



Strengthening Municipal Workforces through Skills-Based Practices

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Introduction

Rapid changes in technology, market demands and persistent talent shortages are prompting employers to rethink traditional approaches to recruiting, selecting and developing talent. To address these challenges, public and private sector employers are adopting innovative workforce strategies such as skills-based practices (SBPs). SBPs are talent practices which prioritize observable, measurable capabilities over proxies such as degrees and tenure.¹ Since 2022, governors in more than half of states have issued SBP-related policy directives, shaping state government employment practices.² Cities across the country, seeking new ways to staff public roles and give more people access to economic opportunity, are also exploring and adopting SBPs.³

In light of the growing interest in SBPs, the National League of Cities (NLC) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR), with support from Walmart, launched a project to deepen understanding of SBPs in city government. The project found that a skills-based approach can help cities unlock untapped talent pools, accelerate hiring

processes and better connect workers with roles that fit their skill sets. By emphasizing skills, city governments can address critical staffing challenges and strengthen municipal workforces.

In this brief, we share insights on how and why cities are adopting SBPs and elements of success for SBPs, as well as ways to leverage their role as conveners and anchor institutions to drive skills-first approaches and regional change. This brief draws on findings from a literature review, interviews with national organizations, a targeted survey of municipal human resources (HR) professionals and focus groups with city representatives. The insights in the remainder of this brief represent findings from NLC and AIR's work together. For details about our method, please see the Methodology section at the end of this brief.

Learn more about how cities are using skills-based practices to strengthen municipal workforces [here](#).

What Are Skills-Based Practices?

SBPs focus on the specific skills required to perform a job and apply that lens across the entire talent lifecycle—from talent attraction and hiring through professional development and promotion. Unlike traditional approaches that rely heavily on formal degrees or tenure, SBPs prioritize observable, measurable skills relevant to the role.⁴ A skills-based approach recognizes that skills can be acquired through diverse pathways and that focusing on competencies expands talent pools, creates new career

pathways, and strengthens alignment between job requirements and worker skills.⁵

While SBP approaches often begin with removing degree requirements from position descriptions, skills-focused organizations can implement these practices across the talent lifecycle. For example, organizations can reframe job descriptions to focus on an applicant's skills, implement skills-based selection assessments, offer targeted training to employees to meet skills gaps, and offer pay increases or promotion based on demonstrating skills proficiency.

Skills-Based Practices in Cities

City HR managers identify employee engagement, development and turnover as among their top workforce issues.⁶ Finding enough qualified candidates can also be a challenge—85% of local and state HR professionals report reopening positions due to a lack of qualified candidates.⁷ City government hiring processes are lengthy, averaging 130 days for city positions compared to 96 days in state government and 36 days in the private sector.⁸ Workforce challenges make it harder for cities to deliver essential services, grow their economies and support community well-being. Examples of the impact of city workforce challenges in recent years include reduced transit service, water safety concerns, reduced policing services and credit rating downgrades.⁹

SBPs have emerged as a promising solution for cities rethinking how to build talent pipelines and address persistent staffing shortages. Cities are using SBPs across the talent lifecycle, from talent attraction and hiring through training

and promotion. Examples come from cities of all sizes and show how SBPs can be tailored to fit each city's unique needs, resources and context. SBP adoption is most common for hard-to-fill, highly skilled, technical roles such as water utility technicians, mechanics, inspectors, electricians and positions requiring a commercial driver's license (CDL).

Cities implementing skills-based talent attraction strategies report a range of benefits, such as broadening their applicant pools and attracting a more diverse range of candidates. Cities using skills-based hiring practices reported faster time-to-hire, decreased vacancy rates and improved ability to select employees with the right skills. Cities using skills-based employee training increased their ability to develop in-demand skills and, in some cases, decreased costs associated with outside training providers. These practices can help employees advance in their careers, increase employee retention and improve succession planning. The long-term goal of adopting SBPs is to build a more agile, inclusive and resilient workforce capable of meeting community needs.

SBP TYPE	CITY EXAMPLES IDENTIFIED THROUGH THIS PROJECT
Skills-Based Talent Attraction	De-emphasize and/or remove degree requirements in job descriptions.
Skills-Based Hiring Decisions	Use skill-based assessments, work samples, job simulations, and structured interviews to make hiring decisions.
Skills-Based Training and Professional Development	Develop an inventory of employee skills within the municipality. Offer targeted training programs that address specific skill gaps (e.g., cross-training, upskilling, apprenticeship).
Skills-Based Performance Management	Structure performance reviews based on skills required for a role. Offer promotions after demonstration of skills proficiency.
Skills-Based Compensation and Rewards	Develop compensation structures based on employees' proficiency in mission-critical skills (e.g., certification attainment).

