taking a closer look at the tuition reimbursement process itself, and augmented with team member feedback and research insights, Rocket Central uncovered deeper problems that needed to be addressed. First, the process of signing up for the program was manual and tedious. Also, a bigger issue surfaced: the tuition reimbursement programs

<sup>14</sup> Rocket Companies refers to all its employees as "team members" and considers them "the lifeblood" of their success. In 2021, the company was included on FORTUNE's list of 100 Best Companies to Work For<sup>®</sup> for 18 consecutive years.

### Summary

#### Challenge

- Providing world class career growth and development to the entire Rock Family of Companies.
- Tuition reimbursement was one of the programs in place to support career growth through education, but the participation was minimal.
- Reimbursing tuition costs excluded people who did not have the ability to pay upfront or wait until the course was finished.

#### Solution

- Launched Rock Academy, an educational benefit program that offers tuition assistance: 100% tuition is covered by Rock Academy, with no out-of-pocket costs from workers.
- Rock Academy partnered with business leaders to develop career pathways and to receive guidance on which skills and capabilities will be required for the future.
- Launched DevBuild, a program that any team member can sign up for at no cost, to become a qualified software engineer in 20 weeks.
- Set up a team of career coaches, known as THRIVE, to help team members navigate career opportunities and help match team members' interests and aspirations with the right opportunities.

#### Results

- Team member feedback and sentiment upon attending Rock Academy or DevBuild has been very positive.
- Participation in the tuition assistance program has gone up 500% within 16 months since Rock Academy's launch.
- Over 1,000 team members have been accepted into different courses within the first year of launch.
- Over 60 DevBuild participants are now placed as software engineers across Rocket Companies. The placement rate within the organization is 95%.

could not address financial barriers to education. "One of the real challenges in America is access to education for underrepresented groups, and while tuition reimbursement programs may seem to offer a solution, the programs exclude people who do not have the ability to pay for the classes upfront or wait until the end of the course to get reimbursed by their employer," said KimArie Yowell, Chief Learning Officer at Rocket Central.



Guided by the company's ISMs<sup>15</sup>—20 philosophies of which the Rock Family of Companies' corporate culture is based on—the company became obsessed with finding a better way to address barriers to education and enable growth for all its team members.

## Addressing Barriers and Enabling Growth

Triggered by what started as an effort to drive participation in the tuition reimbursement program and streamline the process, the company undertook a larger strategic initiative to provide equitable growth opportunities for all team members while supporting the priorities and upskilling needs of the business. Objectives included the following:

- Provide greater opportunity and access to education
- Develop knowledge, skills, and abilities aligned with business objectives
- Empower team members to own and navigate their careers in the way they best see fit

These objectives led the organization into an ongoing multiyear journey aimed at addressing and removing barriers to education and opening new avenues for career mobility and growth. Rocket Central developed three distinct programs that advance these objectives in multiple ways. These programs include:

- Rock Academy
- DevBuild
- THRIVE

### Rock Academy: Facilitating Educational Goals and Career Pathways

In 2019, Rocket Central launched Rock Academy in partnership with Guild Education—connecting employers and learning providers to drive education, skilling, and career mobility at scale—to streamline the process and remove the financial barrier of team members paying for classes up front. Rock Academy is an educational program open to both part-time and full-time members who have been with the company for more than six months. The program provides access to more than 200 educational courses ranging from certificates to master's degrees, with access to new career pathways and 100% tuition assistance (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Rock Academy (Rock Central's Education Program)

### Get A Degree – Debt Free

Rock Academy helps you pursue your career and your degree at the same time. Choose from a wide network of schools and programs to get 100% tuition upfront for select in-network programs or get reimbursed up to \$5,250 for any out-of-network program. Opportunities range from getting a high school diploma to earning an undergraduate or master's degree, and more.

#### Made For Working Adults

Pick from hundreds of flexible accredited programs designed to fit into your busy schedule.

#### Support At Every Step

Meet a dedicated education coach and get one-on-one support from application to graduation.

#### Tuition Paid Up front

After 6 months here, get 100% of your tuition covered up front for all in-network programs.

Source: Rocket Central, 2022

<sup>15</sup> [The ISMs Make Us Who We Are](#), myrocketcareer.com.

