Strategic Partnerships with Local Business

A key element of a successful workforce development organization is the ability to form strategic partnerships with local businesses. These relationships are mutually beneficial to both parties. Workforce development organizations are able to meet the needs of their participants and achieve outstanding results in program services such as skills training, job placement assistance, retention, and participant support activities. In addition, organizations solicit employer support through participation on boards or advisory councils, donation of goods and services, and/or financial support. Local businesses also benefit in many ways. They often look to form relationships with workforce development organizations because they can reduce their recruitment and advertising costs, receive on-the-job training subsidies for certain hires, have access to a readily available supply of skilled jobseekers, and establish community connections.

Pre Partnership Recruitment and Assessment
Although there are numerous benefits, organizations and businesses should thoroughly assess their wants, needs, and capabilities prior to entering into a partnership agreement. Just because both parties are willing to work together, does not mean they are the best match. Do your research. There are many ways to locate appropriate business partners. A few examples include: reading sector literature/publications, attending networking opportunities, contacting your local chamber of commerce, economic development authority, workforce investment board, small business association, reading the business section of the local newspaper, and/or inviting local employers to an open house event sponsored by your organization.

Once you have identified a potential partner, here are a few sample questions to consider for your organization:

- What do I want to accomplish through this partnership?
- What are the benefits and risks of this partnership?
- Am I looking for a short term or long term arrangement?
- What resources can I commit to the development and maintenance of this partnership (time, staff, funds, etc.)?
- Have we worked with other businesses similar in size and structure? What were the results?
Sample Questions to ask Employers:

- What is the employer’s work culture?
- What are their business needs?
- What is going on in their industry? What are the local and national trends?
- What types of positions do they hire for? What skills do they look for?
- What is their history of serving the community?

Respect each other’s time and energy invested with open, honest, frequent communication. This will help both parties determine the right strategic partnership.

**How To: Youthbuild Partnerships with Employers**

Operating a Youthbuild program provides numerous opportunities to form partnerships with local employers. Aligning with employers is part of the inherent design of the Youthbuild program. There are many opportunities to involve employers in the program, including training the participants on construction skills, providing a work experience and identifying employers they can be placed at following graduation.

Other ways to incorporate employers into the program:

- Participate in workshops, such as mock interviews, industry specific training, etc.
- Provide construction training
- Assist in the development of the training curriculum
- Develop hiring agreements
- Provide jobs or internships opportunities
- Create a mock work environment
- Mentor participants
- Tutor participants
- Volunteer opportunities
- Provide further skills training post graduation, along with replacement and advancement opportunities

**Building the Relationship**

A barrier that could develop between non-profits and the business community when looking to explore a partnership is the assumption that each party has regarding one another. These assumptions disconnect the two sectors. The private sector often believes that non-profits only serve those in dire need, are not interested in making money and have low performance and product standards. Whereas, non-profits often believe that the business community is only interested in their bottom line, has lots of money and demonstrates no civic responsibility or investment. The reality is that both industries are often speaking different languages that are acceptable in their industry, but do not translate with each other. When those gaps in understanding are closed, successful partnerships can be formed.
For two parties to come together, they need to find common ground. An employer needs to understand the services, trust the quality and see the value a workforce development organization brings to their business, including the human resource support of recruitment, screening, training and follow up support.

To ensure that your organization is responsive to the employer’s needs and is investing fairly into the partnership, assign a point person to handle all matters with each employer. This will help ensure a prompt and coordinated service delivery system. It is also helpful if the staff hired to manage these relationships understands the needs of the private sector and possibly have had some experience in that industry.

**Next Steps**
With every successful partnership, use it as an opportunity to recruit the next local business. Peer recommendations are a powerful recruitment tool. Ask your employer partners to serve as spokes people to testify to the value your organization can bring to other business contacts. Peer to peer recommendations are more trusted and less risky.

As with any partnership, the parties involved must be able to identify their roles, expectations and benefits of participating. If your organization delivers quality services, the opportunities for strategic partnerships are endless. For the local business community, you must have their product: job seekers that have the qualifications the employers are looking for. Organizations that partner with the local business community gain many benefits not only in the operation of their programs, but also by incorporating them into the entire organization.

**References**
For additional information on developing partnerships with employers, please review:

The article highlights three workforce organizations that formed unique partnerships with employers. Public Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs.