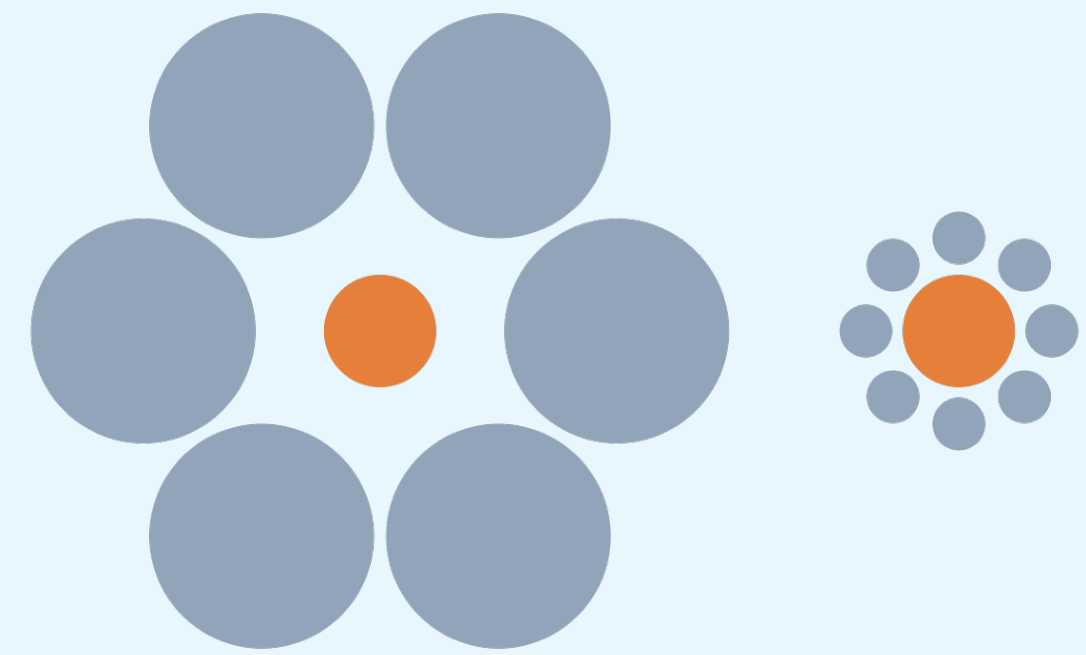# Learning, Working, and Recovering in Context: Building System Capacity for Evidence-Driven Innovation

Samia Amin | Phomdaen Souvanna | Trent Sharp

AIR®
Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Which dot is bigger?

The dots are the same size.

Context matters.
It changes how we experience life. If we want to improve the experiences of others, then we need to understand their context, their lens, and the systems that serve them.

Addressing Inequities with Behavioral Insights, Human Centered Systems Design, and Technology

Workforce programs are often complex and difficult to access and navigate. This is especially true for people and communities with less access to critical resources. Increasing equity in the workforce system requires redesigning programs to meet a wide range of participants' needs. It also requires improving how systems work together to help people move forward. We blend innovative methods to improve participants' experiences and success across diverse contexts.

Where We Start: Pilots to Spark Interest

Pilots can often give states a glimpse of the possible and get excited about using new methods to improve services. AIR, in partnership with DOL's Chief Evaluation Office, worked with states to design and test nudges designed to improve workforce program outcomes.

For example, in Ohio, we used a series of automated text messages to encourage youth to stay engaged with a workforce program. We conducted a randomized controlled trial to understand the impacts.

Automated text messages increased:
- **service take-up rates by 14 percent**
- **service completion rates by 46 percent.**