### Tuition Assistance: 100% Debt-Free Education

Rock Academy covers 100% tuition for all team members with no out-of-pocket costs. Team members now receive assistance instead of reimbursement, meaning that team members do not have to pay a lump sum fee upfront and be reimbursed at a later stage. Team members only need to cover the cost of books and any additional tech fees charged by the school. This renewed approach has opened access to education for frontline workers and underrepresented groups, for whom a degree may have been a far-fetched dream.

### Career Pathways: Building the Road to the Future

Rock Academy is also partnering with business leaders across functions and portfolio businesses to develop career pathways in multiple areas such as marketing, technology, product strategy, and sales.

These pathways are aimed at opening as many career opportunities as possible for all team members, contingent on their interests and aspirations, helping them navigate alternate careers within the organization. Rather than merely providing team members financial support to earn degrees or certificates while working, Rocket Central also helps guide people into developing skills and capabilities that will be required for the future.

### DevBuild: A Software Engineering Career Pathway

Based on feedback from the business, Rocket Central realized software engineering roles were critical to the business and the need for these roles would continue to increase as the business grows. To meet this need while also creating opportunities for team members to choose a technology career path, Rocket Central developed and launched DevBuild. This program specifically targets team members who are interested in becoming software engineers but do not have the requisite skills or qualifications. DevBuild is a 20-week, full-time technology training program geared toward developing skills needed to become a full-stack software engineer. With DevBuild, team members can learn C# within the ASP.NET MVC framework and front-end development. Upon completion, team members can apply for software engineering positions within the organization.

### THRIVE: Personalized and Assisted Career Navigation

Rocket Central also designated a team of career coaches to help team members navigate career opportunities within Rocket Companies. The THRIVE Program sits within the purview of Rocket Central's Talent Strategy and Solutions Team, which offers personalized guidance and coaching to match team members' interests and aspirations with the right opportunities on the internal job portal. This team also points them to programs and resources they can leverage to develop the skills they need to thrive in those jobs.

## Implementation and Rollout

The multiyear journey started with a pilot program prior to the launch of Rock Academy, which provided a group of 500 to 700 team members with access to online courses to get a pulse of the workforce's appetite for trainings and the areas they were most interested in. The team also aligned with key stakeholders in the organization to determine the most critical skills and abilities needed for the success of different businesses within the organization.

As the new programs started shaping up, the chief learning officer (CLO) and senior business leaders championed the communication and messaging across the organization. These communications continue to play a critical role in creating awareness and driving participation. Team members learn about these programs during orientation, as well as when they have been with the company for six months (when they become eligible for these programs), and throughout various touchpoints with leaders.

*“If you identify what the barriers are and find ways to remove them, then identify the needs of the business and marry that with the voice of the business leader to lean into why that's important for team members—you will have a solution that employees will want to take advantage of.”*

**KimArie Yowell**  
Chief Learning Officer at Rocket Central

## Results and Next Steps

The sentiment and feedback of participants in Rock Academy and DevBuild are the biggest testimony to the success of these programs (see Figures 15 and 16). Team members who did not think it would be possible to go to school or bear the financial burden are now taking advantage of the programs. Team members feel empowered to own their careers and navigate opportunities they previously did not have the skills or abilities to pursue.

Although the programs are still in early stages, the results have been outstanding so far.

- Participation in Rocket Central's tuition assistance program has gone from 1% to 5.5% within 16 months since Rock Academy's launch.
- Over 1,000 team members have been accepted into different courses within the first year of Rock Academy's launch. Eight team members have completed their courses already.

