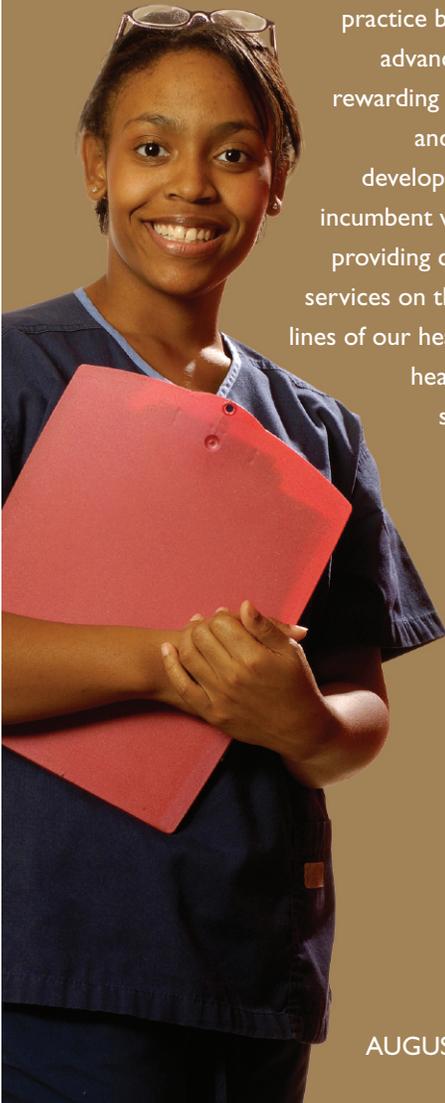


Jobs to Careers

*Promoting Work-Based Learning
for Quality Care.*

Practice Brief

Part of a series of practice briefs on advancing and rewarding the skill and career development of incumbent workers providing care and services on the front lines of our health and health care systems.



AUGUST 2007

Advancing in Health and Health Care Careers— Rung by Rung

*Applying a Work-based Learning Model
to Develop Missing Rungs on a Nursing
Career Ladder*

By Rebecca Klein-Collins
and Rebecca Starr



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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
for Educational and Economic Opportunity

Workforce shortages in health and health care are reaching crisis levels, prompting many employers to adopt creative approaches for recruiting and retaining workers. Employers are turning to “grow your own” strategies that help lower-skilled, frontline workers advance to higher-skilled, higher-paying jobs.

One overarching strategy that integrates these various approaches uses the framework of career ladders. This strategy has the potential to benefit employers and workers alike, both now and in the future. But career ladder systems require careful management, and they cannot be effectively initiated without the close collaboration and agreement among a variety of educational, regulatory, and employer organizations.

A career ladder project at the Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare—BACH—illustrates how one such career ladder system could work, as well as some of the important considerations when designing and implementing such a system. BACH is one of nine grantee sites of the national initiative, *Jobs to Careers: Promoting Work-Based Learning for Quality Care*, which focuses on establishing systems that train, develop, reward, and advance current frontline health and health care workers in order to improve the quality of care and services provided to patients and communities.

An Introduction to Career Ladders

The career ladder approach views employment not just as a discrete job but also as a series of rungs on a ladder. Each rung symbolizes a different job, requiring a clearly defined set of skills or credentials. Ladders can exist within a single organization, operate across industries or sectors, or link jobs in a sequence that crosses industry boundaries. Workers who gain new skills, credentials, or experience can climb to jobs on the next rungs, even if their progress in a career isn't linear. Although this paper is focused on career

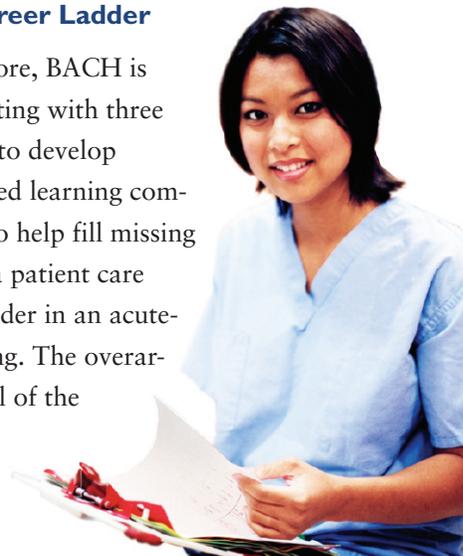
ladders, workers often also move laterally within an industry sector or even change industries. (Career ladders are also referred to as “career pathways” or “career lattices.”)

