How Arizona is building a future-ready public workforce

One year after launching a workforce learning partnership with ASU, the state of Arizona is continuing its investment in employee learning

By Carrie Peterson, ASU News
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As employers across the country grapple with artificial intelligence, shifting skill demands and workforce retention, Arizona is making an investment in its people.

One year after launching a first-of-its-kind workforce learning partnership with Arizona State University, the state is seeing early signs that its investment is paying off.

Following the pilot's early success, Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs was able to secure an additional $1 million in the state budget to continue the initiative for a second year.

More than 3,800 state employees — roughly 1 in 10 — engaged in the initiative, representing 77 of Arizona's 105 state agencies. Through professional certificates, skills-based courses and faculty-led classes, employees built capabilities in leadership, artificial intelligence, data, project management and other areas shaping the future of work.

Participants report applying what they learned to improve workflows, strengthen decision-making and better serve Arizona residents.

The results are helping position Arizona as a model for how governments can prepare their workforce for a rapidly changing economy.

(Video: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WrudO2ljio})

Building workforce capacity for a changing Arizona

The initiative launched in July 2025 after employee engagement surveys identified professional learning and development as a top area of interest for state employees.

Hobbs secured funding in the state budget, creating a statewide workforce development program designed to help employees build leadership, digital fluency and decision-making skills needed to serve Arizona in a rapidly changing economy.

As Arizona attracts advanced manufacturing, semiconductor investment and AI-driven industries, state leaders have increasingly focused on ensuring the public workforce can operate with the digital fluency, data-informed decision-making and project execution capabilities needed to support that growth.

Those same capabilities also help state agencies operate more effectively, strengthening the essential services Arizonans rely on every day — from transportation and public safety to health, human services, natural resources and economic development. By investing in employee learning, Arizona is preparing its workforce to improve performance, respond more effectively to community needs and support a growing economy.

“By investing in our workforce, we are strengthening our ability to serve the people of Arizona,” Hobbs said. “It’s exciting that our state employees found so much value in this program and have already translated what they learned into their work.”

The partnership draws on expertise from across ASU's schools and colleges, connecting state employees with faculty-developed learning experiences centered on the skills shaping today's workforce.

Demand exceeded expectations almost immediately. More than 1,300 employees applied for courses within the first week, demonstrating strong interest in leadership, data, AI and project execution skills. Available funding supported enrollment for 725 employees, filling every funded seat.

Learning together at scale

The initiative was designed to strengthen the broad range of capabilities employees rely on every day, recognizing that effective public service depends on more than technical expertise alone.

The first phase introduced a portfolio of skills-based courses and professional certificates focused on leadership, AI, data and project management.

The second phase launched a series of eight faculty-led seminars from a variety of ASU schools and colleges open to employees across state government, from frontline staff to executive leadership.

Designed around practical workplace challenges, the 90-minute keynote-style classes focused on topics including AI and data fluency, leadership during periods of change, cross-agency collaboration and public-sector innovation. Participants explored how to apply AI to daily workflows, use data to inform decisions, strengthen communication and improve execution on complex projects.

The keynote series created a shared learning experience across the state government, bringing together employees from dozens of agencies to explore common challenges and opportunities facing the modern workforce. More than 3,000 employees participated across the series, with

consistently strong attendance across sessions.

From participation to application

For many participants, the value of the learning experience became clear when they returned to work. Survey responses highlighted how employees were immediately applying new ideas, strengthening teams and approaching their work differently.

"I completed the Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Professional Certificate, and I've used the skills I learned to better facilitate needs," said Ernest Marin, correctional sergeant at the Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry. "It has strengthened my skills to separate tasks, requests for coaching and follow-up."

Among employees who completed individual courses and certificates, 99% reported greater confidence applying program concepts at work, 76% had already applied what they learned at work that month and 86% said the experience strengthened their ability to serve Arizona.

Raquel Perlera, a lean coach at the Department of Economic Security, reported that she "applied information gathering and data analysis for problem-solving and process improvement projects, sharing meaningful and relevant insights to drive decision making" and "utilized skills and techniques for strategic planning, developing core questions to ask leaders, gaining different perspectives to understand present situations and to be able to develop future scenarios."

Employees participating in the faculty-led keynote series reported similar results: Across the eight sessions, 90% identified an immediate workplace application for what they learned and 83% reported increased confidence.

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>
> —
> **Katie Hobbs**
> Arizona governor

A model for the future of public service

For ASU, the partnership reflects a broader commitment to helping learners build new skills throughout their lives and careers while strengthening the public workforce that serves Arizona communities. It also demonstrates how a public university can support workforce development by connecting employees with expertise and learning opportunities throughout their careers.

"Arizona is showing everyone what becomes possible when a state invests in its people and a public university invests alongside it," said Marco Serrato, vice president of ASU's Learning

Enterprise. "The skills needed to succeed are evolving faster than ever. By connecting employees with expertise from across ASU, we're helping build a workforce that can adapt, lead and continue delivering value to Arizona communities."

Cynthia Lietz, vice provost and President's Professor in the School of Social Work, led one of the statewide keynotes. She believes effective public service depends on leaders who can continue learning as the world changes around them.

