

Building Lasting Connections to Employers: *Developing Community-Wide Intermediaries*

Well-supported employer participation is essential to successful workforce development programs. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which funds a system of programs throughout the country that assist individuals, including youth with disabilities, in overcoming barriers to employment through job training and placement, gave heightened attention to the role of employers. There are important provisions in WIA designed to attract more employers to the nation's workforce investment system, including the establishment of Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), which are policy making entities led by employers.

A survey conducted in 2002 by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce revealed that the One Stop Center System remains largely underutilized by employers. A number of research studies have been conducted about what influences and motivates employers to partner with workforce development and employment service entities. Regardless of job seeker category, studies consistently show that employers' motivations for participating in workforce development programs are fairly straightforward. Employer willingness to hire individuals represented by these programs or to host work-based experiences is ultimately influenced by one or more of three factors:

1. How well programs address a particular workforce need of the company;
2. How well programs address an industry-wide workforce need;

3. How well programs meet a perceived community-wide need that ultimately makes it a good place to do business.

Mutual misunderstanding and major differences in organizational style contribute to the challenge in connecting employers to workforce development programs. Most workforce investment programs and services are organized and operated in a way that is not in synch with the way businesses operate. Further, many employers do not operate their businesses based upon the geographic boundaries of governmental jurisdictions that typically govern workforce investment and youth development programs. Moreover they generally do not have paid or specially assigned personnel who can spend time learning about government sponsored workforce programs that may help them. Thus, new approaches to meeting the needs of employers are necessary so that current and future job seekers are connected more effectively to the workplace.

Emerging Workforce Intermediaries

Historically, to meet their charge to help individuals with employment barriers find and maintain employment, the workforce development delivery system has relied on contracted organizations that link individual job seekers with individual employers. For example, WIBs have contracts with One Stop operators and youth service providers, and state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

has contracts with community rehabilitation programs. These organizations act as important agents in negotiating the matching of workers with jobs. In the case of youth programs, these matches typically also provide career exploration, internships, and other work-based experiences to the youth. However, these organizations have mostly focused on individual job seeker outcomes such as placements, wages earned, etc., which speak to the supply side of the workforce investment equation. They have not focused, as much on the demand side, that is, employer needs such as productivity and earnings. This is one reason that there has been uneven participation of employers in workforce investment programs (PEERS, 2003).

In recent years, however, a new type of organization has emerged that represents recognition of the need to change how employers are engaged in workforce investment (Gilroth, 2004). Some of these organizations operate as community-wide intermediaries, linking an array of service providers to businesses and to each other. Not only do these organizations attend equally to the supply and demand sides of workforce investment, but they also deal with broader community circumstances and interests that influence the success of the publicly funded workforce development system.





What do Community-Wide Intermediaries Do?

The most distinguishing characteristic of community-wide intermediaries is the emphasis on serving “dual customers,” that is, current and future workers AND employers. These community-wide intermediaries tend to focus on results-driven dual customer outcomes as opposed to a specific target group of job seekers. These intermediaries take many forms and may include such entities as community-

based organizations, business groups such as Chambers of Commerce, community colleges, or any entity or combination of entities with the willingness and resources to conduct the broad range of activities necessary to connect community partners to one another and to the larger business community. More than a decade of research and practice reflecting the voices of employers and their representatives offers clear indications about what employers want from the public sector

workforce investment system. These employer voices point to key activities for community-wide intermediaries to pursue in order to create a more employer-friendly system; examples are listed in the following two tables. The first table focuses on activities that promote a more employer-savvy network of providers, while the second table focuses on an array of tasks that relate directly to what only employers can do in addressing workforce investment circumstances.

**TABLE I:
SUPPORTING PROVIDERS TO MEET EMPLOYER NEEDS**

Employer Needs	Service provider competencies	Community-wide intermediary support activities
Supported and coordinated network of providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing to prospective employers • Understanding of and adherence to typical company screening processes • Thorough knowledge of youth skills, interests, and aptitudes • Matching youth to employer needs and circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene providers • Map and align program offerings with industry priorities and skill requirements • Coordinate and unify employer outreach • Develop and provide training to provider staff • Assist WIBs, VR, and other contracting entities to develop vendor requirements for meeting demand side needs • Identify and pursue alternate or additional funds to support work of providers
Products and services that support youth in the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing and using employer support materials that are reviewed and endorsed by business partners • Providing post-placement follow up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and distribute materials and guides for working with employers • Develop and distribute work-based learning tools
Quality skill development programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating a variety of work-based options to expose youth to workplace requirements and culture • Directing youth into training that prepares them for jobs in the community’s predominant industries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continually update information on employer skill requirements • Disseminate skill requirement information to providers
Convenient access to programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing employer-friendly processes for linking youth and employers • Collaborating with other providers on employer outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain directory of service providers • Develop and promote processes for streamlined referrals between employers and providers • Conduct continuous outreach to employers on services of provider network
Support to accommodate youth with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying needed job accommodations • Identifying and addressing workplace accessibility issues • Providing ongoing post-placement follow-up • Preparing and supporting youth to understand job-related disability issues (e.g. disclosure, accommodations) • Conducting disability awareness training for supervisors and co-workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure staff throughout provider network is trained in this area • Promote universal access to training programs • Identify and disseminate to employers resources on accommodations and workplace supports