City Examples

Cities across the country are implementing SBPs to tackle workforce challenges across the talent lifecycle.

SPENCER, IA

SKILLS-BASED PRACTICE: HIRING DECISIONS

Spencer, Iowa, is expanding its seasonal parks and recreation landscaping workforce by removing high school diploma requirements and focusing on the skills that matter for job success. Instead of formal credentials, candidates are required to demonstrate essential abilities through a reading exercise and an interview to gauge verbal communication. By breaking down the minimum skills needed for safety and performance, the city has opened the door to a broader range of applicants while still ensuring the safety of employees and the community.

PHOENIX, AZ

SKILLS-BASED PRACTICE: TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Phoenix, Arizona, is tackling talent shortages and high retirement rates by investing in apprenticeship programs as a way to hire entry-level employees and build employee skills. The city currently offers nine apprenticeships—including roles like procurement officer, utility technician, electrician and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) worker—providing full-time employment and covering all training costs. With demonstrated success in advancing apprentices through training, these programs create career pathways that improve retention, strengthen the workforce and provide incremental wage increases. Apprentices gain valuable skills tailored to city standards, while Phoenix strengthens its talent pipeline and works toward ensuring long-term workforce stability.

LIMA, OH

SKILLS-BASED PRACTICE: HIRING DECISIONS AND TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To address the shortage of applicants with certified CDLs, Lima, Ohio, developed their own internal CDL training program. New hires are selected based on their potential to earn a CDL and receive six months of free, onsite, skills-based training leading to licensure in exchange for a two-year work commitment. The CDL training program has increased retention and strengthened the city's workforce. By switching to internal training, the city has also saved costs, eliminating the \$4,500 per trainee fee paid to external training providers.

PHILADELPHIA, PA

SKILLS-BASED PRACTICE: TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, launched the City College for Municipal Employment (CCME) to address talent shortages and provide citizens with pathways to high-quality jobs in city government. The CCME offers professional development, technical training and work-based learning in six critical career areas tied to city hiring needs and regional priorities. CCME also provides upskilling opportunities for current city employees.¹⁰ The inaugural training cohort ran from fall 2024 to spring 2025, with over 70 residents enrolled.¹¹

DESOTO, TX

SKILLS-BASED PRACTICE: HIRING DECISIONS AND TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To stay competitive with the private sector and widen their pool of qualified candidates, Desoto, Texas, is working on establishing a formal program to be eligible to participate in the U.S. Department of Defense's SkillBridge program. Through this program, former military members transition into civilian careers by receiving hands-on training that builds on the valuable skills they gained during their service. The city aims to recruit, develop and retain veterans in positions across all city departments who can grow and thrive within the community through this program.

Elements of Success

Employers who adopt SBPs can make specific and targeted procedural, systemic and cultural adjustments to help ensure that these practices are effectively implemented to meet their desired goal.¹² The following seven elements are key drivers of effective SBP implementation and are important for cities to consider as they explore and adopt SBPs.

Start with a Targeted Talent Challenge

Cities that participated in the project shared several examples of how they introduced SBPs by starting with a workforce challenge in one department or one job role and implementing skills-focused strategies to meet that need. City governments can begin using SBPs to address a targeted talent challenge by, for example, identifying specific job roles with high vacancy rates, impending retirements, or where the public sector struggles to compete with private employers.¹³

Starting small can help cities gain an understanding of how SBPs can help address their workforce challenges and the mechanisms available to solve them. Rather than overhauling their entire talent system at once, cities can begin by implementing SBPs in a single department or function where there is a clear workforce challenge. By targeting one area first, cities can test, learn and refine SBP strategies before scaling them across local government. A focused strategy allows for experimentation that reduces risk, builds internal buy-in and creates a proof of concept for broader adoption.

Gain Buy-In from Cross-Functional Stakeholders

Building trust and gaining buy-in from stakeholders across different teams in city government can enable coordinated action and reduce resistance to change. This buy-in is essential for effective, sustainable SBPs.

HR TEAMS play an essential role in both policy design and operational execution and are often the drivers of SBP consideration and adoption in cities. HR professionals are often responsible for educating and engaging other key stakeholders whose buy-in is necessary for SBP implementation and scalability.

VISIBLE CITY LEADERS who champion SBPs are essential for setting goals, aligning stakeholders and sustaining momentum for SBP initiatives. Depending upon the structure of the local government, this can include support from the mayor, city manager, city council or other senior leaders. To ensure long-term success beyond election cycles, early and deep engagement of career staff is critical.

DEPARTMENT LEADERS AND HIRING MANAGERS can help pilot SBP efforts and model success for others. Involving department leaders and hiring managers from the outset allows them to help define SBP-related goals, identify target job roles, serve as trusted messengers to staff and surface early implementation challenges.