"Public service has always required leaders who can navigate complexity, build trust and respond to change," Lietz said. "Continuous learning helps people strengthen those capabilities and bring new ideas back to the communities they serve."

Many organizations offer professional development opportunities. Arizona's approach is broader in scope. By connecting workforce strategy, economic competitiveness and public-sector capability, the state is treating workforce learning as part of the infrastructure needed to support long-term growth.

As the state of Arizona continues to evolve, leaders across sectors are confronting questions about how to prepare workers for new technologies, changing expectations and emerging opportunities.

Arizona's answer has been to start with the people already serving the state — creating a model that positions workforce learning as a strategic investment in both public service and the state's future.

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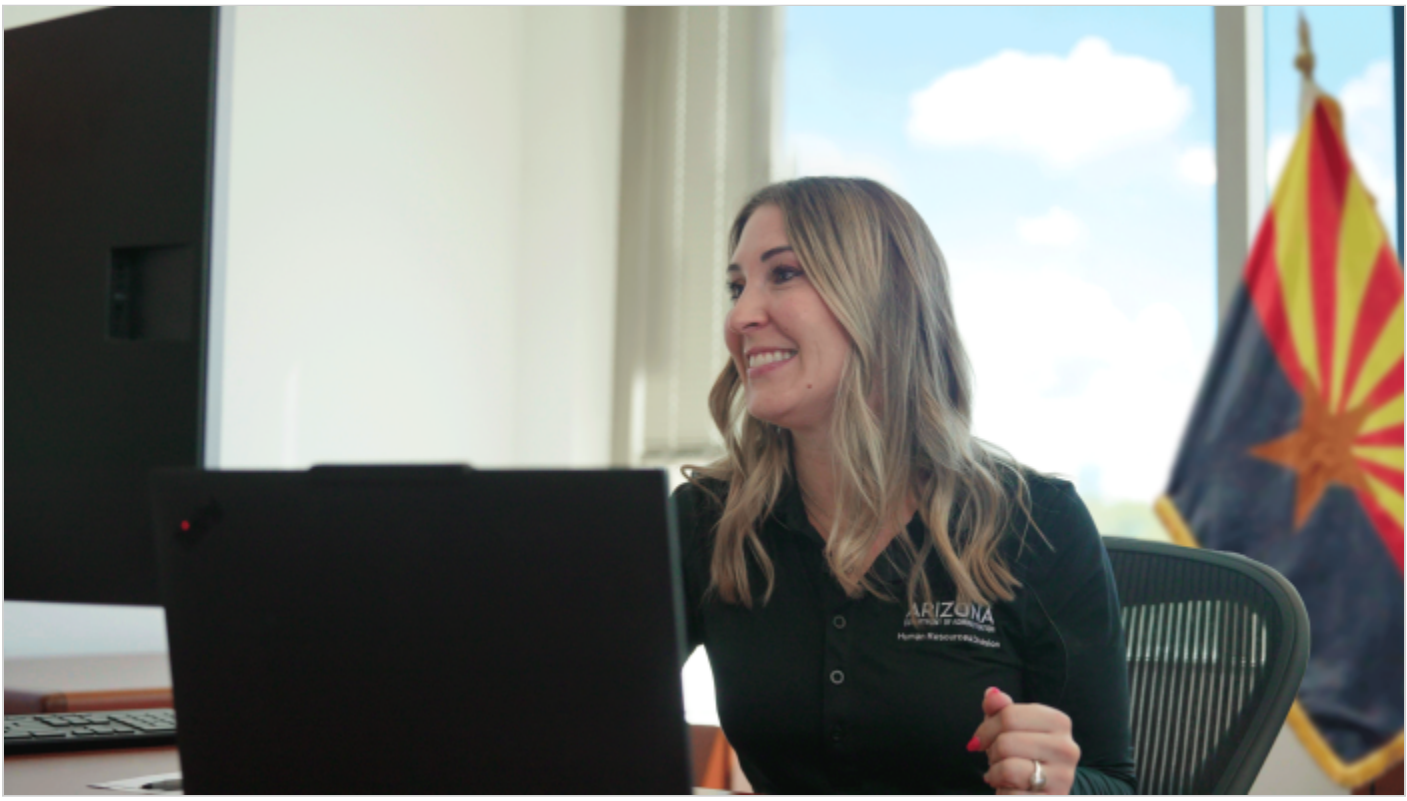
Main image



Nicole Sornsin, human resources director of the Arizona Department of Administration, led the ASU-Arizona workforce project implementation team and also participated in a series of keynote-style classes that covered topics for today's workforce needs. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs speaks at the grand opening of the Materials-to-Fab, or MTF, Center — a groundbreaking collaboration between Arizona State University and Applied Materials Inc., supported by the Arizona Commerce Authority — on Oct. 9, 2025. The MTF Center is designed to accelerate the journey from innovation to fabrication. As Arizona attracts advanced manufacturing, semiconductor investment and AI-driven industries, ASU and the state of Arizona are preparing people for those fields through a workforce learning partnership. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News