



## Employer Engagement Tip Sheet for Workforce Organizations

### Partnering with Employers

Strong business alliances are crucial to any workforce program. Your network of connections with employers are, of course, crucial to providing jobs for your job seekers. Employer partners can also offer crucial input to help you better prepare your clients for those jobs. Together, you and your employer partners are creating a two-way talent pipeline, with area businesses bringing training and opportunities to your customers and your organization sending qualified job candidates back to those businesses.

#### **How a committed employer can enhance your workforce program:**

##### General Program & Staff Guidance

- Help define program strategies and goals.
- Provide on-going technical assistance including participation on an advisory board.
- Validate labor market research and recommend target industries.
- Enlighten your staff about credentialing and certification access.
- Provide a better understanding of an industry with externships and other professional development for your staff, trainers, and counselors.

##### Resources

- Provide trainers and subject experts.
- Allow access to space, labs, production facilities, tools, machines, and supplies.
- Where applicable, offer direct financial support, in-kind contributions, or scholarships for education and training.

##### Career-Focused Education & Training

- Confirm the skills and credentials required for targeted occupations and verify that students meet the requirements.
- Identify the principles and courses that are most applicable to their industries.
- Provide guidance to align curricula with employer needs and integrate technical and skills-based learning with academics.

##### Youth Career Exposure

- Act as mentors and provide professional and leadership coaching.
- Host student site visits and participate in career fairs.
- Offer guest speakers for classes and provide students with networking opportunities.
- Offer job training opportunities and work experience such as apprenticeships, internships, cooperative work projects, and competition-based activities.

## Finding Employer Partners

The first step in enlisting businesses in these alliances is identifying potentially compatible partners.

### Expand Your Scope

As you begin to plan your employer engagement outreach, aim for as wide a range of employers and organizations as possible. Partnership opportunities may appear in unexpected places, and exposing your workforce trainees to a broad array of jobs and industries gives them a broader choice of career options. If you are assembling an employer advisory group, representatives from different industries and business groups will provide you with a balanced range of experiences and perspectives on employees, hiring, training, and more.

### Review Your Knowledge of Local Businesses

Chances are, you and your team already have a certain amount of information about local employers, industry sector organizations and partnerships, labor-management organizations, Registered Apprenticeship sponsors, and/or regional innovation clusters. Make a comprehensive list of these. Discuss each one with your team and annotate your list to indicate which may have potential as workforce partners. Is it a large company? Will it be hiring soon? Does one of your staff have a contact there? This exercise will point you toward your first potential business partnerships.

### Build on Current Employer Partnerships

Utilize any contacts you may have among members of the business community. Not only may they be able to help you establish or strengthen a working partnership with their own company or employer, they may also be willing to act as a champion to *other* businesses.

### Research Labor Market Information

Labor market information (LMI) provides valuable statistics – real employment data, job forecasts, wages, demographics, and other relevant information such as:

- The industries that are hiring in your region.
- The jobs they need to fill and skills they require.
- The occupational sectors that are projected to grow.
- The education and training needed for future jobs.

Exploring LMI for your town, county, and state will help you add to and refine your initial list of employers. The best-known source of LMI is the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). The Department of Labor also operates a [community of practice site](#) with a wealth of information. States have LMI sites that provide more localized data. A list of state-level resources can be found on the [CareerOnestop website](#).

### Consult Local Business Organizations

Tap into local business groups such as chambers of commerce, employer associations, and economic development agencies. Besides being a good source of information about local businesses and industries, they may be prime partnership candidates themselves.

If you are an organization or education-based program, don't forget to consult your local American Job Center (CareerOneStop Center). They can be of great help at every step of your employer engagement process.

## Initiating Employer Relationships

### Know Your Employer Partner's Motivation

Most likely an employer's prime motivation will be to recruit and train new employees. They may also be motivated by a desire to give back to their community. Knowing what moves them to work with you enables you to approach your partnership in a way that is most compatible with an employer's needs and time limitations.

### Outline the Benefits – and Expectations

Explain how your program can benefit employers with:

- Access to a reliable and long-term source of qualified job candidates.
- The ability to influence training and academics to align with their skills needs.
- Credential and certification programs that meet industry standards.
- If you run a youth program, the option to work with students on a trial basis and evaluate their job performance.

Provide them with a clear understanding of how your program works, how it is managed, what is expected of employer partners, and any other relevant information. Inviting them to witness your program in action can be an effective way to introduce them to your organization.

## Meeting with Employers

Do some in-depth research before arranging a meeting. Study any information you have already collected with your team. Then, explore company websites to become familiar with their:

- Products and services.
- Size and structure: Public or privately owned? Family-run? Part of a larger corporation?
- Financial fitness: Growing? Maintaining? Downsizing?
- Number and types of employees.
- Names and titles of senior management.
- Recent news or other helpful information.

Determine the most appropriate individual to contact and, if possible, ask for an introduction by a friend or colleague.

### Establish an Agenda

Plan for no more than two or three people to meet with the potential partner, and make sure your team or project leader is included. Hold a pre-meeting among yourselves to prepare and develop an agenda. Be sure to find out how many people will be attending on the employer side and share your agenda and any promotional materials in advance. Be respectful of your counterpart's schedule and mindful of the role they play in the organization. Have a clear understanding of:

- **Who** will be representing the employer so you can prepare questions they can answer and provide information they will consider relevant.
- **What** you hope to accomplish with them. They may not be the decision maker, so this may just be a foot in the door. You may need to request a second meeting to move forward.
- **Why** the partnership will be of benefit to their organization, as outlined above.