UNIONS serve as strategic allies in shaping fair, inclusive and sustainable SBPs—building employee buy-in and helping to ensure compliance and pay equity. With 44% of local government employees represented by unions, considerations for collective bargaining and transparent communication are essential.¹⁴

LEGAL TEAMS play an important role in setting a legal and sustainable foundation for SBPs and ensuring compliance when SBPs impact job classifications and compensation.¹⁵

Build Strategic Partnerships with Education and Workforce Organizations

Strategic partnerships with educational institutions and workforce development organizations can be helpful for cities adopting SBPs. Secondary schools and postsecondary colleges can align educational programs to prepare students with the skills needed for city government jobs. Educational institutions can also provide the related classroom components of apprenticeship programs in city governments. Workforce development organizations can support the skills training needed to prepare individuals for city jobs, and they can help recruit and screen potential candidates for the skills needed for entry-level city positions. These partnerships can help cities take a skills-based approach to developing a talent pipeline for the municipal workforce.

Couple Change Management with Responsive Employee Listening

Effective implementation of SBPs requires a significant shift in thinking about the talent lifecycle in terms of skills. SBP implementation is fundamentally a change management initiative rather than a quick fix. Change creates uncertainty, making it important to pair SBP strategies with an intentional staff communications plan and a cultural shift in how skills are valued across the organization. Cities can reduce employee resistance to change and improve employee buy-in to SBPs by implementing effective employee listening practices. These practices should involve

systematically and regularly collecting and analyzing feedback from employees about their needs, concerns and motivations. Listening practices allow for a two-way dialogue between city management and employees, helping leaders identify any root causes of resistance and providing information on how the SBP implementation is perceived. This transparency enhances the overall employee experience and ensures that skill-based strategies drive meaningful, sustainable impact.

Adapt Existing Skills-Based Resources to Expand Capacity

To implement SBPs, cities should identify and document the skills needed for each relevant role. As this may require more time and resources than are available, cities can leverage existing resources that have identified the skills and competencies needed for specific job roles in the private sector, such as skills taxonomies or competency models. These resources can provide a practical starting point for understanding the skills needed to perform a job and reduce the burden of identifying and documenting skills from scratch.¹⁶ While adapting such resources, cities should be mindful that the skills and competencies for a job role should be tailored to the specific context of the city government role.¹⁷ For example, if adapting a competency model used in the private sector, a city would want to carefully vet the model to ensure that the skill definitions and proficiency levels align with how a specific job is performed in the city government.



Leverage Top-Down Directives as an Impetus for Sustained Investment

Legislation and policy guidance can legitimize SBP efforts and provide a roadmap for implementation. Executive orders and mandates have played a pivotal role in catalyzing the adoption and scaling of SBPs in state governments. At a city level, in 2024, the [Philadelphia Mayor signed an executive order](#) to remove unnecessary degree requirements for many city jobs. The Chicago City Council passed a [similar city ordinance](#) in 2025.¹⁸ These top-down directives signal leadership buy-in for a focus on skills and facilitate SBP implementation and scaling.

Measure What Matters to Track Success

For effective and sustainable SBPs, cities should identify and track metrics tied to the specific workforce goals that SBPs are being implemented to achieve. Measurement provides insight into whether SBPs are delivering results and can allow cities to refine strategies, scale what works and discontinue practices that do not show positive impact.

SBP Measurement in Practice

SBP GOALS	EXAMPLES OF METRICS
Reduce vacancies and improve time to hire	Track the time to hire for each opening, along with movement between different stages of the selection process (e.g., initial application, passing screening, invited to interview) to identify where candidates drop off and if skills-based hiring practices are helping improve these metrics.
Diversify the workforce by attracting candidates from underrepresented or hard-to-reach populations	- Monitor number and share (i.e., percentage) of job offers and hires made to candidates without a degree. - Track changes in applications and new hires (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic background, veterans, justice-involved individuals) to determine if SBPs are helping to diversify the workforce.
Improve employee retention by implementing skill-building training programs	- Track the percentage of employees who participate in training or skill-building programs and correlate this with retention outcomes. - After training, monitor turnover in key roles or among employees with critical skills to see if training programs help reduce numbers of people leaving.

CITIES ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO PROMOTE SKILLS-BASED PRACTICES

Beyond adopting SBPs as employers, cities can serve as trusted and influential leaders, conveners and collaborators, and innovators in workforce development in their regions. Cities can influence and advance SBPs, wielding their collective experience to drive momentum, foster collaboration and share insights with each other for sustained workforce transformation.

