



GreenWays



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT: FROM PLACEMENT TO PARTNERS

CREATED BY KEVIN DOYLE/GREEN ECONOMY FOR THE GREENWAYS INITIATIVE

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.

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GreenWays, a Jobs for the Future initiative in partnership with Wider Opportunities for Women and the AFL-CIO, provides high-quality workforce services to employers and workers seeking to advance their careers in the green economy. Building on JFF's approach of organizing employers and workforce resources into sectoral workforce partnerships to promote career advancement for lower-skilled workers, GreenWays invested in 20 workforce partnerships in 8 metropolitan-area labor markets. GreenWays is supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Labor through Pathways Out of Poverty and the Green Jobs Innovation Fund.

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Green Economy is a Boston-based independent firm offering consulting, training, facilitation, and strategic planning help to the public and private institutions who are growing a more sustainable global economy.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT TOOLKIT: FROM PLACEMENT TO PARTNERS	1
GETTING READY. WHERE ARE YOU NOW?	3
TARGETING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS	4
BECOMING A GO-TO CONVENER	5
PARTNERING ON PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY	6

EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT TOOLKIT: FROM PLACEMENT TO PARTNERS

Created by Kevin Doyle/Green Economy for the GreenWays initiative

Workforce development organizations and educational institutions recognize that strong relationships with businesses are necessary to place their program graduates into jobs. It can be difficult to look beyond these immediate benefits and see the value of engaging in deep employer relationships that maximize benefits not only for program participants but also employers. This toolkit provides a step-by-step guide for training providers, workforce development organizations, community colleges, other educational institutions, and community based organizations to begin to deliberately integrate employer engagement into the core decision making of your program. It offers strategies to expand the number of ways that employers can participate in your program design and development to your mutual benefit.

Employer involvement is not the same as “job placement” work, nor is it synonymous with “marketing to employers.” Successful involvement translates into a partnership of mutual support and understanding between workforce programs and employers. These deeply engaged relationships with employers exhibit a number of important qualities. The relationships are:

- > Continuous
- > Strategic
- > Mutually valuable

- > Wide-ranging
- > Comprehensive
- > Intensive
- > Empowering
- > Institutionally varied

This toolkit will help workforce development organizations and educational institutions begin to develop relationships with employers that will ultimately demonstrate these qualities.

Workforce development organizations, community colleges, and other institutions that train and educate workers should approach employers from the perspective of prioritizing their business needs. The education or training organization analyzes labor market information (LMI) and becomes deeply engaged in the employer’s industry community, meets the real demands of individual companies, and designs and operates programs in a way that requires employer participation. As they develop shared trust, highly involved employers inform the design of training programs, support the program delivery, hire program graduates who add value to their workforce, and even move those workers up the career ladder. Through these actions, businesses also demonstrate to others in the industry that the training program is an important workforce partner.

Building strong relationships is hard, and usually requires the community college or workforce development organization to take the first steps. Figure 1 provides a helpful graphic regarding the

Figure 1. Various Stages of Strong Employer Partnerships



various stages of strong employer partnerships. The activities on which workforce development organizations and educational institutions focus will change as their relationship with an employer transitions from a new relationship to other stages of collaboration. This toolkit prepares educational institutions and workforce development organizations for the early stages of launching a new relationship with employers and building it to become a working relationship. **A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers** provides a framework for the next steps of transforming these relationships into strategic partnerships.

As they develop and strengthen employer relationships, workforce and educational organizations must focus on employer needs as a top priority ensuring they design programs that address their needs and increase their involvement in employer communities, just as employers increase their involvement in training programs. Before approaching employers, workforce organizations and educational institutions should have a strong grounding in the industry through analysis of traditional and wherever possible real-time LMI, and they should use real-time LMI to understand the skills and competencies currently in demand in the industry. These organizations should also map relevant career pathways so they can help participants receive industry-recognized credentials and prepare them for advancement within key industries, rather than just looking to an initial job placement.

Education and training providers must often overcome structural barriers to prioritize employer interests. For example, programs are generally designed around the needs of trainees and social service clients, regardless of whether they align well with what employers require. Instead, employer engagement should be integral to all levels of education and workforce organizations. Once employers have bought into a partnership, involving them in many facets of programming requires creativity.

Despite the challenges, this involvement is worthwhile. Deep employer participation enhances the long-term sustainability of programs and ultimately serves training programs, their clients, and employers through great results. Over time, these relationships can even serve as the basis for catalyzing systemic change among employers, encouraging them to reevaluate how they provide career advancement for workers.

