

# Collaborative Regional Workforce Development for an Inclusive Solar Future: A Case Study from Oregon Solar Energy Industries Association

February 2019

---

*"I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power!" – Thomas Edison*

---

The US solar industry has made incredible strides over the past decade. Solar is currently the fastest growing source of power, and this accelerated expansion of the industry has propelled solar installer to the number one fastest growing job in the US. Job creation in renewable energy, particularly in solar, is vastly outpacing the broader energy sector, and beyond: the 2017 National Solar Job Census found that from 2012-2017, solar employment grew *nine times faster* than the overall US economy. However, rapid creation of solar jobs over the past decade has challenged the solar workforce to keep pace with demand.

The majority of solar employers, nationwide across all sectors of the industry, continue to report difficulty finding and retaining quality candidates, particularly for entry level jobs. As the industry pursues regional efforts to expand and shore up a stable workforce, these efforts should be simultaneously paired with deliberate strides toward improving industry diversity and improving accessibility of solar career opportunities to diverse communities. As solar emerges as a mainstream part of the American energy sector, stabilizing and strengthening the workforce involves ensuring representation of diverse perspectives.

---

*"Over the past five years, solar employment grew nine times faster than the 1.76% annual growth of the US economy."*

*2017 National Solar Job Census,  
The Solar Foundation*

---

This case study from Oregon Solar Energy Industries Association (OSEIA) supplements the Solar Training Network's (STN) toolkit, *Strategies for Solar Workforce Development*, and demonstrates how industry organizations can champion regionally adaptive workforce initiatives. Since its founding in 1981, OSEIA has grown from a task force of volunteer policy expertise, to a full-time executive director and support staff guided by a mission to: *make solar energy a significant energy source and expand markets by strengthening the industry and developing a skilled and stable workforce*. OSEIA is a leader in regional efforts to bridge gaps within and adjacent to the Oregon solar industry to better integrate solar into the spheres of public resources and public awareness.

Oregon was an early leader in the US solar industry. The state's initial strides can be attributed to policy leadership as solar advocates collectively brought solar to the forefront of energy policy and the state passed strong renewable energy legislation, creating the Energy Trust of Oregon to build capacity and expand knowledge related to efficiency and renewable energy solutions. In 2007, Oregon's Renewable Energy Act opened up the state's two Investor Owned Utilities to reach beyond efficiency and encourage investments in renewable energy. In 2016, the Coal to Clean bill increased Oregon's Renewable Portfolio Standard to 50% by 2040 and established a community solar program.



In general, solar is currently being installed in Oregon in greater amounts than ever before, largely due to accelerated interest from the small and large scale utility developer opportunities. 2017 marked the first year since 1977 that Oregon did not incentivize rooftop solar and the first year that Oregon's solar industry experienced a significant dip in workforce numbers, highlighting the link between strong state solar policies and the economic impact of the industry. Like every state market, Oregon experiences the ups and downs of the "solar coaster," but still sees a trajectory of long-term growth. At the end of 2018, Oregon was benefitting from over 600MW of solar installed across the state, supporting 3,654 solar jobs (#12 nationally for solar jobs per capita).

To better communicate a long-term solar vision, OSEIA released the Oregon Solar Plan in 2017 to illuminate the role of solar in the transition to a clean energy economy, and to connect with the public, decision makers, and diverse stakeholders on the significant, wide-ranging contributions that solar can offer, as long as it has a place in long-term planning. The Solar Plan sets an ambitious ten-year goal for the industry, emphasizing the value in keeping the policies that work, and filling policy gaps, to create market signals that solar has a predictable future in the state.

---

### *The Oregon Solar Plan*

*Solar can be 10 % of Oregon's energy mix in 10 years.*

*By 2027:  
Oregon's workforce will grow  
by 8,000 new solar jobs ...*

*... to install 3,740 MW,  
10% of Oregon's energy*



Key to making this goal a reality is communicating to diverse stakeholders the cross-functional contributions of solar as a growing part of the energy sector, and the value of a thriving solar industry across a range of variables including employment, improved public health, and economic growth. Long term planning to realize these benefits requires coordination across investments in solar infrastructure, policy and comprehensive workforce development.

---

## **SOLAR PLUS** NORTHWEST

Solar plus...