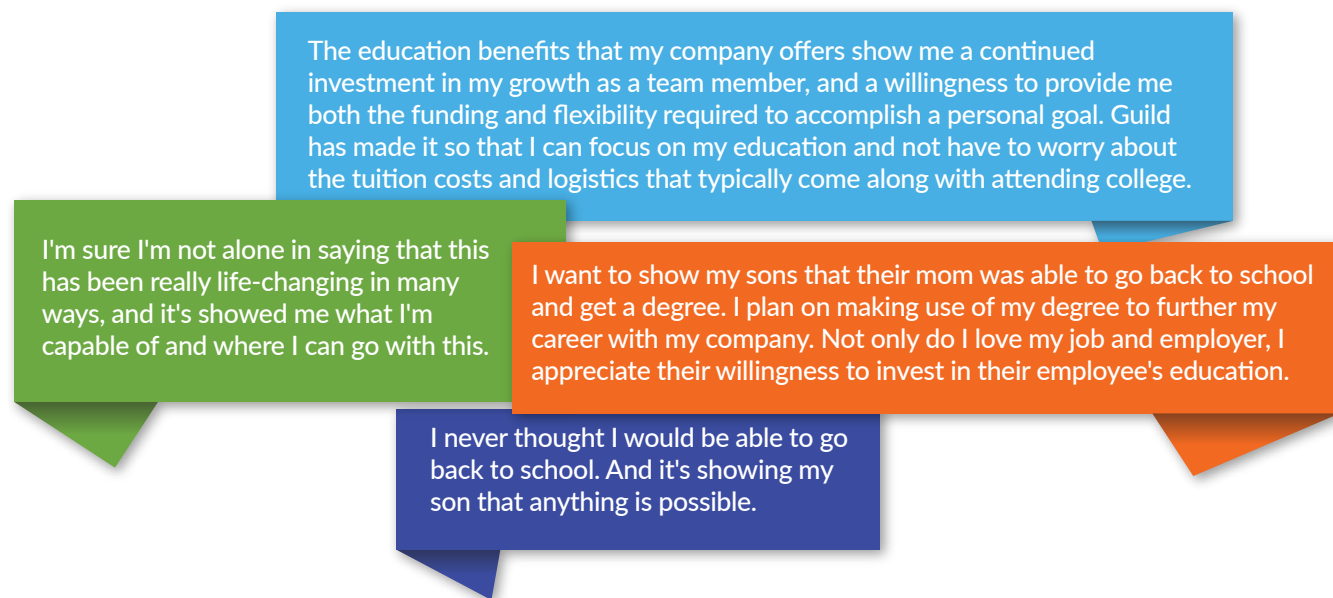
- Over 60 DevBuild participants are now placed as software engineers across Rocket Companies. The placement rate within the organization is 95%.

Rocket Central continues to focus on evolving and optimizing these programs, building more career pathways, and exploring ways to expand these opportunities to more team members in a scalable and personalized manner. Rocket Central, through its programs focused on removing barriers to education and enabling equitable career growth, is playing a significant role in transforming people's careers and their lives.

*“Equity is at the heart of everything. You have to understand where all your people are coming from—their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations. Only then you can create equitable growth for everyone, and truly maximize the potential of your company.”*

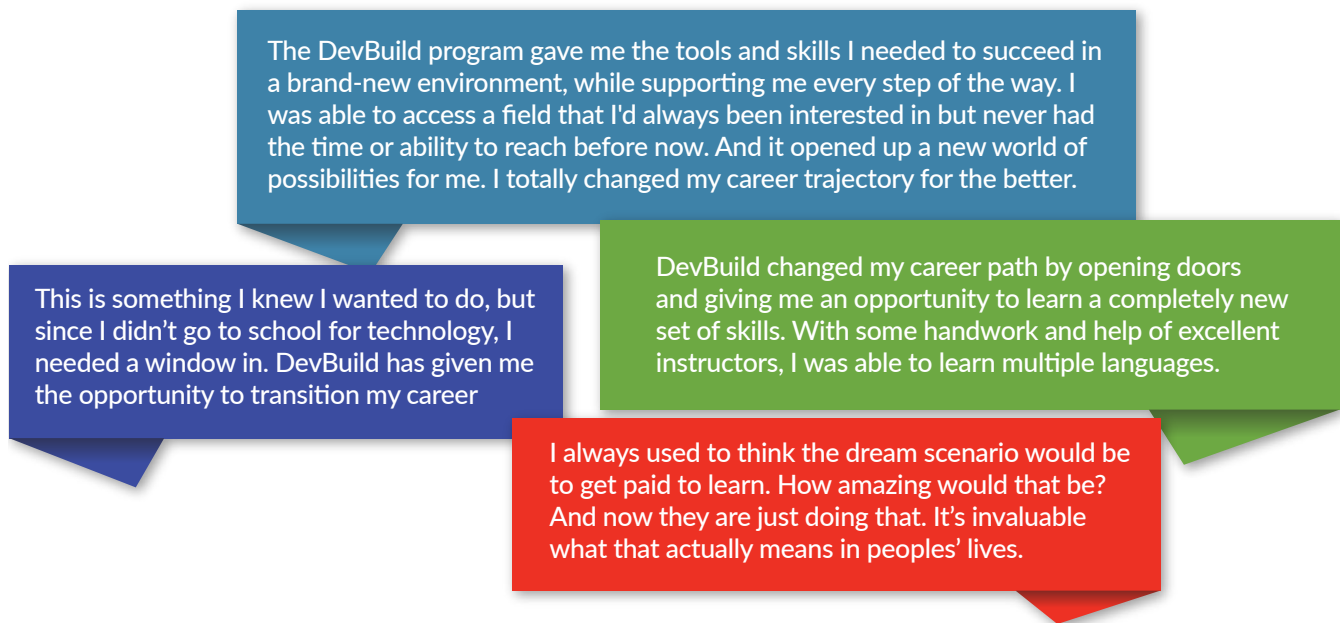
KimArie Yowell  
Chief Learning Officer at Rocket Central