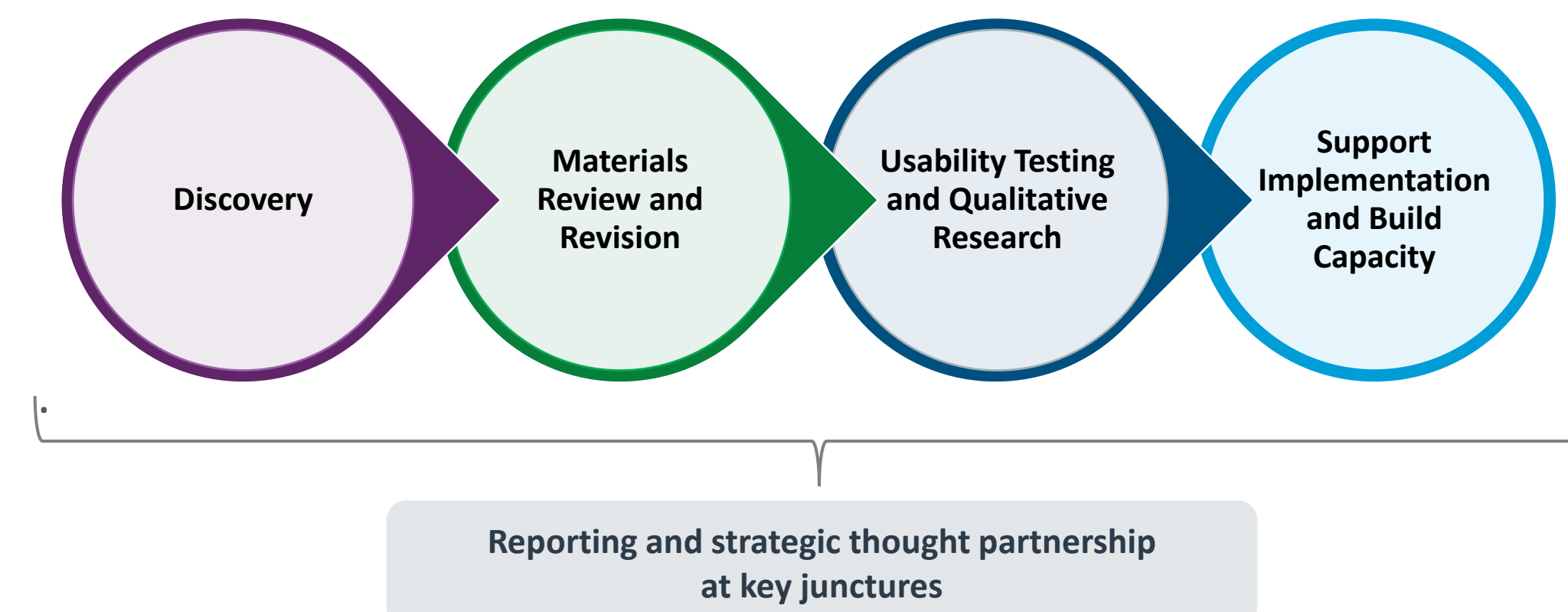**Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Youth Use of Workforce Services in Virtual Contexts**

See: Amin, S., Davis, S., and Fatima, S. (2023). *Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Youth Use of Workforce Services in Virtual Contexts.* Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research. Final report submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor Chief Evaluation Office. Retrieved from dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/DOL-BI-Remote-Services-Study.pdf

What We Do Next: (Re)Design Programs for Equity

The unemployment insurance (UI) system provides income support to eligible workers. UI can be crucial for keeping people out of poverty and stabilizing the labor market. Too often, though, UI is difficult to access and navigate. AIR has partnered with Ohio and Nebraska to use HCD and BI methods to understand barriers to equity in UI.

We've moved from insight to action by fully redesigning hundreds of UI communications and doing usability tests to make sure they work better for underserved communities.

Discovery → Materials Review and Revision → Usability Testing and Qualitative Research → Support Implementation and Build Capacity

Reporting and strategic thought partnership at key junctures

See: (Re)Design for Equity | Workforce Innovation and Learning | American Institutes for Research (air.org)

Where We Are Headed: Place-Based System Transformation

People often need to access multiple support systems to find and thrive in good jobs. Government supports are split across many agencies and programs. To serve workers and learners well, all systems must be customer-oriented, efficient and aligned.

(Re)designing processes in one project within one system can spark state interest in changing and aligning adjacent systems. In Nebraska, our initial charge was to do a plain language and BI revision of UI benefit documents. We leveraged machine learning to assess readability. That freed up time to conduct rich, in-person discovery of customer and staff journeys and the systems features that shape them.

Our deep-dive discovery work gave the state ideas on system improvements. We are finding new ways to support them.

We are now helping them build capacity to improve their engagement with businesses on UI tax and discussing ideas on how to transform their reemployment services supports. They have used insights to invest in other improvement efforts, including revamping UI call center supports.

Keep an eye out for: Amin, S., Souvanna, P, and Sharp T., *Collaborative System Transformation: Addressing Inequities with Behavioral Insights, Human Centered Systems Design, and Technology.* AIR White Paper, Forthcoming.