

Employer Engagement Tip Sheet #3: Understanding and Developing Employer Relationships

This is the third of five employer engagement tip sheets which feature highlights from the [Youth CareerConnect \(YCC\) Employer Engagement Handbook](#), first released in December 2015. All employer engagement tip sheets can be found on the [YCC Community of Practice](#).

Know Your Employer Partner's Motivation

Initiating and maintaining successful business partnerships requires an understanding of what may inspire an employer to collaborate with workforce development programs in the first place. Their primary reason may be to recruit and train new employees. Some are eager to give back to their communities and establish their firms as socially concerned enterprises. Some may simply welcome an activity that reaches beyond their day-to-day business matters. Knowing what moves them to work with you enables you to cultivate your association in a way that is most compatible with their needs and time limitations.

Outline the Benefits – and Expectations

Whatever an employer's ultimate motive in volunteering, it is important to help them understand how your program can benefit them by offering:

- Access to a reliable and long-term source of qualified job candidates.
- The ability to influence training and academics to align with their skills needs.
- Credential and certification programs that meet industry standards.
- The option to work with students on a trial basis and evaluate their job performance.
- An opportunity to exhibit their investment in their community to a larger audience.
- An infusion of energy from students that can revitalize staff and inspire positive change.

By the same token, employers should know exactly what is expected of them. They should understand your program, how it works, how it is managed, what type and quality of training it provides, and any other information that is relevant to their collaboration. This may be discussed over a series of meetings. Even better, invite the employer to your organization to witness the program in action.

Understand the Stages of Your Employer Relationship

Employers will behave differently at each phase of your relationship. New employer partners may be cautious and tentative, while longer-serving partners will hopefully take on larger roles and evolve into valued advisors and leaders. How you engage with them and what you expect of them will change depending on where you are in the process.

The diagram below presents a pattern of partnership growth and maturity. It will help you visualize and map out your interactions and activities as your employer partnerships advance and grow stronger.

EMERGING, DEVELOPING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS					
NEW RELATIONSHIP		WORKING RELATIONSHIP		STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP	
	Level One	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four	Level Five
Key Employer Roles	Advising	Capacity-building	Co-designing	Convening	Leading
Stage of the Relationship With YCC	Initial contact/new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
Engagement Actions and Examples	Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates	Job site tours; speakers; mock interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting	Curriculum and pathway development; adjunct faculty and preceptors	College-employer sectoral partnerships	Multi-employer/multi-college partnerships

Source: Jobs for the Future. [A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers](#) (Wilson, 2015).

■ **New Relationship: Level One.**

Advising. This entry level is primarily for information exchange. You will be assessing the employer's needs and introducing them to your program processes and potential. A good way to do that is to invite them to attend meetings and sit in on training.

■ **Working Relationship: Levels Two – Three.**

Capacity-building & Co-designing. Employer trust grows and a working relationship solidifies, leading to substantial contributions: student job site visits; speakers; loan or donation of resources; curriculum development.

■ **Strategic Partnership: Levels Three – Five.**

Convening & Leading. You and the employer representatives become more reliant on and valuable to each other. You are now working together as full-fledged partners, perhaps in collaboration with colleges or other institutions and organizations.

For tips on how to enlist your strategic partners (employers in Levels Four and Five) to communicate the benefits of your program to their associates in other companies and business organizations and provide you with testimonials for your outreach efforts, see the [Enlist Employer Partners to Expand Your Outreach](#) toolkit.

It is a must for your organization to monitor your partner relationships and discuss each of them regularly in order to maintain and strengthen them. Find further information on this in [Tip Sheet # 5: Growing and Sustaining Employer Relationships](#).