... jobs

... economic development

... community resilience

---

Around the same time the Oregon Solar Plan was released, OSEIA had the opportunity to join Solar Plus, a U.S. Department of Energy funded regional stakeholder effort to not only accelerate market growth but deliver the full technical, social, and economic benefits of solar energy. This initiative emphasized job creation, community resiliency and access. Concurrent with these efforts, against the backdrop of 2017's solar jobs downturn, OSEIA was inspired to explore how to strengthen resources and support available to the industry and non-traditional stakeholders, particularly as related to a range of workforce development efforts. OSEIA aims to equip the

Oregon solar industry with resources and engagement opportunities to most effectively support



companies as they navigate industry growth. Workforce development is a process of leveraging regional networks and resources through partnerships to address skills gaps and manage hiring needs of an industry, and central to this process are sector partnerships. State associations play a valuable role in convening industry leaders to facilitate information sharing, and leveraging data to better align workforce policy and resources with industry needs.

In December 2018, OSEIA hosted two inaugural day-long workforce development workshops in Portland and Eugene that focused on long-term strategies for workforce stability and diversity. With funding and support from Solar Plus and guidance from The Solar Training Network Workforce Development Toolkit, OSEIA convened local and state workforce experts, as well as a diversity and inclusion HR expert to engage the solar business community and other industry members on adapting hiring practices toward improving diversity, and overall recruitment and retention.

OSEIA worked with each presenter to develop actionable tools and outcomes for participants to put theory into practice.

The workshops explored the value of workforce diversity, and emphasized that diversity of backgrounds and perspectives is an investment the industry should be actively pursuing. Diversity benefits a company only to the extent that it's paired with inclusion, and the workshop offered tools and discussions related to incorporating these ideas into broader, cross-functional conversations to encourage companies as a whole to embrace diversity as a strategic business advantage, rather than an HR issue.

Through dynamic discussions and reflective activities, the workshops reinforced that change is a process – it is one thing to state diversity as a goal, and another to fully and deliberately seek out diverse perspectives. OSEIA's goal for the workshop was to start conversations, and inspire continued engagement. Next steps include exploring ways to access broader funding streams and pursue more robust engagement with stakeholders within and adjacent to the industry.

Since the workshops, OSEIA has received requests for advice for replication in other states, as well as invitations to speak with outside workforce stakeholder groups and participation at regional career fairs beyond the solar industry. Building on lessons learned from the inaugural workshops, a similar session

---

### ***The Business Case for Workforce Diversity...***

---

*Inclusion fosters innovation, and companies tend to reflect the communities that they serve. Prioritizing workforce diversity, inclusion and representation at all levels of a company improves responsiveness to a diverse and expanding client base.*

***... your workforce is your brand.***

---

---

### ***For an Industry Perspective...***

---

*It's never been easier to make the case for a diverse workforce and accompanying hiring strategy. The statistics showing the steady changes in buyers, coupled with the immediate positive impacts a business gains when they empower different voices make this an obvious need... Now, where do you go from there? The OSEIA workshop brought us to this next level of thinking, and provided a thorough and practical primer on how to do this right"*

***Michael O'Brien, Sales Director - A&R Solar***

---



will be offered at the Oregon Solar Energy Conference in May 2019. Additional recruitment and engagement tools are currently under development by OSEIA for industry members to support a stable and diverse workforce across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. These new connections demonstrate that continued industry engagement with workforce issues can bring broad positive impacts.

Workforce development is all about expanding knowledge and networks, in ways that are adaptive to regional market needs. Key goals for solar workforce sector partnerships might include:

- ✓ Building public awareness of diverse solar career pathways
  - Engage local public education stakeholders – K-12, community and technical colleges – in conversations or formalized partnerships related to curriculum or work-based learning, such as career days, guest speaking, job shadowing, internships, advisory boards, etc.
- ✓ Data-informed decision making
  - Leverage labor market information, and approach workforce policy with a cohesive industry voice with strong and consistent messaging.
- ✓ Expanding recruitment efforts to broader talent pools
  - Improve company-wide understanding of the value of workforce diversity; improve representation and inclusion of diverse communities.

## Resources for Solar Industry Sector Partnerships and Workforce Diversity

*The strategy and design behind OSEIA's workshops were informed by the Solar Training Network's Workforce Development Action Plan and Sector Partnership Checklist.*

*The full toolkit, which includes resources for solar employers related to recruitment strategies, work-based learning program design, public funding sources, career pathways and more is available on Solar Training Network's career and industry connections platform: [AmericanSolarWorkforce.org](http://AmericanSolarWorkforce.org)*