## Work Toward a Commitment

If you sense during your meeting that there is good potential for a partnership, raise the issue of a commitment in closing. However, be aware that this may not happen at the first meeting. Have patience and give attention to the employer's questions, ideas, needs, and circumstances. Achieving a commitment will most likely occur only after your potential partner:

- Clearly grasps the intent and processes of your program.
- Believes your program will benefit the company mission and integrate with its operations.
- Understands in detail what is expected from them in time and resources.
- Has support from management and any affected staff.

Once the employer begins to suggest ways for collaborating, this may be a sign that discussing a commitment is appropriate.

## Follow Up

One or two days after the meeting, send a note thanking the participants for their time, outlining the action items you will be following up on, and stating when they should expect to hear from you again. You may also want to include any action items the employer may have agreed to and let them know you are looking forward to hearing from them.

## Move Forward

A commitment from an employer produces a new set of tasks for your team. As you further communicate with your new partner and learn more about them, you will begin to ascertain the depth and intent of their interest. You will more fully understand exactly what they seek from the partnership and what both sides can gain from it.

## Developing & Maintaining Employer Relationships

As you welcome new employer partners to your program, start modestly. Ask for little more than advice until you build trust. Make several workplace visits to learn more about the employer and how you can collaborate. [\*A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers\*](#) (Wilson, 2015) offers a few tips:

- Learn to “speak business”: Avoid organizational jargon and focus on the language and processes of your partner's business.
- Bring value: Suggest joint strategies, approaches, and training ideas that will address the employer's challenges.

Remember that partnership building is a gradual process. Use these steps to guide you in securing and strengthening your collaboration:

### 1. Continue learning about each employer.

Gaining familiarity with an employer and their workplace is a must in order to serve both them and your clients. You'll want to know:

- The company's staffing needs and types of training they offer.
- The standard job progression and the skills required for entry and advancement.
- Their industry's certification and credentialing standards.

- Internship and job shadowing opportunities for youth and adult trainees.

## 2. Agree on employer roles and responsibilities.

Before entering into a formal partnership, you should agree on the employer's specific responsibilities. Keep in mind that they are subject to regulations, insurance requirements, and government oversight. Never place your employer partners in positions that may endanger their controls or push against any legal or process-oriented constraints. Underline your intent to shield them from any negative issues or events.

## 3. Formalize your discussions in a written agreement.

A written document removes much of the potential for misunderstandings and disappointments. Once there is verbal consensus on an employer's specific obligations, consider developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to describe the scope of their responsibilities and note any limitations, issues, and legalities. This document may also address such particulars as:

- Job site safety, liability, proprietary assets, limits on use of facilities or equipment, and other employer issues.
- The role of employer individuals who will serve your program (such as a "loaned" instructor).
- How and when communications will occur.
- Who will own or control any jointly created products or investments (such as a new curriculum).
- List employer contributions, if applicable, laying out a timeframe for the assistance and indicating how it will be used.

Keep in mind that some employers may not want, or may not be ready, for a formal agreement. Do not rush them into signing one. As you work together more closely, it will become clear whether a written agreement is needed. Once you are discussing concrete contributions and roles, ask if you may take notes leading to an MOU. (A good source of information about memoranda of understanding may be found at [FormSwift](#).) Or use a somewhat less formal approach by following any substantial discussion with an email that reviews what was promised or agreed upon.

As you enter the formal agreement process, expect to have disagreements. Decide beforehand how best to manage them. Usually, open discussions held with the goal of maintaining a positive relationship will help overcome such challenges.

## 4. Understand the Stages of Your Employer Relationship

An employer will behave differently, and your collaboration will change as your relationship with them evolves. **The diagram below** represents a pattern of partnership maturity that may help you visualize and map out your interactions and activities at various stages of development.

EMERGING, DEVELOPING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS					
NEW RELATIONSHIP		WORKING RELATIONSHIP		STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP	
	Level One	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four	Level Five
<b>Key Employer Roles</b>	Advising	Capacity-building	Co-designing	Convening	Leading
<b>Stage of the Relationship With YCC</b>	Initial contact/new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
<b>Engagement Actions and Examples</b>	Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates	Job site tours; speakers; mock interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting	Curriculum and pathway development; adjunct faculty and preceptors	College-employer sectoral partnerships	Multi-employer/multi-college partnerships

Source: Jobs for the Future. [A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers](#) (Wilson, 2015).

■ **New Relationship: Level One.**

Advising. This entry level is primarily for information exchange. You will be assessing the employer’s needs and introducing them to your program processes and potential. A good way to do that is to invite them to attend meetings and sit in on training.

■ **Working Relationship: Levels Two – Three.**

Capacity-building & Co-designing. Employer trust grows and a working relationship solidifies, leading to substantial contributions: job site visits; apprenticeships; loan or donation of resources; curriculum development.

■ **Strategic Partnership: Levels Three – Five.**

Convening & Leading. You and the employer representatives become more reliant on and valuable to each other. You are now working together as full-fledged partners, perhaps in collaboration with colleges or other institutions and organizations.

Finally, sustaining and strengthening productive business partnerships requires planning, consistent monitoring, and solid communications. There is no predictable model for building these relationships. The process will differ from employer to employer, and the timeline will vary. One may never move past a “working relationship” while another will expand their role and develop into a long-standing alliance. Ultimately, however, the time and energy you invest will benefit your organization as well as your partner’s business and will contribute in a critical way to the economic vitality of your community.