

# Employer Engagement Tip Sheet #5: Growing and Sustaining Employer Relationships

This is the fifth 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](#).

## The Partnership Growth Process

Partnership building is a gradual process. As you welcome new employer partners to your program, start modestly. Ask for little more than advice until you build trust. Make several workplace visits to learn more about the business and its needs. Discuss the best ways to prepare students and other program participants to fill employer positions. [A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers](#) (Wilson, 2015) offers a few tips:

- Learn to “speak business”: avoid education terminology and focus on solutions, not on your program.
- Bring value to the employer: suggest courses, plans, and assets that will address the employer’s challenges.

At the same time, help employers understand your program’s needs and goals and show how they correlate to the employer’s own. Soon you can start suggesting some initial tasks to undertake together. The chart below shows the types of action items you might plan at various stages of a developing partnership.

| EMERGING, DEVELOPING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS                    |  |  |   |  |  |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| Partnership Growing: Steps and Engagement Actions and Examples | NEW RELATIONSHIP   | WORKING RELATIONSHIP   | STRONGER WORKING RELATIONSHIP                                 | PARTNERSHIP  | STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP  |
|  | Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates | Job site tours; speakers; job interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting | Curriculum and education program development; adjunct faculty | Help to build larger employer/YCC sectoral partnerships among other businesses | Help to build better multi-employer partnerships, provide leadership and in-depth resources assistance |

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

In a “New Relationship” the parties will be focused mainly on learning and communicating. As you and the employer become more familiar with each other, you can introduce ideas such as those described in the “Working Relationship” above. Larger projects with a broader scope and sectoral partnerships will follow as alliances become stronger (“Partnership” and “Strategic Partnership”).

### **Three steps to building a long-lasting relationship:**

- 1. Continue learning about the employer and how your program can help meet their needs.**
- 2. Agree on a set of roles and responsibilities for the employer.**
- 3. Formalize this discussion with a simple written agreement.**

#### **1. Continue Learning About Each Employer**

Learning more about the employer and their workplace will reveal a good deal of useful information: how suitable the company is for student skill-building; the company’s staffing needs and types of training they offer; and the learning opportunities that may be available to your students. You’ll also want to seek out specific information about:

- Current job shadowing and internship options and employer’s interest in developing new opportunities in these areas.
- Entry positions for which employer is seeking applicants and minimum skills sets for those jobs.
- The standard job progression and skills required for advancement.
- Current certification and training systems and how they might be incorporated into your own program training.

#### **2. Establish Employer Roles and Responsibilities**

Right from the start, you should be clear with your employer partners as to what will be expected from them and how they can participate in the success of your program. Before entering into a formal partnership, you should come to an agreement about their specific responsibilities. When doing so, keep in mind that they are subject to regulations, insurance requirements, and government oversight. Never place your employer partners in positions which may endanger their systems or controls or push against any legal or process-oriented constraints. Underline your intent to shield them from any negative issues or events.

#### **3. Negotiate a Written Agreement**

A written document removes much of the potential for misunderstandings and disappointments. Once there is verbal consensus on an employer’s specific obligations, consider developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to describe the scope of their responsibilities and contributions and note any limitations, issues, and legalities. This document may:

- List contributions, how they will be used, and how/when/where they will be made available.
- Describe the roles of employer individuals who will serve your program (such as a “loaned” instructor).
- Indicate a time frame for the assistance.
- Describe limits or issues on behalf of the employer (such as safety, liability, protection of company proprietary assets, and limits on use of facilities or equipment).

- Note how the employer and your program will monitor and manage the assistance.
- Note how and when communications will occur.
- Describe who will own or control the products or investments (such as a new curriculum) over time.

Some employers may not want, or may not be ready, for a formal agreement. Do not rush them into signing one. As you work more closely with an employer, it will become clear whether a written agreement is needed. Once you are discussing concrete contributions and roles, ask if you may take notes leading to an MOU. (A good source of information about memoranda of understanding may be found at [FormSwift](#).) Or use a somewhat less formal approach by following any substantial discussion with an email that reviews what was promised or agreed upon.

As you enter the formal agreement process, expect to have disagreements. Decide beforehand how best to manage them. Usually, open discussions held with the goal of maintaining a positive relationship will help overcome such challenges.

### **Keep the Lines of Communication Open**

Maintaining productive business partnerships requires planning, good communications, and consistent nurturing. There is no predictable model for building these relationships; the process will differ with each partner. With some, you may not move past a “working relationship.” Others will continue to expand their roles and develop into long-standing alliances that provide great value to your program. In all cases, patience, attention, and communications will be rewarded.

For tips on how to enlist dedicated employer partners, those 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.