

DEBRIEF

21 Hours of Collective Intelligence: Upskilling Mid-Career Tech Talent in Milwaukee

Between October 23–24, 2025, the MKE Tech Hub Coalition convened over 200 collaborators across three interconnected events:

1. The MKE Tech Member Meeting
2. The SEWI-ATD Talent Development Forum
3. The MKE Tech Executive Roundtable

Each session built upon the last, moving from insight to design to strategic alignment centered around a shared goal to create a clear, data-backed narrative about what it will take to upskill mid-career tech talent in SE Wisconsin.

This debrief will cover each event, key insights, and share what this means for Milwaukee's tech workforce, and what's next for the Coalition.

1. Member Meeting: Identifying Who Needs Upskilling



We opened with a [keynote](#) from [Kelly Palmer](#), former Chief Learning Officer at LinkedIn and co-author of *The Expertise Economy*. Her message was unequivocal: Organizations that treat learning as strategy, not benefits, will define the future of work. Her vision is to put learning into work, calling on leaders to redesign work itself as the primary learning platform where employees develop new capabilities through meaningful, outcome-driven projects.

In an exercise that engaged all attendees, over 100 participants worked in small teams to co-create 24 detailed personas of mid-career tech professionals across Milwaukee's ecosystem.

Key Insights Gained from Personas Exercise

The following insights were derived directly from member input during the persona exercise, capturing in participants' own words how mid-career professionals describe their motivations, barriers, and aspirations for upskilling in a changing tech landscape.

- **Purpose-first upskilling:** Out of 24 personas, 20 connected their motivation for learning to practical, measurable results that demonstrate business value. They noted motivators such as the desire to:

“apply automation to reduce downtime”
“improve reliability and energy efficiency”
“build a predictive maintenance service that surfaces actionable alerts”

These statements show that participants define success through visible results, including efficiency, reliability, and productivity gains tied directly to work performance.

- **Confidence and clarity gaps:** Of the personas, 15 expressed a lack clear on-ramps to gaining skills and confidence with emerging technologies and seek safe, applied learning environments. Personas revealed hesitation and uncertainty about how to begin or which direction to pursue in learning new technologies:

“limited time, uncertainty around the highest-ROI path”
“unsure how to experiment with AI given governance/privacy rules”
“training budget and time constraints”

Such phrases reflect a lack of clear, supported on-ramps and a desire for safe, applied learning contexts.

- **Employers as gatekeepers:** A full two-thirds (16 of 24) cited organizational barriers as a constraint on learning, including frequent mention of “siloed teams,” a limited “training budget,” and “time constraints.” Several personas pointed to management’s priorities as decisive factors in whether upskilling can occur.

These recurring themes highlight that participation stalls without managerial sponsorship or organizational encouragement to learn.

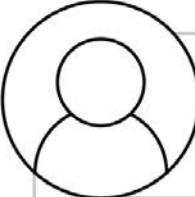
- **Regional implication:** Every persona described mid-career professionals who are skilled, experienced, and loyal to their teams, but Milwaukee’s existing technical workforce is in jeopardy of falling behind without structured, supported pathways into modern technologies such as AI, automation, and IoT. Across personas, Milwaukee’s workforce appeared motivated but at risk of stagnation without modern pathways:

“to stay relevant and advance by applying AI/automation to tangible business problems”
“driven by curiosity about automation and sustainability”

These recurring themes portray a regional workforce eager to modernize but dependent on structured, collaborative pathways into AI, automation, and IoT-related fields.

PERSONA EXERCISE

Mid-Career Technical Talent

	Name: Role: Employer:	Motivators + Barriers:
Opportunity Scenario: Imagine their employer's technical roadmap... what project could they explore?	Value Creation: In this upskilling experience, what value is created for this person?	
What skills would they be learning/applying with your example project?	What value is created for their employer?	
How would you scope expectations/milestones (recognizing other work responsibilities)?	What else could be included to enhance or support the upskilling experience?	

Copy of the persona exercise completed at the MKE Tech Hub Coalition's October 2025 member meeting.

