
Wisconsin Legislative Council

STUDY COMMITTEE MEMO



Memo No. 2

TO: MEMBERS OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE ON THE REGULATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN WISCONSIN

FROM: Tom Koss and Patrick Ward, Staff Attorneys, and Brian Larson, Principal Attorney

RE: Fast Forward Program Job Training to Address Demands for Artificial Intelligence-Skilled Workers

DATE: September 4, 2024

At its July 24, 2024, meeting, the study committee discussed the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on Wisconsin's workforce. Some members of the study committee identified a need to support job training and upskilling to allow employers to more adequately address their demands for AI-skilled workers. As a follow-up to that discussion, this Memo provides information pertaining to Wisconsin Fast Forward, a workforce development program that assists employers and other organizations with the expense of training workers. This Memo includes a description of the Fast Forward program generally, an advisory action plan from the Governor's Task Force on Workforce and AI, and options for further consideration relating to this issue.

WISCONSIN FAST FORWARD

Background

Fast Forward is one of Wisconsin's numerous workforce development programs. Fast Forward and other job training programs are part of Wisconsin's larger workforce development system, which, pursuant to federal law, involves groups and governments at the federal, state, and local levels, with funding from both governmental and private sources. Underlying this structure, Wisconsin is divided into 11 geographic regions, with a local workforce development board assigned to each region to help coordinate workforce development efforts. Specifically, each workforce development board is assigned certain tasks, including developing a local plan for workforce investment activities, analyzing regional labor market conditions, and engaging regional employers to coordinate workforce activities with the needs of employers. [[29 U.S.C. s. 3122 \(d\)](#) and Department of Workforce Development (DWD), [Wisconsin Workforce Development Boards](#), accessed September 4, 2024.]

Fast Forward was created in 2013 with the goal of helping train new and existing workers to learn new skills so that they remain competitive in the workforce and so that employers remain in Wisconsin.¹ The program is administered by DWD and provides grants to increase workers' skills.

More specifically, Fast Forward provides grants to reimburse employers and other organizations that provide training to unemployed and underemployed workers, and incumbent employees of businesses

¹ See 2013 Wisconsin Act 9, LC Bill Hearing Materials.

in Wisconsin. The training is intended to increase the skills of unemployed workers to meet the needs of employers, and increase the skills of underemployed or incumbent workers to a level that would qualify them for employment with higher wages, more hours, or increased functionality. [s. [106.27 \(1\)](#), Stats., and s. DWD [801.09 \(1\)](#), Wis. Adm. Code.]

Grants may be awarded to a public agency, private organization, coalition of public or private entities, and tribal governing bodies. To be eligible, an organization that is applying for a grant must demonstrate plans and progress in increasing new jobs, reducing layoffs, and increasing overall employment in Wisconsin by increasing workers' skills to better match employers' needs.² The program is structured so that each organization that receives funds may customize the training provided to workers. [s. [106.27 \(1\)](#), Stats., and ss. DWD [801.04](#) and [801.05](#), Wis. Adm. Code.]

Expanded Fast Forward

Throughout the years, the Legislature has added more specific types of grant opportunities to the program. These more specific types of grants are collectively referred to as Expanded Fast Forward and are typically available less frequently, for a limited time, and applicable only to certain types of skills or workers. Examples of Expanded Fast Forward programs include grants to school districts to fund the acquisition of equipment and software used in advanced manufacturing fields, grants technical colleges to reduce wait lists for enrollment in programs and courses in high-demand fields, and grants to shipbuilders to train new and current employees. In total, the Legislature has created approximately 23 Expanded Fast Forward programs, though most are not currently active.

Funding

Fast Forward is funded through an appropriation to DWD for workforce training. In the 2023-25 biennial budget, the Legislature set this appropriation at \$5.25 million annually, which was a reduction of \$1 million annually from the baseline established in the previous biennium. From this appropriation, DWD must allocate the following: (1) at least \$250,000 in each fiscal year for Project SEARCH, a training program for young persons with disabilities; (2) grants to DOC to fund the creation and operation of mobile classrooms; (3) \$976,800 in each fiscal year for grants to the Department of Corrections (DOC) to support instructor costs for the mobile classrooms; and (4) funding for DWD to provide coordination between nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education to coordinate student internships. [s. [20.445 \(1\) \(b\)](#), Stats.]