Figure 15: Feedback Quotes from Rock Academy Participants



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

Figure 16: Feedback Quotes from DevBuild Participants



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

# Walmart Paves the Way from Jobs to Life-Long Careers

## Retail Giant and the World's Largest Private Employer

Walmart Inc. is an American multinational retail corporation that operates over 10,000 stores worldwide. It is also one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic e-commerce and fulfillment companies in the world. The company's segments include Walmart U.S., Walmart International, and Sam's Club. Having started six decades ago in 1962 as a small discount retailer in Rogers, Arkansas, Walmart has grown to be the world's largest private employer and has ranked number 1 on the Fortune 500<sup>16</sup> list of companies for close to a decade now. The company currently employs 2.3 million associates around the world, with nearly 1.6 million associates in the United States alone.

Walmart was founded with a mission of helping people save money and live better. The company has stayed true to its mission over the years, exponentially expanding its scope to serve customers and associates alike (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: Walmart's Mission



Source: Shutterstock

## Better Careers for A Better Life

As an extension of the company's mission of making lives better for everyone, Walmart has been known for its

investments in training and upskilling associates to enable them to have better careers. Creating this kind of opportunity for associates at this scale not only helps them learn and grow in their careers but also creates agility for the business in a constantly evolving world.

### Summary

#### Challenge

- Exploring new ways to create paths for every associate to grow.
- Addressing several questions to facilitate growth for its workforce: How do we empower, upskill, and reskill our associates? How do we create future-proof careers for everyone in the organization?

#### Solution

- Walmart began with a focus on making education accessible for hourly frontline associates.
- Walmart launched its education program called "Live Better U (LBU)," a program designed to serve as a launching pad for hourly associates to acquire new skills and grow their careers at Walmart.
- The program covers 100% tuition and costs for books for associates enrolling in various courses.

#### Results

- As of July 2021, over 52,000 associates had enrolled in various programs and over 8,000 associates graduated with new skills and educational credentials.
- LBU encourages associates to develop new skills and helps Walmart retain top talent and build talent for its future needs.
- LBU serves as a catalyst for facilitating equitable and enduring career growth, driving equity and inclusiveness, increasing retention and promotability of associates, and shifting the firm towards skill-based hiring.

<sup>16</sup> [Walmart Company Profile](#), *Fortune.com*, May 23, 2022.

The leadership team has been committed to exploring new ways to amplify growth opportunities within Walmart—such as its \$1B investment in career-driven training and development in 2021—making the company a place where associates can envision a long-term future. What had started as an ambitious dream was the beginning of a groundbreaking expedition to develop people in their current roles and prepare them for roles they will have tomorrow and beyond.

However, the leadership team members needed to first solve for many pieces of the puzzle to make this dream a reality. For instance, how do they upskill and reskill their millions of associates at scale? How do they empower them to pursue career options across different areas of the Walmart business? How do they create future-proof careers for everyone in the organization, specifically frontline workers?

## Access to Education: The Key to Unlocking Better Careers

To upskill and reskill associates in different areas of the business, Walmart needed to design a series of development steps including education, certifications, degrees, learning programs, and experiences. The starting point was to create access to education. Guided by a core value of driving equity, Walmart began with a focus on making education accessible for hourly frontline associates.

In February 2017, a tiger team of three to four people set off to explore how Walmart could make education accessible for its associates. The team was charged with the goal of enabling more associates at Walmart to take advantage of educational benefits for continuing education and learning new skills. The objective was to ideate a model, do a soft launch to test stickiness, and scale it up quickly. With a product mindset—thinking and working in the direction of quicker business outcomes and an agile approach—Walmart conceived its new educational benefit program in under a year.

In June 2018, in partnership with Guild—a career opportunity platform connecting employers and education institutions at scale—Walmart launched its education program called “Live Better U (LBU).” This program is designed to serve as a launch

pad for hourly associates to acquire the skills and experience needed to help grow their careers at Walmart.

“*It is easy to dream about creating access to education for everyone, but operationalizing an educational benefit program is one of the hardest feats an organization can strive to accomplish. Guild had expertise in the education arena, and we had an expertise of our associates and where we wanted to take the business. The collaboration helped us work through the cost model, navigate policies and tax implications, forge partnerships with academic institutions, and give birth to Live Better U.*”

Beth Williams-Moore, Director  
Live Better U

## Live Better U: A Launch Pad for Acquiring Critical Skills for Career Growth

Through LBU, Walmart associates can earn key skills and degrees designed to help grow their careers at Walmart. Associates can earn a high school diploma, prepare to go to college, enroll in online universities or career development programs, earn college degrees in growing industries, or earn skilled trades career diplomas in a variety of specialized areas.

Live Better U is not a tuition reimbursement program. Instead, it's 100% paid for by Walmart. As Walmart has explored different cost models for the program, it was clear that tuition reimbursement was not the best approach. Walmart realized that while several organizations offer tuition reimbursement, it requires associates to pay an upfront education fee that gets reimbursed at the completion of the program. This presents a barrier for most hourly and frontline workers who cannot afford to pay the lump sum fee upfront.

To address this barrier, LBU was launched not as a tuition reimbursement program but rather as a tuition assistance program. Associates are not required to pay any upfront tuition cost to enroll in a program. Walmart covers the cost of tuition, books, and fees, eliminating student loan debt and addressing



one of the biggest hurdles that keep people from accessing education. Since associates do not need to pay out of pocket for tuition, it helps bring more equitable access to education.

## The Expansion of LBU

While there has always been a consistent drive to ensure LBU is inclusive, changes have been made over the years to even further expand access to the program. When LBU was first launched in 2018, all hourly frontline associates who had spent at least 90 days with Walmart could choose from nearly 50 educational programs by contributing a dollar a day toward tuition and books. Over 12,000 associates enrolled in various dollar-a-day programs in the year following the initial launch.

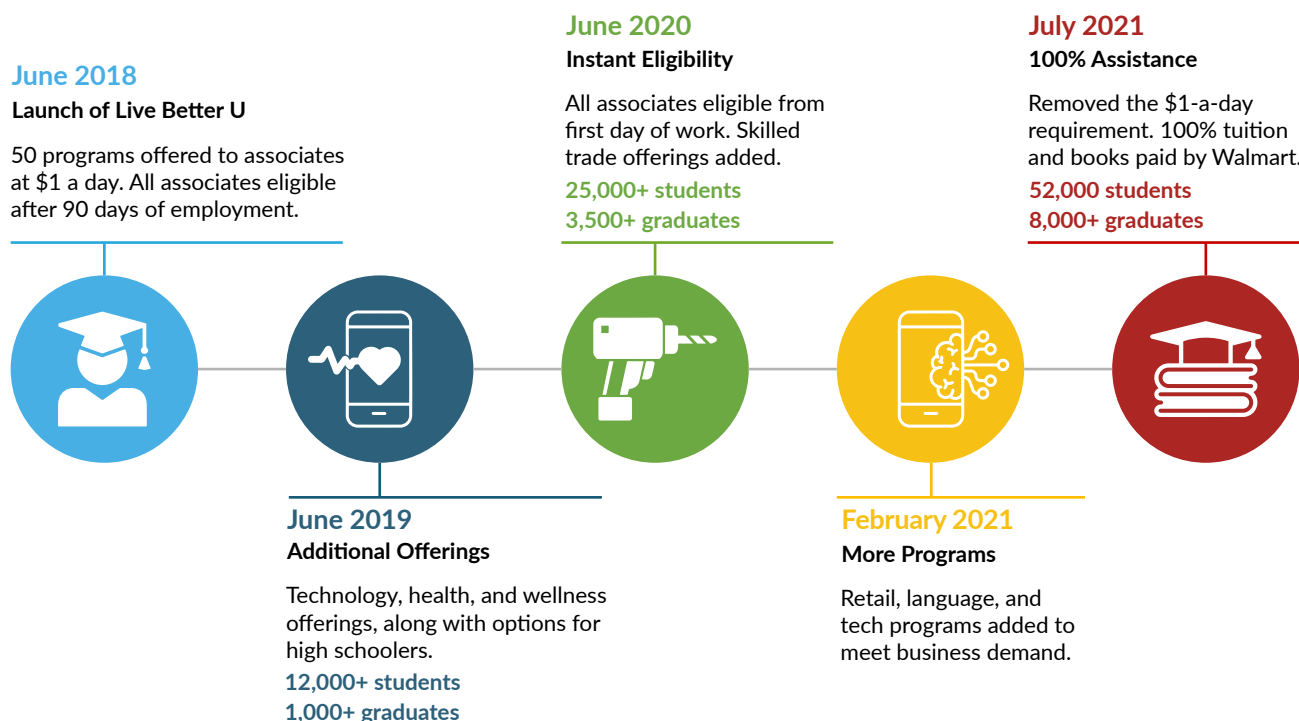
In June 2020, Walmart removed the 90 days of employment eligibility criteria. With this change, all associates can now enroll for an educational program from the day they are hired. The program continued to expand, and the company added more programs and academic partnerships, including skilled

