

BY MANWAI C. KU

SPOTLIGHT ON...

Springboard Forward

The conventional employment program in the United States focuses on helping workers *find* a job and then, to a lesser extent, *keep* that job. But does this two-pronged “find and keep” mantra serve workers and businesses well? Is it good enough to simply slot a worker into a job and assume that thereafter it’s just a matter of holding it? The highly educated worker, by contrast, is schooled to think in terms of a career plan rather than just holding down her or his current job. The question that then emerges is whether this type of career plan, which has served the educated worker so well, might be applied more broadly.

We recently spoke with Elliott Brown, founder and executive director of Springboard Forward, a new social venture based in Belmont, California, that has developed an innovative approach to helping low-wage workers formulate real and meaningful career plans. “We have a saying here, ‘What if it were possible?’” Brown said when describing the vision of his organization. Prior to establishing Springboard Forward, Brown had worked in a youth employment agency in East Palo Alto, and he was deeply troubled that low-wage workers there typically had little hope and expected their future to be one forever mired in low-paying work. Based on this experience, Brown saw a need for a program that could inspire hope by providing assistance with career development and that could engage the business community in these efforts precisely because doing so was in businesses’ interests. Because hopelessness about career advancement often leads to disengagement from work, businesses face chronic workforce challenges such as high worker turnover, poor employee performance, and weak customer service. As a result, business success is intimately tied to the needs of the low-income community, an insight that allowed Brown to build an approach aligning the interests of workers and businesses.

The cornerstone of Springboard Forward is the Engaged Employment™ Program, which comprises a yearlong combination that begins with workshops and continues with ten months of one-on-one coaching. The workshops are designed to help employees discover their skills, experiences, interests, and strengths, and the one-on-one coaching focuses on helping employees create what is often their first career development plan. Supervisors of employees are included in the process,

receiving training to recognize the value in employee development and to identify the skills they need to support the development of their workforce. Although the plans of workers may include eventually leaving their employer, such plans nevertheless provide workers with real direction and thereby increase engagement with their current jobs. As a result, businesses benefit from greater productivity, lower turnover rates, and better relationships with employees. Brown explains, “What is different about our model is our dual-value proposition: we help workers, but we also help businesses.”

The results? Through a partnership with Kenexa, a leading multinational evaluation firm, Springboard Forward finds that almost all of the employees in partnering companies (which have included Home Depot, Bon Appetit, and El Camino Hospital) have developed long-term goals and career plans. Over 90 percent have achieved stable and steady employment, and most have taken steps toward realizing their aspirations. About 40 percent have received a raise or a promotion within the first four months of the program, and almost a quarter have enrolled in classes related to their career goals. Nearly 90 percent of graduating clients view their current positions as valuable starting points for their careers, and most express greater clarity about their career paths. Meanwhile, businesses are reporting 80 to 90 percent job-retention rates—several times greater than the average rates in these high-turnover industries. About 80 percent of the employees have worked with their supervisors to identify opportunities for growth, and supervisors note that their employees have become more focused, proactive, and ultimately productive.



ABOVE: A Springboard client interprets her career map. BELOW: Springboard clients working individually and in small groups on developing their career maps.

For his work, Brown was elected as an Ashoka Fellow, a prestigious award for top social entrepreneurs, in 2005, and Springboard Forward was named a 2005 and 2007 Social Capitalist Award winner by Fast Company/Monitor Group. This year, Springboard Forward has been selected to join America Forward, a coalition of social entrepreneurial nonprofit organizations, and it was even recognized recently by President Obama at the White House. Amid the accolades, Springboard Forward has also expanded across regions and in size, with the number of Bay Area counties covered increasing from two to five in the past year, and the number of career coaches increasing from 12 to over 50. A Stanford graduate, Brown is especially thrilled by the recent addition of Don Kennedy, former President of Stanford University, to the board of directors.

Will the Springboard Forward model become the new mainstream approach to employment programs? “There is a real interest in the Obama administration in innovative approaches,” Brown says. “We are realizing as a nation that the conventional fight against poverty hasn’t worked and that we need to take a look at new kinds of solutions.” Reflecting on the mission of Springboard Forward, Brown stresses the importance of recognizing the resourcefulness and capability of low-wage workers to move out of poverty. “What we ask people to do is think about what they most want,” Brown says, “and to come up with a plan that allows them to get up in the morning and be excited about the contribution that they are going to make.” The results are startling: “We do nothing more than unleash a plan. And it’s incredible what people can do once that is unleashed.”

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