Initiatives that utilize the career ladder approach typically establish a series of education and training programs and support services that simultaneously address recruitment, retention, and advancement. At the low end of the ladder, such initiatives help individuals gain entry-level employment within a specific industry or sector. Once an individual has “stepped onto” a potential advancement ladder, he or she has opportunities for gaining the additional education and training needed to advance to higher and higher rungs.

Career ladders provide a useful framework for implementing recruitment, retention, and advancement programs for health and health care workers. In fact, the health and health care arenas are well-suited for such career ladders because advancement often requires not only additional skills, but also additional credentials or certifications from regulatory bodies at each step on the advancement path. These ladders then help establish a seamless system of career exploration, training, and skill upgrades that enable individuals to advance to higher-skilled jobs.

An Example of a Patient Care Career Ladder

In Baltimore, BACH is collaborating with three hospitals to develop work-based learning components to help fill missing rungs of a patient care career ladder in an acute-care setting. The overarching goal of the BACH Career



Who Benefits from Career Ladder Programs?

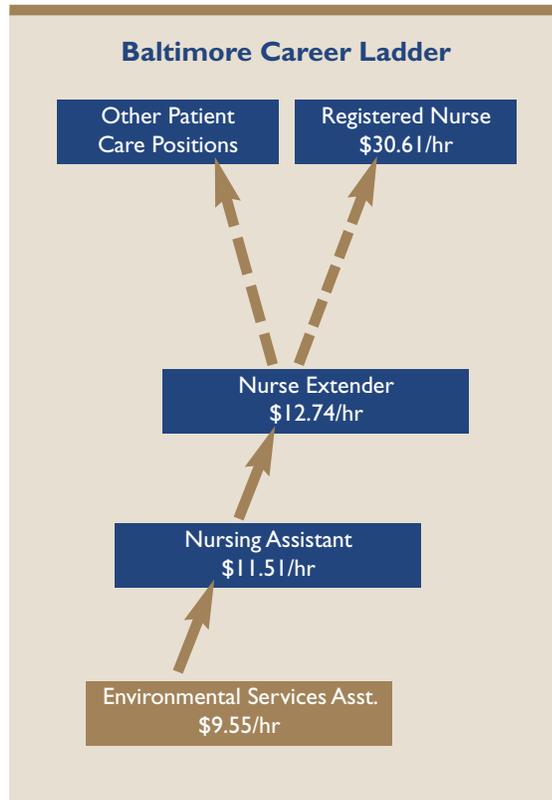
Career ladder programs benefit employers and workers alike. Employers can use this approach to fill jobs facing critical shortages, while also retaining workers by offering them advancement opportunities. Workers also benefit by having new opportunities to increase their skills and gain credentials needed for better jobs.

Characteristics of Leading Career Ladders

The most successful career ladders:

- Identify avenues of advancement for workers within local labor markets by matching the skills acquired at one level of employment or education and training with the skills required by higher levels of employment;
- Help participating employers identify potential candidates for employment from their internal staff;
- Clarify the skill needs of employers to influence the training efforts of workforce development systems; and
- Address the needs of workers for pre- and post-employment training by utilizing a range of educational options, from on-the-job training to contracted training from local providers.

Source: Prince & Mills (2003)



Ladder Project is to meet the hospitals' critical need for "nurse extenders."

Nurse extenders are similar to certified nursing assistants (CNAs), but they are trained to carry out several additional tasks normally done by Registered Nurses (RNs) (e.g., administer IV starts, EKGs, and oxygen therapy). In Baltimore, the nurse extender position has grown increasingly important due to difficulty in filling current and projected vacancies for RNs, a job that requires advanced training.

BACH is now in the planning phase of its Career Ladder Project. As the project moves forward, BACH will identify hospital workers who have strong basic skills and an interest in entering patient care jobs but who currently work in non-patient care departments, such as environmental or dietary services.

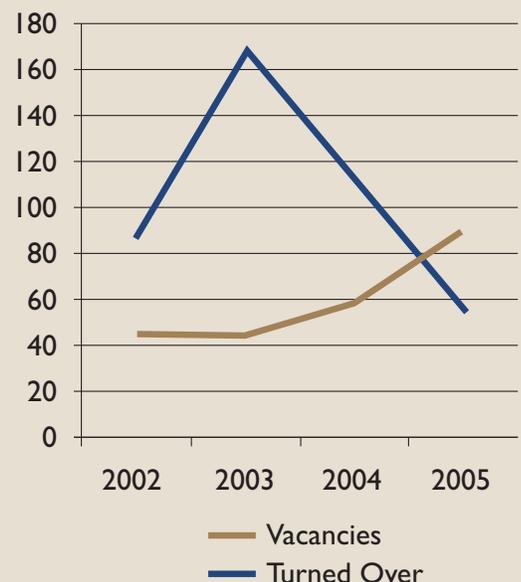
In the first rung of the ladder, BACH will offer these workers three months of classroom training in order for them to qualify for interim posi-

tions as nursing assistants. In these interim positions, the workers take part in six months of work-based learning—a highly structured method of training that is integrated with the job itself. The work-based learning component is designed to provide both work experience and on-the-job instruction, and there are clear expectations of what skills each person will master and what competencies he or she will acquire. Throughout the experience, a supervising nurse manager will assess each person's progress and keep track of what skills and competencies they have acquired.

