



Making the Connections: Growing and Supporting New Organizations: Intermediaries

The Need for Intermediaries

Despite a number of pieces of supportive legislation and identified effective practices, youth with disabilities continue to experience high unemployment as well as insufficient opportunities to obtain competitive employment with the potential of career growth. Too many examples of success exist to attribute this lack of progress to any inherent unemployability of youth with disabilities. Because these successes have generally been achieved without extraordinary fiscal expense, the lack of progress cannot be attributed simply to a lack of money and resources. Rather, critical disconnections exist between and among community institutions. The goal of improving educational and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities would be better served by focusing on the strategic and coordinated use of the resources currently available within a state's education and workforce development systems.

Building and Supporting the Right Type of Organizations: Intermediaries

Over the past decade a new type of organization has emerged, building on the most promising practices of connecting job seekers and job providers. The American Assembly at Columbia University, with support from several major foundations, conducted an early 2003 Assembly on the issue of building and growing intermediaries. The Assembly identified three key goals of workforce intermediaries:

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the US Department of Labor (DOL), recognizing the need for more effective linkages between the supply and demand sides of workforce development, is testing a new organizational strategy – intermediary organizations. By aligning and brokering multiple services across institutional and funding sources, intermediary organizations can play an important role in improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities while at the same time assisting employers in meeting their need for qualified skilled workers. This brief is for policymakers and program managers at the state and community level that are involved in developing intermediaries.

- **To bring workers into the American mainstream.** Success for these organizations means that workers are employed in jobs that offer the promise of financial stability.
- **To increase business efficiency and productivity.** Organizations are equally concerned with serving employers' needs and helping businesses become increasingly productive. They realize that business and worker success are interdependent.
- **To enhance regional competitiveness.** These groups understand that the health of regional economies affects the ability to advance workers and strengthen business.

The number of such efforts has risen from a handful in the early 1990s to several hundred

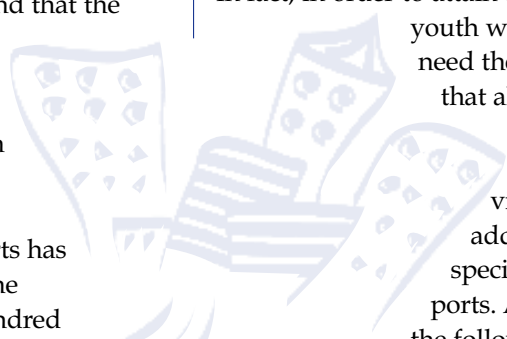
today. Although they approach their tasks in different ways, successful intermediary organizations bring together key partners and functions to advance careers for all workers (recognizing the special needs of low-skilled, low-wage workers), to increase business productivity, and to improve regional competitiveness (The American Assembly, 2003).

A Focus on the Needs of the Customers

The workforce development system has two key customers: youth and adults seeking employment, and employers seeking capable workers. A substantial body of information documents what each group needs; with careful study and action, this information can direct efforts in the workforce development field toward organizing and facilitating better linkages between these two customer groups.

What do Youth Customers Need?

Federal investments in research and demonstration initiatives have shown that when given opportunities, knowledgeable staff guidance, and supportive environments, youth with disabilities succeed in the workplace. In fact, in order to attain career success, youth with disabilities need the same things that all youth need, with attention in individual cases to additional and specialized supports. All youth need the following:





- access to high-quality standards-based education, regardless of the setting;
- information about career options;
- exposure to the world of work;
- opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills;
- strong connections to caring adults;

- access to safe places to interact with their peers; and
- support services to allow them to become independent adults.

Ultimately, youth with disabilities need assistance in navigating multiple, and often confusing, eligibility requirements and referral mechanisms to receive the benefits of programs and services avail-

able to help them. Organizations working with youth, with and without disabilities, need a services manager responsible for tracking and advocating to guarantee that the youths needs are addressed through different stages of learning and development.

What do Employer Customers Need?

According to the Center on Workforce

GUIDEPOSTS FOR INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS TO MEET EMPLOYER NEEDS
MICRO LEVEL INTERMEDIARY

Employer Needs	Workforce Professional Obligations: Individual Programs
Awareness of recruitment resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect with existing business and employer networks and job referral and placement organizations; • Market services through existing community forums (e.g., newsletters, job fairs, etc.); • Join business organizations; • Build and maintain networks of business and employer contacts through continuous dialogue; • Make direct contact with new employers.
Effective applicant screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify competencies needed for each job and industry; • Visit companies to identify needs; • Understand and adhere to typical company screening processes as closely as possible; • Know each youth’s skills, interests, and aptitudes; • Match youth to employer needs and circumstances.
Applicants with technical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure youth are enrolled in updated and rigorous skills training programs; • Identify and address barriers to accessing training programs; • Match youth skills to job and task assignments.
Applicants with soft skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage employers to support job shadowing and short-term internships as initial effort to expose youth to the workplace culture; • Prepare and support youth in soft skills (e.g., appropriate work behavior, language, dress, etc.); • Match youth with peer and adult mentors.
Convenient access to applicants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize red tape; • Coordinate employer outreach with other professionals; • Respond to employer outreach efforts.
Support for youth with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and address needed job accommodations; • Identify and address accessibility issues at workplaces; • Provide on-going post-placement follow up with students and employers; • Prepare and support youth with disabilities to understand and manage job-related disability issues (e.g., disclosure, reasonable accommodation needs, etc.); • Conduct periodic disability and diversity awareness training for supervisors and co-workers.
Return on investment of time and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect employers’ time; • Keep meetings short and informative; • Ensure that both support services and youths’ presence are benefits, not detriments, to employer operations.