In the 2023 state fiscal year, Fast Forward provided 36 organizations with about \$5.1 million in funds. According to DWD, wages for "underemployed workers increased by an average of 98 cents per hour, while incumbent workers' wages rose by an average of \$2.26 per hour as worker skills and productivity increased."³ Some Expanded Fast Forward programs are funded from this general appropriation, while others have their own specific appropriations.

GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ADVISORY ACTION PLAN

As was discussed in the staff brief, the Governor's Task Force on Workforce and AI was created to gather and analyze information and produce an advisory action plan that includes certain information, such as recommending solutions to the potential impact of generative AI on Wisconsin's workforce

² As a condition of receiving a grant, DWD may also require a recipient to provide matching funds at a percentage to be determined by the department. [s. [106.27 \(1\)](#), Stats.]

³ DWD, [Fast Forward Annual Report 2023](#) (December 29, 2023).

development and educational systems. Members included the DWD secretary, who served as chair, and representatives from other state agencies, businesses, and labor organizations.

The task force released its advisory action plan in July 2024. In that advisory action plan, the task force recommended several options to address the impact of generative AI on the workforce. Two of those recommendations proposed changes to Fast Forward.

First, the task force recommended expanding Fast Forward funding to “provide a specific Wisconsin Fast Forward grant program announcement focused on AI training, considering AI demand and training providers.” The task force’s report appears to contemplate creating an AI-specific grant opportunity or encouraging DWD to award grants to employers for the use of AI under its broad authority to award Fast Forward grants. Specifically, the report mentions promoting the use of Fast Forward funding for AI training projects and setting aside funding for such a grant, with only employers eligible for grants, or incorporating AI funding into the existing Fast Forward program and funding.

Second, the task force recommended developing a specific Expanded Fast Forward grant program announcement focused on reimbursing the purchase of AI technology and equipment for Wisconsin school districts.⁴ The report notes that statutory changes would be needed to expand the Expanded Fast Forward program noted above that provided grants to schools to acquire equipment and software used in advanced manufacturing.

OPTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Several options for further consideration relating to AI training through the Fast Forward program are summarized below. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of possible options, but rather a starting point for committee discussion.

- **Take no action.** The study committee may determine that no action should be taken, because the statutory language already directs DWD to use program funds for training and upskilling. Because these concepts are broadly defined, the program can already accommodate AI training and upskilling, as may be requested by participating employers.
- **Engage with the department.** The study committee may attempt to engage directly or indirectly with DWD regarding the potential to include AI training and upskilling under the program, such as by asking a representative from the department to provide information or testimony to the study committee, or asking Legislative Council staff to engage with DWD.
- **Modify the Fast Forward program.** The study committee may develop, and potentially recommend, legislation that would expand the Fast Forward program, presumably by adding a new section to the statute, under the Expanded Fast Forward umbrella, as described above.
 - The decisions to be made might include whether or not to impose a time limit, or require a certain amount of spending, as some of the prior expansions have done.
 - Given the study committee’s focus on AI training and upskilling, the study committee should consider whether the proposed legislation would specify any types of training to be included, or any relevant limitations or exclusions.
 - The legislation could address or incorporate various proposals in the Governor’s task force report described above, which included promoting the use of Fast Forward funding for AI

⁴ Governor’s Task Force on Workforce and AI, [Advisory Action Plan](#), July 2024, pp. 32-33.

training projects, setting aside funding for AI-specific grants, making only employers eligible for grants, and reimbursing AI technology purchases by school districts.⁵

- **Nonstatutory legislation.** The study committee may conclude, based on information from DWD or other sources, that the statute does not need to be modified, but that the Legislature should pass a nonstatutory provision to direct the department to create a plan to increase the availability of AI training and upskilling within the Fast Forward program, and to report back to the Legislature or a legislative committee within a specified time.
- **Nonlegislative recommendation or finding.** The study committee may determine that no legislation is required (or that it is unable to agree on legislation). Rather than recommending legislation, the study committee could memorialize certain recommendations or findings relating to AI training through the Fast Forward program. These recommendations or findings would then be included in the final report of the Joint Legislative Council, or other correspondence, at the direction of the study committee.

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⁵ Governor's Task Force on Workforce and AI, [Advisory Action Plan](#), July 2024, pp. 32-33.