After the work-based learning component of the project, the workers will qualify for the nurse extender program. They will receive two months of classroom training, followed by a second work-based learning component, this one lasting three months and again including clear expectations of skill mastery and frequent assessments by the supervising nurse manager.

High vacancies, opportunity for growth lead BACH to focus on the Nurse Extender position

Although the Alliance's coaching program has helped reduce turnover, vacancies have nearly doubled.



Once the workers acquire all of the requisite skills and competencies, they qualify to apply for jobs as nurse extenders.

The career ladder need not end here, however. Nurse extenders qualify for educational opportunities—not only leading to RN positions but also to a wide range of skilled technical jobs that are in high demand in the health care sector.

Understanding Which Rungs of the Ladder Are in Place— And Which Are Not

The image of a career ladder seems simple enough: Take one position, add education and training, advance to the next level. Repeat.

However, progression along a career ladder is not always straightforward. Occasionally some rungs in the ladder are missing. Alternatively, a particular employer may only offer one or two steps on a ladder. Often, jobs do not fall neatly along a continuum.

GAP Analysis: The Demand Side— Turnover and vacancies have far outpaced job growth

While hospitals increased staffing for eight entry-level, skilled healthcare positions by 3 percent between 2002 and 2005, the number of these jobs turned over or vacated increased by 12 percent and 22 percent, respectively, during the same period.

FTEs	2002	2005	Change '02-'05
Budgeted	2,588	2,672	3.3%
Vacant	221	270	22.2%
Turned over	269	302	12.3%

Source: Md. Hospital Association. Positions include: Lab Technician, Nursing Asst., Nurse Extender, Pharmacy Tech, Radiographer, Resp. Therapist, Resp. Therapy Tech., Surg. Technologist. Hospitals include: Good Samaritan, Johns Hopkins, Maryland General, Mercy, Sinai, St. Agnes, Union Memorial, Univ. of Maryland.

This is where “intermediary” organizations like BACH play an important role. Intermediaries work with an employer or industry to identify the jobs or rungs on a ladder, the skills and credentials that are required of those jobs, and the ways in which workers can gain education in order to climb from rung to rung. Sometimes, an intermediary can create pathways and opportunities that did not exist before.

For example, BACH’s original goal was to find ways to help Baltimore hospitals recruit and retain more nurse extenders, answering a need in the industry. BACH began that effort by conducting a gap analysis of the local labor market (see “How Do You Know Where to Start?”). From the analysis, BACH concluded that many of Baltimore’s low-skilled workers could be trained to become nurse extenders. Many of them already worked within hospitals as entry-level, environmental services workers. In addition, hospitals already had training programs in place for CNAs to become nurse extenders.

However, the accepted practice among acute care employers was that in order to qualify for the existing nurse extender training, a worker needed six months of experience as a CNA in a long-term care setting. For example, an environmental services worker might be interested in moving to patient care, but to do so, she would have to quit her hospital job, complete the nursing assistant training on her own, and obtain six to twelve months of nursing assistant experience at a long-term care facility. In other words, she could not advance to a nurse extender role without changing employers.

By analyzing existing hospital positions and possible career pathways, BACH identified where it needed to focus its efforts: on reintroducing a position within the acute care setting so that low-skilled hospital workers would have an internal pathway to nurse extender and beyond.

How Do You Know Where to Start? The Role of a Gap Analysis

In workforce terms, a gap analysis examines both the supply for labor and current and projected job openings. This information helps in identifying where focused change efforts can better link supply and demand. The Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare’s gap analysis found two important labor supply issues: 43 percent of city residents age 16 and older were not in the workforce, and 31 percent lacked a high school diploma. Meanwhile, Baltimore hospitals had a great need for workers to fill entry-level, minimally skilled positions. BACH’s conclusion from the analysis was that a successful workforce development strategy would move Baltimore’s unemployed and unskilled workers into those entry-level, high-demand positions. The result was the Career Ladder Project.