trade, technology, and more. As a result of these changes and continued program success, enrollment as of mid-2020 had grown to more than 25,000 associates.

As the program expanded, Walmart continued to monitor response and participation very closely. While the enrollment numbers were great, Walmart wanted to increase access to those expressing interest in the program. Walmart realized that although paying a dollar a day seemed attainable, there was an opportunity to increase access for its primary target group—hourly associates.

Steadfast in its investments in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion and a commitment to make education truly accessible, in July 2021, Walmart eliminated the “dollar-a-day” requirement, making education 100% paid for by the company. Enrollments in the program have more than doubled ever since (see Figure 18)

Figure 18: Evolution of Live Better U—Key Milestones



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

## Associates, Business Leaders, and Educational Partners Come Together

Since LBU's inception in 2018, Walmart has been building out a variety of certificate programs, diploma courses, and foundational programs with a focus on what associates need to be successful in their careers at Walmart, and what the business needs for future growth. To do this, the LBU team worked with associates to understand their requirements—and also with business leaders across the company to determine where they foresee capability gaps. Guild's in-depth relationships with educational partners helped bring in the appropriate providers to close the gaps (see Figure 19).

## Next Up: Career Pathways, Internships, Talent Marketplace

Walmart is committed to providing a path for everyone to thrive in their careers, with LBU as a key enabler of this vision. Walmart is growing LBU not just from an educational standpoint but also to expand the purview of the program

to create career pathways for every associate while mapping out career opportunities they can access through their newly acquired education and skills. This entails understanding skills adjacencies to define the paths between current and potential future roles across different areas within Walmart.

The company will continue to invest in skilling and career mobility by cultivating a deeper understanding of skills of the future that they can start building today. "Our goal is to ensure that associates don't have to leave Walmart to have a different career. You might not have all of the knowledge and skills of today, but if you have the capacity and the intention, Walmart will invest in you and show you the way," said Williams-Moore.

Walmart recognizes that education is one piece of the pie when paving the way to long-term careers. Another equally important piece is experience and exposure. Alongside ongoing efforts to create more awareness among associates to leverage education to gain new skills, LBU is also working with business leaders to create opportunities for internships and fellowships for its graduates to test their skills and enhance their learnings in a sandbox environment, or a safe space within Walmart. On the horizon is a talent marketplace