WHAT'S IN THE TOOLKIT?

The continuum concept of “new,” “working,” and “strategic” relationships with business is adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, *Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint*.

This toolkit is not designed to be a comprehensive guidebook for successful employer involvement. Instead, its four sections focus on the most important aspects of building a relationship between employers and workforce education and training programs:

1. Getting Ready. Where Are You Now?
2. Targeting Your Relationships
3. Becoming a Go-To Convener
4. Partnering on Program Design and Delivery

This toolkit is designed as a modular guide, not a publication that must be read from cover to cover. Use the entire toolkit as a package, or select individual exercises, checklists, questionnaires, planning guides, or resources that are most relevant to you. The tools are designed to stand alone so you can skip what you already know, while also organized into sections that progress sequentially. The toolkit begins with an assessment of your current employer relationships. Next, it provides ideas for new employer outreach and strategies for positioning your organization as a valued industry convener. The final tools connect employers directly to your training program.

SECTION ONE

GETTING READY. WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

This section is intended to be the first step in your efforts to incorporate robust employer engagement into each element of your training program design and delivery. Before you can improve and expand your relationships with employers, you have to understand your current forms of engagement.

This section frames your strategy for new employer involvement by examining three critical aspects of how your current partnerships meet both your and your employer partners' needs. These tools help: 1) assess the current status of your employer involvement from your perspective and that of your existing employer partners; 2) clarify what you most want from new partners, as well as what they need from you; and 3) map your existing assets and develop your value proposition. Each of these three steps requires you to compare the value of employer involvement to you and to your employer partners. Unless these needs become aligned, your efforts to more deeply involve employers in your industry are not likely to succeed.

- > **Tool 1.1 | Assess Your Current Partners: Internal Assessment.** This internal partner assessment is a first step to the employer engagement process. Use this worksheet to focus your efforts, outline your current partner activities, and determine what you need from your partners.
- > **Tool 1.2 | Develop Your Partner Database.** This tool brings together the details of your employer partnership into a single table that can help you analyze trends and search for gaps in your industry relationships.
- > **Tool 1.3 | Assess Your Current Partners: External Assessment.** Your current partnerships form the baseline of your engagement strategy and can be useful in engaging new employers. This tool helps you assess your current partners to see if you are meeting their needs, as well as how their involvement in your program aligns with the needs you identified in your internal assessment.
- > **Tool 1.4 | Setting Goals to Guide New Partner Development.** This worksheet helps you analyze the information you have gathered about your partnership so that you can set goals to strengthen it. This tool focuses on key activities and allows you to set additional goals.
- > **Tool 1.5 | What Employers Value Most.** Share this worksheet with employers as a starting point for a joint discussion of how they can be involved in your program. You can ask them to complete it on their own, or use it as an interview guide when you meet.
- > **Tool 1.6 | Mapping Your Assets.** Preparing for effective employer involvement requires knowledge of all your assets, including those that may not seem obvious. Use this table to map your assets in four major categories: knowledge, facilities, relationships, and partners.
- > **Tool 1.7 | Demonstrate Return on Investment (ROI) To Employers.** Many businesses use ROI calculations to assess new opportunities—like possible involvement in your program. This tool will help you think about your program from the perspective of financial ROI for your potential employers.
- > **Tool 1.8 | Craft an Employer-Based Value Proposition.** As you prepare to approach employers, develop a statement of your value proposition in collaboration with some of your existing employer partners.

SECTION TWO

TARGETING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

The goal of the employer engagement promoted throughout this toolkit is to develop deep and lasting partnerships that are mutually beneficial. This section supports that goal by focusing your relationship building on the strategic decision makers in your target industry.

Building each employer relationship takes significant effort and time, yet not all of these relationships bring equal value to your program. This section helps focus your outreach and engagement strategically. Start by building an in-depth knowledge of the industry: who are the employers and what can each of them bring to your program? This will help you identify and appeal to the right companies in your efforts to prioritize employer engagement in your program operations. Next, consider whom you approach at the company level. You can get the most value by aligning employer leadership with the leadership of your program.

> **Tool 2.1 | Identifying Employers in Your Industry.** Rather than using a pre-existing contact list of employers in your industry, take the time to develop your own. This tool provides tips on using both your existing partners and external sources to identify appropriate companies.