TRUSTED AND INFLUENTIAL LEADERS

- City leaders can move their communities toward prioritizing skills over degrees by leading the way and implementing SBP for the city through executive orders and legislation.
- Cities implementing SBP can serve as trusted messengers, especially when communicating the value of SBP—their voice carries weight and can set the tone for regional workforce practices.

CONVENERS AND COLLABORATORS

- Cities are uniquely positioned to bring together business, labor, education, workforce and community partners, fostering cross-sector collaboration focused on the implementation of effective SBPs.
- By focusing on workforce skills needs, cities can help build robust talent pipelines by breaking down silos and aligning public and private workforce needs.
- By acting as anchors in their communities, cities can help ensure that SBPs become part of a regional strategy for workforce development.

INNOVATORS IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Cities can create programs to fill gaps and fund skill development initiatives that strengthen their own workforce and the broader community.
- Cities can lead workforce efforts that focus on upskilling over termination, reducing turnover and costs.

Conclusion

Cities across the country are beginning to explore and adopt SBPs to respond to talent challenges and improve workforce outcomes. However, these efforts are still emerging, and city adoption is often isolated to a certain job, role or department, rather than being approached as a larger, coordinated initiative. Understanding the elements of a successful SBP strategy, as outlined in this brief, could help cities begin to do more of the strategic work that can turn fragmented, one-off initiatives into a larger change management strategy that benefits cities, their employees and the

communities they serve. By sharing current efforts, lessons learned, metrics tracking and value gained, municipalities can increase awareness and build a stronger case for SBP. Developing and leveraging peer examples, aligning with broader workforce initiatives, and investing in infrastructure and change management will position cities to use SBP to address critical talent challenges and strengthen municipal workforces. Local leaders can further act as champions and changemakers within their larger regional workforce ecosystem through their ability to convene and connect business, labor, education, workforce and community partners.

Methodology

The insights in this brief were developed through a rapid literature review, interviews with national organizations that focus on public-sector employment and/or advancing SBPs, a targeted survey with city HR professionals, and focus groups with city representatives.

Literature Review. A rapid review of 42 research papers and articles related to SBPs in the public sector to identify information related to and examples of city government SBPs.

National Organization Interviews. Interviews with representatives from the following 14 national organizations that focus on public-sector employment and/or advancing SBPs to gather their insights into city government SBPs.

- ◆ Aspen Institute
- ◆ Competency-Based Education Network
- ◆ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
- ◆ Education Design Lab
- ◆ Grads of Life
- ◆ MissionSquare Research Institute
- ◆ National Academy of Public Administration
- ◆ National Governors Association
- ◆ OneTen
- ◆ Opportunity@Work
- ◆ Public Sector HR Association
- ◆ SkillsFWD
- ◆ Society for Human Resource Management
- ◆ Work for America

Targeted HR Survey. A survey of city HR professionals to assess their awareness, consideration and implementation of SBPs, as well as their city’s motivations, perceived benefits and associated challenges. Responses were received from 28 cities out of a total of 1,154 cities invited to participate in the survey. The responding cities represented 16 states. The cities varied considerably in workforce size, employing between 138 and 37,000 individuals (M = 4,300, SD = 10,658). City HR teams varied too among respondents, with some cities having a single HR staff member and others having up to 170 HR staff (M = 17.14, SD = 41.34). Most respondents (75%) were HR directors, with others serving in various HR capacities.

Focus Groups. Focus group participants represented a diverse range of roles, city sizes and geographic regions.

- ◆ **City Representatives.** A total of eight city representatives participated across three virtual focus groups. The sample included five HR directors, one assistant HR director, one HR analyst, and one director of youth development and social innovation. Participants came from suburbs, towns, and small, midsize, and large cities. Geographically, they represented the Midwest, West, and South.
- ◆ **Mayors.** A total of five mayors participated in one in-person focus group held during the National League of Cities 2025 City Summit. Mayors represented medium and large cities from the South, Midwest, Northeast, and West.

About NLC and AIR

With an active membership of more than 2,800 cities, the [National League of Cities \(NLC\)](#) is the voice of America’s cities, towns and villages. NLC’s Education and Workforce Success team has more than two decades of demonstrated experience elevating the municipal role in education and providing strategic and technical assistance to city leaders seeking to develop more intentional collaborations to promote postsecondary access, persistence, credential attainment and ultimately workforce success.

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The [American Institutes for Research® \(AIR®\)](#) is a not-for-profit organization that conducts research and delivers technical assistance to solve urgent challenges related to workforce, education and health. AIR’s Employment & Economic Opportunity Program Area works with public, private and philanthropic organizations to advance worker economic mobility, business vitality and community well-being. At AIR, we implement, measure, and assess a variety of [skills-based practices](#) that span the talent cycle, from employee attraction and attainment to development and retention.

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