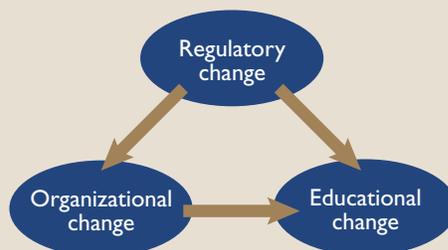
Managing Change

An intermediary organization helping an employer or industry to establish a career ladder will discover that much of the task involves managing change. All career ladder programs affect employers' human resources practices and will also have an impact on the educational system providing the training—a key component to advancement. Changes to a career ladder may also affect the regulatory system, often the case in the health and health care sectors.

Managing Change with Employers

In the Baltimore Career Ladder Project, BACH asked employers to embrace change in several ways by: creating interim nursing assistant positions; developing work-based learning experiences for both the interim CNAs and nurse extenders; providing volunteer mentors for interns; and asking nurse managers to evaluate the progress of the trainees as they engage in work-based learning. The pressure hospitals felt to fill nurse extender vacancies worked in the program's favor. Even so, hospital staff needed to believe in the program and trust BACH's ability to make it happen. BACH took considerable time to develop close working relationships with its employer partners to establish a dialogue about the program's goals and the employers' concerns. A planning group comprised of employer representatives is helping to continue this dialogue as the program progresses.

Developing a successful program requires significant system change



Managing Change Within the Educational System

By recreating a role for nursing assistants in acute care, the Baltimore Career Ladder Project is precipitating change in the nursing education system as well. Prior to *Jobs to Careers*, most nursing assistants worked in long-term care settings, so their training included an extensive geriatric aide component. BACH and the hospitals have been helping the Community College of Baltimore County to make its training program more appropriate preparation for jobs in acute care. Additionally, BACH has initiated a discussion with the college about changing the status of nursing assistant courses from non-credit to credit; this would enable current hospital workers to use employer tuition assistance to pay for the training. Awarding credit for the courses would also help students who complete the nursing assistant training program advance toward an Associate's degree.

In education (and in other aspects of career ladders), issues may arise that could not be anticipated. In Baltimore, one surprise was that many of the entry-level hospital workers who were interested in nursing did not have the basic educational foundation necessary for nursing assistant training. No training resources were in place to deal with such a challenge. In response, BACH and its educational partners are exploring how to offer basic education/developmental courses that

will help those individuals qualify for the program. BACH is also exploring ways to provide tutoring to individuals who do meet the basic skills requirements but nevertheless find the training program a challenge academically.

Managing Change with the Regulatory System

Some industries encounter few regulatory obstacles when introducing new training models, but regulation can be a significant roadblock in health care. In Baltimore, BACH is collaborating with the Maryland Board of Nursing to gain approval for the new acute-care nursing assistant position, as well as for the work-based learning model. With the hospitals as partners, these efforts are on the way to removing the barriers to change.

A Framework for Growth

Career ladders provide a useful framework for establishing a system of recruitment, training, and career advancement, particularly in health care and other industries that need to “grow their own” high-skilled workers. Using and refining this innovative model, the Baltimore Career Ladder Project is creating new positions and career pathways within hospitals, and it is also introducing training components that make the most of work-based learning strategies. Creative approaches like these are helping health care employers meet critical labor shortages, while also helping a growing population of low-skilled workers secure jobs with opportunities to advance.

For Further Reading on Career Ladders

General Resources

Fitzgerald, Joan. 2006. *Moving Up in the New Economy: Career Ladders for U.S. Workers*. New York: The Century Foundation, Inc.

Jenkins, Davis & Christopher Spence. 2006. *The Career Pathways How-To Guide*. New York: Workforce Strategies Center.

Prince, Heath & Jack Mills. 2003. *Career Ladders: A Guidebook for Workforce Intermediaries*. Boston: Jobs for the Future.

Nursing Career Ladders

Goldberger, Susan. 2005. “WorkSource Partners: Regional Advancement Centers.” In S. Goldberger, *From Entry-level to Licensed Practical Nurse*, Boston: Jobs for the Future.

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. 2004. *How Career Lattices Help Solve Nursing and Other Workforce Shortages in Healthcare*. Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

For More Information on the Baltimore Career Ladder Project

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Jobs to Careers

*Promoting Work-Based Learning
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Jobs to Careers: Promoting Work-Based Learning for Quality Care seeks to support partnerships to advance and reward the skill and career development of incumbent workers providing care and services on the front lines of our health and health care systems. The initiative is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in collaboration with the Hitachi Foundation and with additional support from the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. Jobs to Careers supports partnerships of employers, educational institutions, and other organizations to expand and redesign systems to:

- Create lasting improvements in the way that institutions train and advance their frontline workers; and
- Test new models of education and training that incorporate work-based learning.

Jobs for the Future, based in Boston, serves as the national program office for Jobs to Careers.