



Innovator Interview: Alyssa Alvarado Real Jobs Rhode Island, Program Director

Alyssa Alvarado is the program director for Real Jobs Rhode Island, Rhode Island's demand-driven workforce and economic development initiative. She spoke with the GPL about implementing active contract management to achieve better outcomes for both employers and clients.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What is your vision for the Real Jobs Rhode Island program?

Alyssa Alvarado: Real Jobs Rhode Island is a program that aggregates industry demand and then uses very intentional partners to identify workforce solutions to meet those needs. It's sort of a big experiment. We're trying different things to see what works for different industries. That's really difficult when it comes to performance and data, because you want to be responsible for taxpayers dollars, but you also want to make sure that you achieve real results. There are many moving pieces. None of our partnerships are doing the same thing, so we need to keep tabs on all of those different moving parts and use all of that data in a meaningful way.

One of the things that's innovative about the program is the mechanism itself. It's not about achieving any one goal in any one sector. It's a mechanism by which we can continue to move folks from one area of the labor force to another. I don't think there's going to be a day when, all of a sudden, we say our work is done. The economy is constantly evolving, so we need to have a mechanism by which we're able to keep up with those changes and continue to move people from one skill set to a different skill set. We have to implement innovative strategies to try to achieve that.

How has active contract management changed the way you do your work?

Active contract management is a great example of what it really means to be in a cooperative agreement. Our partners are working with us to develop and implement the solutions. The data helps us move from a place where we're operating off anecdotal information to a place where we're operating off actual information. We're not just looking at data and performance management in a reactive way, but actually being proactive in terms of how we can help our partners successfully execute their programs.

The great thing about active contract management meetings is we're taking the ideas and then converting them to action and following through on the action. We can manage performance in real time, allowing us to actively be a part of the workforce solutions that our partners are implementing and ensure that new programs we launch are successful. For example, as an outcome of a recent meeting, we identified one action we could take that would be low effort and high impact. We realized that we needed to give our partner additional resources for an industry engagement liaison to make sure that small businesses know about how they can access these

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programs and benefits. Our grantees have the ability to request additional funds from us at any time, and we can respond to industry demand in real time.

What were some of the challenges in standing up Active Contract Management?

When we first rolled out and piloted Active Contract Management with one of our partnerships, we realized very quickly that we weren't asking the right questions and looking for the right types of data with our partners. Our rollout of active contract management with that partnership was a little tough. We were struggling with the placement outcomes, and when we started looking at the data, we realized it wasn't an issue with the placement process. It was actually the fact that the participants weren't getting through the training. Once we realized what the problem was, we met with the training provider and we changed the structure of the program. The outcomes improved dramatically. So we were able to change our administrative processes and contract structure in such a way where we were able to get the right types of data for that type of project.

What have you learned through this process?

What I've learned through Active Contract Management is that performance is really a two-way street. It's not just about managing the performance of your grantees, but also about managing your own program performance. Through the active contract management sessions, what we needed to change on the program side of things to help our partners be successful in their implementation became really clear. When we did the launch with the pilot and then scaled up our active contract management work, we realized that we needed to make some changes in the way we were structuring our proposals and our contracts. It had a huge impact on the outcomes we were seeing a result. We were really talking through what we had hoped to achieve in a lot more detail than we had initially.

What encourages you in this work?

One of the great benefits of having the data is to be able to show employers and job seekers in Rhode Island that this strategy is working. Recently, we met with Polaris¹ and that was a really exciting meeting for me as the program director. In the past, we've been looking at the performance of individual projects within the sector, but today we looked at our performance across the sector as a whole—all of the initiatives that Polaris has been funding. We gauged our reach within the entire manufacturing industry in Rhode Island and were able to see where we were performing really well and where we still have more work to do. It was really exciting.

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Corporation for National and Community Service Social Innovation Fund, the Dunham Fund, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Pritzker Children's Initiative, and the Rockefeller Foundation. © Copyright 2019 Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab.

¹ Polaris MEP, a manufacturing extension partnership providing business improvement programs to manufacturers in Rhode Island