Profile of a Milwaukee Mid-Career Tech Professional

The personas created during the member meeting coalesced into a consistent regional archetype which provided a clear picture of Milwaukee's mid-career technical professional and what they need to keep pace with a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Profile

This individual has between 8 and 15 years of professional experience, often in engineering, software, or systems roles. They are highly competent, deeply embedded in their organization's operations, and proud of the expertise they have built. Many are team leads, project owners, or informal mentors who drive continuity and quality across systems. They are trusted contributors who now face a pivotal moment in their careers: technology is evolving faster than their current skill set, and they want to adapt rather than be replaced.

Implication for the Region

This composite persona is a reflection of Milwaukee's deep bench of experienced professionals who are loyal, curious, and ready to upskill. Their growth depends on accessible, employer-supported pathways into emerging technologies. For the region,

investing in this group represents the fastest and most equitable route to competitiveness, transforming institutional knowledge into sustainable economic strength and resilience.

2. SEWI-ATD Forum: Designing Learning That Works



On October 24, over 100 members of the SEWI Chapter of the Association for Talent Development continued the work by designing targeted upskilling experiences for two composite personas developed from the previous day's session

The challenge: "What amazing upskilling experience can you dream up?" Participants designed applied, project-based learning models without budget constraints, emphasizing scalability, sustainability, and cross-sector collaboration.

Experience Design Challenge

What amazing upskilling experience can you dream up?

Rules of the game

- Pick a persona – focus entirely on them
- Go for big, bold ideas!
- No budget restrictions
- Focus on tangible, applied project work
- Think about sustainable, scalable systems or platforms
- Leverage outside, regional assets and partners
- Leverage a coalition of cross-sector organizations



The above represents the Experience Design Challenge prompt for SEWI-ATD Forum activity.

Key Insights Gained from Experience Design Challenge

The following insights are derived from member responses collected during the SEWI-ATD Experience Design Challenge. Each notable trend reflects how learning and development leaders envision effective upskilling for Milwaukee's mid-career technical talent.

- **Project-first learning is the center of gravity:** Nearly two-thirds of the 33 designs revolved around learning through work itself. Teams proposed applied, real-work learning experiences tied to measurable business outcomes such as simulation-based production scenarios or live data projects. Participants emphasized that mid-career learners do not need more courses; they need projects that count.
- **Human-in-the-loop learning remains essential:** While 23 of 33 designs integrated AI copilots, virtual coaches, or chat-based mentors, participants repeatedly warned that humans must validate AI. Many included checkpoints for mentor review or expert quality assurance, showing broad agreement that automation should amplify, not replace, expert judgment. This blend of AI support and human oversight is becoming a defining feature of trustworthy workforce development.
- **SME time is a bottleneck:** A significant number of groups identified limited subject matter expert availability as a persistent constraint. Proposed solutions included "SME-trained bots" and structured SME office hours to guide learners while scaling limited expertise. This creative use of AI-assisted coaching demonstrates how organizations are reimagining mentorship within a hybrid workforce.
- **Simulation and sandbox learning accelerate transfer:** Fourteen ideas involved synthetic data, incident drills, or mirrored environments that allow participants to practice safely before applying new skills in production. Teams described these as "safe-to-fail sandboxes" where learners can test, iterate, and reflect without risk. The strong interest in simulation-first design suggests that learning innovation in Milwaukee will likely rely on shared sandbox infrastructure that can serve multiple employers.
- **Focus over volume:** Many teams intentionally narrowed scope, recommending that each program focus on three to five critical skills per role within a 12-week sprint. At the meeting, Kelly Palmer recommended focusing on a few "critical" skills rather than a long list, noting that concentrated, deep practice builds confidence faster than content-heavy curricula. Participants reflected this message in their design thinking submissions.
- **Regional implications: Milwaukee's L&D community is ready for collective experimentation:** Across all submissions, participants expressed enthusiasm for ecosystem-level collaboration such as cross-company learning cohorts, shared simulation assets, and common success metrics. However, they also noted the need for a *central convener to coordinate, measure, and scale these efforts*. As one participant observed, "We need someone to hold the hub together." This insight points to a clear role for the MKE Tech Hub Coalition as the regional coordinator of

learning innovation, helping transform individual initiatives into a unified, data-informed upskilling system.

The SEWI-ATD Talent Development Forum revealed that Milwaukee's learning leaders are ready to design practical, applied upskilling experiences that tie directly to real business outcomes. Participants agreed that progress depends on purposeful projects, human guidance supported by AI, and organizational systems that protect time and reward learning.