Building Employer-Savvy Service Provider Networks

Among the most important responsibilities of community-wide intermediaries is to develop, support, and continue to improve a network of service providers who each must interact with individual employers on behalf of individual youth. Without such an employer-savvy network, employers are likely to continue to experience difficulty in linking with individual programs that have the necessary quality and knowledge of employer needs. Consequently, the interest and involvement of employers will quickly wane, and the longstanding challenge of engaging employers in workforce investment systems will continue.

Developing such a network can be a challenging undertaking because youth service providers are typically accustomed to operating within their own categorical service "silos." However, by demonstrating how providers can achieve better results and make their resources go farther, community-wide intermediaries can successfully organize providers into a network that is valued equally by the demand and supply sides.

Table I on page 2 contains selected employer requirements, provider competencies necessary for meeting these requirements, and ways in which community-wide intermediaries can support competency building. These are meant to be illustrative, and are by no means exhaustive, of the roles community-wide intermediaries can play in supporting networks of providers that will be responsive to employer needs.

Supporting and Growing Employer Networks

In creating new community alliances that are mutually beneficial to all concerned (including taxpayers), a series of tasks exist for which only representatives of the employer community can provide the necessary leadership. Table II provides examples of such tasks.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In the context of the WIA structure (both Title I and IV), the employer needs identified in this brief go beyond the WIA-mandated tasks of One Stop Centers and their designated partners. A wide array of non-mandated partners also needs to be involved in order to tap into the many community resources that might contribute to better outcomes for youth and for employers. Mapping these resources and identifying new ways for them to work together to meet employer and youth needs will be required. Community-wide intermediaries can serve this function.

WIBs that govern WIA activities should undertake two important tasks: 1) to look for ways to allocate WIA resources so that community-wide intermediary activities are supported; and 2) to identify and collaborate with partnering entities in their communities that also have a stake in improving youth employment outcomes or business development (or both). Through these tasks, WIBs can help establish the type of intermediaries and intermediary activity that will serve the entire community.

These undertakings must help to sustain activities directed to meeting employer and industry needs. Sustaining these partnerships ultimately contributes to the availability and effectiveness of individual linkages between individual youth and individual employers. In addition, such intermediary activity can result in the sharing of resources, the coordination of employer engagement efforts, and the blending of resources that make community efforts to improve services to youth go farther and be more effective.

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**TABLE II:
ORGANIZING THE DEMAND SIDE OF EMPLOYER NETWORKS**

Employer Needs	Working with Employer Networks	Community-Wide Intermediary Support Activities
Community awareness of industry needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organize industry needs profile in concert with WIBs, private sector companies, industry/trade associations 	<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.
Help ensure quality skill development programs exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide forum for employers and, as appropriate, unions and industry associations involved or interested in development of standards based curriculum including soft skills and program support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convene employers as appropriate (e.g., by career clusters; occupation specific programs) for purpose of promoting materials for use in variety of education and training venues Develop and maintain list of employers, and business led organizations willing to serve as advisors/supporters to education and training programs (e.g., speakers, mentors).
Products and services that support youth in the workplace and provide convenient access to programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide coordinated employer voice in concert with WIBs, any private sector company, and all industry and trade associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organize a review committee of employer representatives to provide oversight of products and processes developed by supply side organizations
Support youth with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a support group that assists employers and programs alike, in concert with the WIB and employer organizations such as the Business Leadership Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Either provide staffing, or assure staffing is provided, to support group to develop agenda, products, and services that will promote increased labor market participation of persons with disabilities (e.g. training of staff in the workplace, providing speakers and mentors)
User-friendly information about effective programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a mechanism to develop a variety of information tools, including periodic result-driven reports to employers in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use data to plan, evaluate, and improve services Support development of annual community wide report card of progress Support and coordinate a continuous improvement of services and supports

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for 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:

- 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.

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