

Facilitating Employer Engagement Among WIB Partners: A Role for Intermediaries

There are an array of school-sponsored and youth employment programs that assist youth in preparing for and participating in work experiences and jobs. Such programs would benefit from well supported and coordinated employer participation facilitated through local and state workforce investment systems. However, in many communities, employers report that workforce development programs do not meet their needs, and that their engagement in workforce development programs has been superficial and episodic (American Assembly, 2003). This brief, the third in a series, focuses on how intermediary organizations can help WIBs and their partners generate, expand, and refine effective employer relationships that result in increased work experience and employment opportunities for all youth, including those with disabilities.

The challenge of recruiting employers for workforce investment initiatives is not a new phenomenon. There have been consistent attempts to market these programs to employers on behalf of job seekers with disabilities, TANF recipients, ex-offenders, youth, and other users of public workforce investment systems. However, regardless of job seeker category, studies consistently show that employers' motivations for participating in workforce development programs are fairly straightforward. In one recent examination of employers' perspectives, for example, employers' willingness to bring youth with

This brief focuses on how Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) can ensure strong business leadership roles in their state and local workforce systems by creating and fostering intermediaries that effectively link employers with One-Stops and their partners. Strategies and examples are shared that illustrate how intermediaries can facilitate, coordinate, and streamline employer engagement responsibilities among WIB partners.

disabilities into the workplace was shown to ultimately be influenced by two factors: convenience of access to these job seekers and competent service from education and employment service programs and professionals (Luecking, 2004). Thus, intermediary entities can benefit employers by effectively facilitating convenient access to diverse categories of workers and as a mechanism for enhancing service competency. Further, intermediaries can assist youth and adult employment service programs that are associated, or potentially associated, with WIBs by facilitating workforce development linkages with employers.

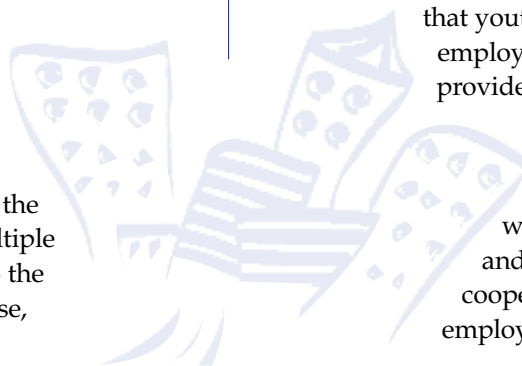
The Value of Intermediaries

The term "intermediary" is growing in usage in several venues within the public sector with multiple definitions attached to the term. In the broad sense, intermediaries are

organizations or agents who form partnerships and develop relationships in order to connect and facilitate communication between two or more parties. In the context of youth services, intermediaries can be existing organizations, such as One-Stop Center operators or other centrally positioned organizations such as a Chamber of Commerce or a well established community based organization, that are tapped to convene systems and services and facilitate their collaboration (Wills & Luecking, 2003). Intermediaries can also be organizations created for this purpose.

Intermediaries can serve broad functions ranging from convening community partners for program and services planning, to raising money on behalf of community partners, to directly connecting job seekers and employers. For the purposes of this brief, the term intermediary refers to entities that: 1) establish relationships with employers and employer organizations; 2) convene and organize workforce investment and employment service organizations; and 3) devise and facilitate linkages between the two groups so that employers meet workforce and industry needs and so

that youth and adult employment service providers effectively prepare and place their job seekers for work experiences and jobs offered by cooperating employers.





These intermediaries, as will be outlined below, can serve specific and important roles at both the local and state levels. This can significantly enhance the intent of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to coordinate categorically distinct programs and services through the governance of WIBs. Even more promising is the potential for intermediaries to coordinate employer-driven workforce development requirements.

Workforce Investment Boards as impetus for collaboration

There are important provisions in the WIA that are designed to attract more employers to the nation's workforce investment system, including the mandate that employers play a prominent and majority role in the governance of state and local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB). These boards are responsible for overseeing the implementation and administration of the federally funded One-Stop workforce development systems created by the WIA. WIBs members are appointed by elected officials and a majority of members must be employers. Local WIBs are responsible for the development and oversight of the workforce development activities in its area. Responsibilities include selecting operators and providers of One-Stop services, as well as developing the list of eligible providers of training services; monitoring local system performance, and developing local performance measures with the state WIB and governor.

There is ample evidence that, in spite of inconsistent connection with WIA-funded programs, employers are not inherently opposed or hesitant to hire individuals served by workforce investment programs. In fact, once employers are exposed to workers represented by these programs they generally have favorable opinions of these individuals, regardless of

category. One of the problems, unfortunately, is that the opportunities for employers to be exposed to and interact conveniently with workforce investment programs have frequently been burdensome and uncoordinated.