3. Executive Roundtable: Converting Ideas into Strategy



The Executive Roundtable luncheon concluded the 21-hour collaboration by bringing together 25 leaders from across industries to interpret insights from the previous sessions and identify the most strategic next steps for the region's workforce agenda. The discussion moved from ideas to action, outlining how Milwaukee can translate collective learning into measurable regional impact.

Following a presentation from Kelly Palmer and a review of insights from the previous two sessions, attendees engaged in a forward-looking strategic discussion focused on translating ideas into action. The following key themes emerged:

Key Insights

- **Learning must integrate with transformation:** Leaders agreed that upskilling cannot operate on the margins of business strategy. It must be embedded within modernization initiatives and directly tied to innovation, productivity, and performance goals.
- **Shared learning infrastructure is emerging:** Executives supported building a regional learning backbone that provides shared testbeds, simulation environments, and project-based credentials recognized by multiple employers.

This approach would make learning both scalable and transferable across organizations.

- **Measurement matters:** Participants emphasized the need for tangible evidence of impact, including delivered capstones, demonstrated return on investment, and improvements in operational metrics. Success will be measured by outcomes, not completions.
- **Collective investment appetite:** Many leaders expressed interest in co-sponsoring regional pilots that test new learning models, with the MKE Tech Hub Coalition serving as the neutral convener, connector, and evaluator of results.
- **Regional implications:** The conversation revealed alignment and urgency across sectors. Members want to move beyond planning into collaborative pilots that demonstrate scalable, measurable impact for Milwaukee's tech workforce.

The roundtable attendees confirmed that Milwaukee's leaders share a vision for workforce transformation. There is clear readiness to move from discussion to coordinated pilots that demonstrate measurable business and talent impact. With alignment across sectors and strong momentum, the region is positioned to turn collaboration into a competitive advantage.

What This Means for Milwaukee's Tech Workforce

The synthesis of these 21 hours reveals a maturing regional ecosystem that's ready to move from awareness to activation. The conversations across the three sessions reflect a community that understands both the opportunity and the urgency to strengthen Milwaukee's workforce by helping mid-career professionals grow alongside technology, not apart from it.

- **Mid-career talent is Milwaukee's catalytic advantage:** Mid-career professionals carry the region's institutional memory, customer insight, and operational expertise. When equipped with new skills in AI, data, and automation, they become the bridge between legacy systems and future innovation. Upskilling this group accelerates transformation from within, strengthens retention, and creates the capacity for early-stage professionals to advance into roles of greater responsibility. By expanding what mid-career talent can do, organizations also open pathways for emerging talent to contribute and rise.
- **Upskilling must become part of the region's shared infrastructure:** Sustainable progress will depend on systems that go beyond single day training programs. Shared sandboxes, applied project frameworks, and regionally recognized credentials can create a durable foundation that connects learning to economic growth and ensures equitable access to opportunity.

- **Employer participation determines the scale of impact:** True return on investment comes when learning is embedded in the flow of work, measured through business outcomes, and championed by leadership. The employers who make time for learning, celebrate progress, and align development with strategic goals will set the pace for the region.
- **Milwaukee can model inclusive, human-centered transformation:** By focusing on experienced professionals and collaborative ecosystems, the region can demonstrate that technological advancement and workforce inclusion are not competing goals. Milwaukee has the potential to define what responsible tech adoption looks like: practical, people-driven, and regionally coordinated.

What Comes Next

The insights gathered across these sessions will directly shape the MKE Tech Hub Coalition's 2026 Workforce Offering, which will represent a **shift from isolated training programs to a coordinated regional approach** that equips professionals to grow with technology and enables employers to build capability at scale.

To guide its development and ensure relevance across sectors, the MKE Tech Hub Coalition is assembling a **Workforce Advisory Committee** composed of regional employers, educators, and community leaders.

If your organization is interested in shaping this initiative, reach out to Casey O'Brien, Director of Workforce, at casey.obrien@mketech.org to express your interest or nominate a representative from your team. Your insight will help define the pilots, partnerships, and measures of success that will strengthen Milwaukee's tech workforce for years to come.

As the Coalition moves forward, the call to action is clear. When industry, education, and community align around a shared purpose, learning becomes a regional growth strategy that strengthens competitiveness, inclusion, and long-term resilience across Milwaukee's tech ecosystem.