Preparation of the US Chamber of Commerce, the development of a future workforce is a high priority for our nation’s businesses. In addition to needing workers with specific, industry-related skills, employers are looking for workers who have so-called “soft skills,” such as the ability to work as team members, respond to supervision, follow directions, etc. To find such

workers, and to insure a future supply of such workers, employers need an awareness of and easy access to recruitment resources, as well as effective processes for screening applicants. They also need to function in a cost effective manner, that is, to receive a reasonable return on their investment of time and resources in developing and recruiting their workforce. One

avenue for employer investment in human resources is involvement in youth work preparation programs.

Employers, however, need support to host youth in the workplace. A recent study conducted by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) surveyed employers who have hosted

**GUIDEPOSTS FOR COMMUNITY-WIDE STRATEGIES TO MEET EMPLOYER NEEDS
MACRO LEVEL INTERMEDIARY**

Employer Needs	Workforce Professional Obligations: Community-Wide Systems and Supports
Community awareness of industry needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop profile of employers by size, type, and location; • Identify employment trends, including projecting skill needs; • Update information periodically; • Develop clearinghouse of skill requirements (standards) used by key local industries.
Supporting and coordinating work of program providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare and maintain directory of employer liaisons in all education and training programs in region; • Convene the employer liaisons on regular basis; • Develop broad-based, business-advised marketing strategies for advocating employer needs and views; • Present program information from all providers based on a business perspective; • Promote the participation of workforce development professionals in activities that educate them about business and industry (e.g., externships, job shadows, etc.).
Quality skill development programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the development of, and participation of youth in updated and rigorous technical skills training programs; • Encourage the incorporation of soft skills development into youth and technical training programs.
Products and services that support youth in the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In concert with program providers and employers, develop work-based learning tools (e.g., assessment of skills development, checklists for use by workplace supervisors, etc.); • Develop and provide training for employees responsible for working with youth; • Identify any gaps in products and services and establish common strategies among the providers and employers to fill such gaps.
Convenient access to programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish ways to streamline the referrals between employers and youth programs across the age range; • Promote the use of One-Stop Career Centers.
Support youth with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote universal access to training programs; • Identify and make accessible to employers community resources on accommodations and workplace supports; • Provide or ensure access to training for employees of businesses regarding different types of disabilities; • Foster a disability-friendly workplace culture across worksites.
Continuous improvement of youth programs services and supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the effectiveness of youth program supports and services for both employers and youth (e.g., customer satisfaction surveys); • Help secure funds for evaluations.



youth with disabilities in their workplaces about their experience. The study revealed that most employers prefer to follow their internal human resource procedures when bringing youth with disabilities into the workplace, but are willing and able to make accommodations and adaptations to these procedures when they have competent help from trained professionals.

Employers' willingness to offer opportunities is ultimately influenced by two factors: 1) awareness of these programs (i.e. how well such programs are marketed to them), and 2) availability of competent intermediary entities, such as transition or workforce development programs and professionals, to provide access to young job seekers. In youth transition and workforce development programs, a host of organizations already exists to link youth and employers, including school transition programs, disability employment programs, workforce development youth programs, and community rehabilitation programs. With so many entities vying for employer attention, both within and outside the disability employment arena, employers are likely to remain uninterested or confused, forced to make sense on their own of multiple and disjointed initiatives.

Micro vs Macro Intermediary Functions

With their dual customer focus, intermediary organizations offer one

possible solution for addressing these and other types of issues necessary to ensure that youth receive the work-based experiences which research has shown they need to succeed. Thus, although there is increasing recognition that intermediary functions are critical to youth success and to employer operations, a key difference remains between intermediaries that connect individual youths to individual employers (the micro level) and those that link various programs and services to each other or to the larger employer community (the macro level).

While the establishment of local One-Stop Centers across the nation is an important step toward coordinating and integrating the many services available to address the career-attainment needs of youth and adults, continued and more strategic alignment of services and service delivery from the macro level is necessary. Currently, only a limited number of individual youth programs and workforce professionals are consciously and strategically related to or integrated with macro level community-wide efforts to meet employer needs. States should consider how to develop and support such intermediaries. These macro intermediaries can then build the capacity of existing organizations providing direct services – the micro intermediaries. Utilizing this macro-micro approach to meeting employer needs can 1) strengthen the ability of micro intermediaries to gain

the trust of employers and be helpful in meeting the employers' human resource and operational needs, and 2) establish a distinct and cogent link between "grassroots" youth services organizations and the systems and supports that meet community and employer needs.

Establishing new ways of doing business takes time, and none of this work can be successful without active participation of state and local workforce policy boards established by the Workforce Investment Act (1998). While they are not the sole source of financing and human capital, their involvement in the strategic planning process is necessary from the beginning, and those responsible for developing intermediaries need a solid understanding of both state and local workforce boards.

References

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NCWD/Youth is working to ensure that youth with disabilities are provided full access to high quality services in integrated settings to gain employment and independent living.

NCWD/Youth is doing all of the following:

- Supporting state and local policies that promote full access to high quality services for youth with disabilities;
- Strengthening the services provided by organizations responsible for delivery of workforce development services; and,
- Improving the awareness, knowledge, and skills of individuals responsible for providing direct services to youth.

PARTNERS

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- InfoUse
- National Association of Workforce Boards
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, University of Minnesota
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National Youth Employment Coalition
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