

YES! Youth Employment Solutions Center

Engaging Employers: Partnering for Success

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Introduction

While the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) stresses greater involvement of employers in the workforce development systems, voices of employers are often missing from research and policy discussions around disability employment. Many employers are disconnected and disengaged from the discussions around hiring individuals with disabilities. Most employers want information and advice from “trusted brokers” (Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas, and Glover (2010).

Employer engagement is a key strategy for workforce development as it aligns programs and services with employer needs (Barnow and Spaulding, 2015) and is necessary in connecting the business and disability communities. Employer engagement can range from advisory to long-term partnerships. Working with employers over an extended period builds trust and increases mutual interests (Wilson, 2015).

We should view employer engagement as a continuum – as an area to grow. Looking at the following:

- New relationship – obtaining information: discussing hiring needs, skills needed and on-going labor needs and challenges
- Working relationship – proposing specific employer services, work experiences and employment placements that are beneficial to employers and demonstrates effective job matching
- Stronger working relationship – additional worksite tours, job shadows, work experiences, internships, and job placements
- Partnership – co-designing employer services and assessing the impact and benefit of the employer services
- Strategic partnership – advocates and promotes hiring - reaching out when there is a hiring need, participating in events (e.g., reverse job fairs); participates in Employer/Provider Consortiums or Business Advisory Councils or Disability IN Affiliates

All employer relationships are not equal – the ladder of employer engagement shows the development of relationships (Wilson, 2015).

Figure 1. Ladder of Employer Engagement

	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV	Level V
Types of Relationships	New Relationship	Working Relationship	Stronger Working Relationship	Partnership	Strategic Partnership
Key Provider Role	Learning, assessing labor needs and organizational culture	Proposing specific employer services and job candidates	Capacity building; expanding services and placements	Advising; co-designing employer services; assessing impact of employer services	Convening; leading; disseminating information on internal policies and employment practices for hiring job candidates with disabilities; participation in employer/provider consortiums or business advisory councils or Disability:IN affiliates
Stage of relationship	Initial contact/new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
Activity examples	Informational interviews; labor needs assessments; work site tours; job analysis	Employer proposals and presentations; work experiences; community based assessments; trial work placements; internships	Additional work site tours; job shadows; work experiences; community based assessments; additional trial work placements; internships	Employer satisfaction surveys; interviews to assess impact of employer services; providing disability related training	Advising on internal policies and employment practices for hiring job candidates with disabilities; developing and participating in employer/provider consortiums or business advisory councils

Source: adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint

Depending on the size of the business, a relationship might look different. For example, a larger business might have relationships across all levels, while a smaller business might only have relationships in one or two levels. Understand that building relationships is a gradual process – it is about building trust and demonstrating the benefit to the employers which can only be done over

time. Change from “education or social service speak” to business speak – avoid acronyms and terminology that education or social service-focused. Additionally, focus on needs and solutions versus a “program” and identify ways to bring value to the employer or business.

When building a long-term relationship, keep the lines of communication open, continue learning about each employer, and establish ways to engage the employer as often as possible (e.g., worksite tours, job shadows; additional labor needs assessments over time, advisory board, speaker at event, mock interviews community-based assessments, work experiences, etc.).

For a business relationship to be successful, it is important to get commitment on four levels and that each is identified to build and maintain a dynamic relationship. This is important because you may have identified a champion within the business, but if you have not identified a willing supervisor, then the long-term relationship may fail. The Commonwealth Corporation (2013) identified four types of “Yes” relationships:

- **Champion** – Someone who cares about employment of individuals with disabilities and is connected at any level to the business but also has connections with others within the business. This person can introduce a provider of employment services or prospective workers with disabilities to key decision-makers.
- **System** – Someone who understands how a disability employment services organization can be a resource, understands the business and provides guidance or structure in the process of hiring job seekers with disabilities.
- **Supervisory** – Someone who will provide supervision and assist in designing experiences or work opportunities for job seekers with and without disabilities, as well as providing feedback regarding the services and individual’s performance.
- **Fiscal** – Someone who provides guidance regarding the ability to hire based on financial factors and the anticipated value the individual and the employment services brings to the business.

The Employer Relationship Mapping Tool (Commonwealth Corporation, 2013) can be used to identify the relationships you have or need to cultivate for long-term relationships.

Figure 2. The Employer Relationship Mapping Tool

Champion	System
Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?	Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?
Supervisory	Fiscal
Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?	Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?

Business Case for Hiring

In a report from Accenture in partnership with [DisabilityIn](#) (the leading nonprofit resource for business disability inclusion worldwide, with a network of over 270 corporations expands opportunities for people with disabilities across enterprises) and the [American Association of People with Disabilities](#), many employers have not leveraged the talents of individuals with disabilities for three primary reasons:

- lack of understanding of the scope of the talent available;
- lack of understanding of the potential benefits; and
- misconceptions about return on investment.

However, companies that have hired employees with disabilities have higher revenues, net income, and profit margins. Beyond revenue, employers noted additional benefits of hiring employees with disabilities such as increased innovation (adapting and ensuring products and services are accessible); improved productivity (including lower turnover of employees); improved market share and enhanced reputation. (Accenture, 2018).

In focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019 with employers, discussions were organized around pre-determined topics related to customized employment and economic impact. To meet the selection criteria to participate, employers must have hired at least one individual with a disability into a job that meets the WIOA definition of customized employment and have experienced an operational or economic benefit from the recruiting, hiring, and retention of a worker with a disability through customizing a position in their company/organization. The findings supported specific impacts of customized employment from the perspective of participating employers. These included:

- Reduced costs to recruit, hire, train, and manage employees
- Increased productivity
- Increased job retention and quality of hire
- Use of alternative/flexible hiring processes
- Assessment of labor needs

Findings supported general impacts of hiring individuals with disabilities from the perspective of participating employers. These included:

- Access to employer/provider coalitions and single point of contact
- Universal application of supports and accommodations
- Use of internships and other onboarding strategies
- Expanded hiring and employee promotion
- Improved workplace culture
- Identification of internal champions

Several items were repeated by all employers, namely reduced recruitment, training, management costs and increased productivity.

What Employers Want

2,500 employers were surveyed in an independent study to determine what they look for in employees, with or without disabilities (Owens, 2007). Of the 2,500 surveys, 838 responded (response rate of approximately 34%) and seven agreed to participate in a small focus group. The employers were diverse geographically (from urban, suburban, and rural communities); by size (Large >500 employees; Medium between 499-250 employees; and Small < 249 employees); and by industry/sector (e.g., manufacturing, retail, hospitality, health care). Employers trended around three traits that they look for in any employee they hire: reliability/dependability; flexibility/availability; and productivity/quality.

During the focus group meetings, employers discussed that while the three aforementioned traits were of the highest value in their employee recruitment efforts, employees did not necessarily need all three traits. For example, one employer noted that in his business, the most important traits were dependability and flexibility. His turnover was high and while he also needed productivity, if someone came to work every day and was able to work when they were needed, he had other people who could ensure the productivity and quality was there. Another employer explained that in his industry, the most important trait was accuracy (quality). He would be willing to overlook or accommodate absences or only having to work a certain day or time if the employee was accurate on their job.

This perspective suggests that Employment Consultants need to ask questions that draw out these unique needs among employers to determine whether an individual job seeker would be a good match. Asking questions about employer need or industry expectations can provide us with valuable information about the business needs and can then help us focus on presenting what the candidate has to offer and the value they bring. Connecting core strengths of the candidate to specific needs of the business as identified by the hiring or recruiting representative will likely lead to most successful hirings of youth and young adults with disabilities.

One employer also noted the importance of disability employment service providers developing long-term relationships with employers:

“The most important thing service providers can do is develop relationships with employers. If you come to me with a person looking for work, I had better know you already. If there is no personal relationship it is doomed to fail.”

Employers stated that they are typically neutral about hiring employees with disabilities when approached by an employment service provider. They expressed frustrations when Employment Consultants start and end the conversation talking about their candidates or services without ever asking more specific questions and show a genuine interest in the business. The employers noted that the first meeting should be about building a trusting relationship.

What Works

A partnership model of employer engagement – in which Employment Consultants and disability employment service organizations provide competent service delivery, develop a trusting relationship with employers, provide high quality customer service to employers, identify mutual benefits to partnering on addressing employee recruitment goals, and provide ongoing services – is critical (Hagner and Cooney, 2003). A strong model of employer engagement respects and empowers the business community over time which ultimately leads to increased employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

1. Employment consultants provide support and expertise to business that develops employer's knowledge and skills when it comes to hiring persons with a disability. This could include training co-workers to support employees with disabilities both at work and socially (e.g., holiday parties, company picnics, break room).
2. Business Advisory Councils and Employer/Provider Consortia where employers can share and discuss successes, challenges, and resources for building inclusive hiring practices.
3. Expanding diversity and inclusion programs to include individuals with disabilities.

Summary

Employer engagement is a key strategy for workforce development as it aligns programs and services with employer needs and is necessary in connecting the business and disability communities. Employer engagement can range from advisory to long term partnerships. Working with employers over an extended period builds trust and increases mutual interests. We should view employer engagement as a continuum – New Relationship, Working Relationship, Stronger Working Relationship, Partnership and Strategic Partnership. Depending on the size of the business, a relationship might look different. For example, a larger business might have relationships across all levels while a smaller business might only have relationships in one or two levels. Understand that building relationships is a gradual process – it's about building trust and demonstrating the benefit to the employers which can only be done over time. When building a long-term relationship, keep the lines of communication open, continue learning about each employer, and establish ways to engage the employer as often as possible (e.g., worksite tours, job shadows; additional labor needs assessments over time, advisory board, speaker at event, mock interviews, community based assessments, work experiences, etc.). To establish and maintain an employer partnership, employment consultants and disability employment service organizations need to make a business case for why the target employer should continue to work with an employment program. Evidence suggests that companies that have hired employees with disabilities have higher revenues, net income, and profit margins as well as reduced costs to recruit, hire, train, and manage employees, increased productivity and increased job retention and quality of hire. A strong model of employer engagement respects and empowers the business community over time, which ultimately leads to increased employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

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