> **Tool 2.2 | Recruiting Your Employer Leadership Committee.** Employer leadership committees can be critical contributors to any job training or workforce development program. This guide helps you select employers that can best serve on a leadership committee.

> **Tool 2.3 | Develop High-Level Relationships.** Developing relationships with the top leadership of successful employers should be central to your employer involvement strategy, because these decision makers are critical to ensuring that the businesses fully support your partnership. This worksheet offers step-by-step guidance for your initial outreach to the leadership of potential partner organizations.

> **Tool 2.4 | Host Industry-Specific Briefing.** Industry briefings provide employers an opportunity to expand their networks into a workforce community, access political value, meet potential customers, and learn strategic information. Use this tool to effectively prepare for and implement an industry briefing.

SECTION THREE

BECOMING A GO-TO CONVENER

One of the best ways to encourage partnership with your program among your target employers is to become a go-to convener of industry events and a provider of valued information. This sends the message that you are not just a service provider to companies or a social service program seeking industry support. Instead, you are positioned as a knowledgeable and trusted leader within the industry community.

Being a convener can be particularly valuable, because firms and other industry representatives need a forum that allows them to overcome barriers to collaboration. Sharing information among competitors can allow them to grow the pool of talented labor available to businesses throughout the industry. Ultimately, a goal of this kind of convening is to develop functioning partnerships among employers. The workforce training program also benefits, because aggregating their labor demands facilitates access to higher quality information about program demand.

This section provides guidance for becoming a go-to convener through understanding industry issues and hosting industry events that address them. It also includes several tools that help program staff communicate with employers to maximize the opportunities to build relationships at the events that you host.

Positioning yourself as an industry convener supports the goal of this toolkit to engage employers in your program operations, because employers are more likely to invest their time and effort in organizations that they value. In addition, the form of engagement by those partners will benefit you most when you understand their industry needs and can direct their activities to those areas of value.

- > **Tool 3.1 | Identify Major Issues Facing the Industry.** Use this worksheet as a starting point for identifying major issues in your industry. Address these issues in events that you host for local employers—even if they are not directly about their workforce.
- > **Tool 3.2 | Co-Host an Employer-Focused Networking Event.** Use this guide to plan networking events as simple as a cocktail party or as elaborate as a vendor fair. The tool provides tips for each stage of event planning including: partnering with co-hosts, setting event objectives, selecting an event type, and inviting employers.
- > **Tool 3.3 | Tips for Successful Employer Connections.** This tool offers tips to ensure that everyone in your organization, even those who do not usually reach out to employers, is prepared to make the most out of their interactions with employers.

SECTION FOUR

PARTNERING ON PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Ultimately, you are developing relationships with employers so that you can deliver a training program that will create strong career opportunities for participants. Your organization should not only focus on job placement, but also on mapping career pathways so your program graduates can advance within your target industries. You should also work with your employer partners to create a training program that provides the skilled workers that companies seek to promote throughout their industry.

This section focuses on how to partner with employers to design and deliver your training program to align with employer needs. For example, if you accept people into your program that businesses would not hire, your program graduates are unlikely to find jobs. Instead, you can work with employers in participant selection to identify individuals who fit your program's target population while also meeting employer criteria. In addition to participant selection, employers often critique the soft skills, occupational skills, certifications, and work experience of graduates emerging from training programs. The tools in this section offer strategies to maximize employer input in these critical areas and set your graduates up for success in the industry. This section gets to the core value of employer engagement to your goal of delivering a high quality training program.

- > **Tool 4.1 | Employer Voice in Participant Selection.** Use this table to consider multiple strategies for incorporating employer partners into your participant intake process and to determine which works best for your program.
- > **Tool 4.2 | Prioritizing the Right Soft Skills.** Provide this worksheet to your employer partners so you can better understand which soft skills are most important to your program.
- > **Tool 4.3 | Finding Skills In Labor Market Information.** This tool helps you develop a curriculum that is likely to appeal to employers in your sector using O*NET, an online federal resource.
- > **Tool 4.4 | Teaching Industry Skills.** Use this worksheet to develop and track employer feedback and participation in each of the industry skills your program teaches.
- > **Tool 4.5 | Work-Based Experience.** Ask employers what kinds of on-the-job opportunities they would find most helpful to prepare participants for employment, and whether they would consider providing those opportunities. Use this tool to begin that process and to organize your planning as you implement work-based experience in your program.



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