Figure 19: Live Better U—Programs and Academic Partners

Programs Offered by LBU			
<b>Certificate Programs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People &amp; Business Leadership</li><li>• Project Management</li><li>• Business Analytics &amp; Ops</li><li>• Human Resource Management</li><li>• Operations &amp; Supply Chain Management</li></ul>		<b>Degree &amp; Career Diploma Programs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Business</li><li>• Supply Chain</li><li>• Technology</li><li>• Health &amp; Wellness</li><li>• Skilled Trades</li></ul>	
<b>Foundational Programs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English Language Learning</li><li>• High School Completion</li><li>• College Start</li><li>• ACT/SAT Test Prep</li><li>• College Courses for HS Students</li></ul>			
Academic Partners Affiliated with LBU			
Bellevue University	Pathstream	University of Arizona	Morehouse College
University of Massachusetts Global	Penn Foster High School	University of Denver	Spelman College
Johnson & Wales University	Purdue University Global	Wilmington University	Voxy
Louisiana State University Online	Southern New Hampshire University	North Carolina A&T State University	

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022, and Walmart, 2021

that Walmart is working toward to raise the career profiles of associates' skills, experiences, and aspirations while providing greater access to learning and growth opportunities.

## Beyond Statistics: Stories Substantiate Success

Through career pathways and LBU, Walmart helps frontline workers build the skills for future jobs, and at the same time, helps the business build a diverse pipeline of talent to meet its future talent needs. LBU has been a huge success with strong advocacy and sponsorship from shareholders and executives, particularly the CEO, Doug McMillon, who started out his career as an hourly associate. As of July 2021, over 52,000 associates had enrolled in various programs and over 8,000 associates graduated with new skills and educational credentials—many of whom are the first in their family to graduate, holding true on the promise to allow associates to live better.

Beyond the spectacular statistics, stories from associates on how education has set them and their families up for even better futures are the real testimony to the success of the program. Several associates' stories of making successful career transitions are starting to surface. For example, there are frontline hourly associates transitioning from field jobs into home office jobs, supply chain jobs, or jobs in technology and cybersecurity. Even more powerful are stories of frontline associates owning a house for the first time as a result of career growth that was powered by LBU.

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*Going back to school has been on my mind for twelve years. To be more financially stable and to better care for my family and myself, I needed to further my education. Moving forward with my education has given me hope, courage, and the ability to move forward to be recognized and become a more valuable asset to the company. I'm striving to be a good manager, leader, and role model.”*

Shakoya W., Walmart Associate (Store #5185) and LBU Participant (Bellevue University, People & Business Leadership Certificate)

By helping associates save money on education, Walmart is helping them have better careers and better lives—truly living up to its mission, “Save Money. Live Better.” This program encourages associates to invest in themselves and helps Walmart retain top talent, develop skills and capabilities for future jobs, and open new doors in attracting great candidates into the company's recruiting pools. LBU serves as a catalyst for driving equity and inclusiveness, increasing retention and promotability of associates, and shifting the firm toward skill-based hiring—all while filling critical roles internally. LBU is Walmart's leap forward toward creating not just jobs but also long-term careers.

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*Live Better U is not just an education benefit. It is an opportunity for Walmart associates to build better careers for themselves and better lives for their families. It is gratifying for Walmart as an organization to see associates talking about how this door to education that was once shut with innumerable barriers stacked up against it, has suddenly been knocked down, and they can just walk through it toward a better future.*

Beth Williams-Moore, Director  
Live Better U

## About the Authors



### Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



### Nehal Nangia

Nehal is the director of research at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, Nehal drives empirical research on key workforce-related topics and the development of actionable insights and powerful stories for today's talent executives. Nehal has over 15 years of professional experience in human capital, with a focus on learning and development; performance management; employment value proposition; workforce transformation; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). She is the research leader for learning and leadership at The Josh Bersin Company.

Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Nehal was a global advisor for clients at Deloitte and published several studies on pertinent topics such as DEI, performance management, and bias. Nehal lives and works in India and has a master's degree in psychology. Nehal has also led deployments of benchmarking and diagnostic products at Gartner for clients across EMEA, APAC, and ANZ.

## The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals tackle the ever-evolving challenges and needs of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, talent, and L&D. The Josh Bersin Academy—built on our research and powered by Nomadic Learning—helps HR practitioners grow key foundational skills. Our corporate membership program provides HR teams and senior leaders with the skills, strategies, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through a combination of research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. In 2022, The Josh Bersin Company introduced the Global Workforce Intelligence (GWI) Project to guide market-leading businesses and their leaders through the challenges of industry convergence while remaining future-focused.

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