The WIA sought to bring together many previously distinct employment service partners into One-Stop Centers so that different categories of job seeking customers could be served in one convenient, centralized location. However, there is still much to be done to develop strategic and skillful methods to recruit more employers to hire One-Stop customers. It is apparent that despite centralized service delivery on the job seeker end, it remains a common practice for multiple agencies, representing distinct categories of job seekers, to compete for employer attention. This frustrates and confuses employers and creates unnecessary duplication on the part of workforce development programs and professionals. The employer customer could certainly be better served. That is, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on the second of the dual customers of the workforce investment system — employers.

By virtue of their governance, WIBs are conveners of employers. WIBs can ensure a strong business leadership role in the local workforce system by creating and fostering intermediaries that effectively link employers with One-Stops and their partners. Through these One-Stops, WIBs can position themselves as coordinators and promoters of comprehensive, system-wide innovations, and provide specific, high quality brokering or service delivery that stakeholders value. Since WIBs have mandated employer-dominated governance and since WIBs already have a ready group of mandated and non-mandated employment service partners, it is reasonable that the WIB serve as the impetus to create better linkages between One-Stop partners and

employers through designated intermediaries.

At this time, states have independent and sometimes numerous computer database systems that serve their workforce development customers (both job seekers and employers). WIBs can encourage the movement toward streamlining these multiple systems within and across states to help facilitate linkages that meet workforce and industry needs, as well as build relationships with employers in local communities. Streamlining would require an emphasis on self-directed and self-service programming for both employers and jobseekers, and would serve a greater number of customers.

Intermediaries Facilitating Employer Engagement

Intermediaries offer a way to counter the confusion caused by the fragmentation of employer recruitment initiatives typically characterized by so many disparate programs that represent various categories of job seekers. Many employers have articulated that their success in hiring individuals represented by various workforce development programs is bolstered by the convenience of a single point of contact from the among the myriad of employment service programs, along with mechanisms that insure competent and employer-friendly support from the workforce investment system. At both the local and state levels, intermediaries can therefore facilitate more effective employer engagement among WIB partners by taking on responsibilities to coordinate employer engagement in the workforce investment system.

At the local level intermediaries can address employers' needs by assuming responsibilities as illustrated in the following chart.

From the employer's perspective, these activities will ultimately yield an



ongoing and reliable source of human resource recruitment. From the perspectives of the workforce investment system, these activities will help all of the workforce development and employment programs make their resources go further and create better employment outcomes for their respective constituencies.

At the state level, there are several possible roles that intermediaries can assume to create a statewide system that is responsive to both job seeker and employer customers. The chart below illustrates potential responsibilities of intermediaries in this regard.

The WIA incentive for disparate categorical programs to work together as co-located partners can also be an incentive for One-Stop partners to collaborate in their employer

recruitment. The following case study features one state’s efforts to streamline the manner in which employers are recruited for workforce development initiatives through the partnership of a number of distinct workforce development entities, using a specially organized network as an intermediary mechanism.

Case Study: The Employer Service Network in Rhode Island

As it developed its original state One-Stop Plan, Rhode Island prominently included strategies for serving employers, who as a group have continuously clamored for a single source of contact for workforce development activities. The goal of Rhode Island’s plan was to minimize categorical appeals to employers, reduce duplicative efforts, and generally create a convenient

mechanism for linking employers and job seekers through the formal establishment of the Employer Service Network (ESN).

The ESN is a joint project among the partners in Rhode Island’s One-Stop System, called netWORKri. It features a formal affiliation of workforce and economic development entities, including the state’s Office of Rehabilitation Services, and professionals who strive to offer an array of services to employers. Its purpose is to add value, reduce waste, and continuously improve Rhode Island’s capacity to connect people, employers, jobs, education, and services. ESN services available to employers through its members include: recruitment, referral to programs offering training or training funds, needs assessments, assistance in

INTERMEDIARIES FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Employers’ Needs	What Intermediaries Can Provide
More direct links to job seekers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating, implementing, and monitoring a system that is a single point of contact for employers and job seekers;• Bringing partners together for joint efforts (inter- and intra-agency collaborations);• Sharing job openings, job referrals, and business information with other partners; and• Marketing its services to employers with a more broad-based appeal, which is not dependent on selling a particular category of job seekers.
Well matched employees and effective follow-up service recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Providing a reliable source of human-resource;• Creating a mechanism for sharing effective practices and pursuing positive outcomes (i.e., post-placement follow-up);• Conducting labor market and economic research that improves job matching and training (i.e., post-placement follow-up); and• Using this feedback for facilitating improvements and specifying expectations and standards for training applied to instructors qualified to teach courses customized to employer needs.
Quality professional service and business practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bringing employers together for continuous feedback about quality/improvement of the workforce system;• Training staff of employment service programs to be more business-like and effective in partnering with employers;• Providing learning opportunities to ensure long- term sustainability of effective practices and policies;• Helping WIBs revise contracting and RFP (Request for Proposal) processes, so that One-Stops and their partners who receive Workforce Investment Act (WIA) monies can meet a certain standard when operating with employers;• Helping to build long-term ability to use outcome data to evaluate and improve their work; and• Reporting to WIBs about all of the above.



accessing an array of economic development services, assistance with tax and other hiring incentives, job analysis, and consultation on worker accommodations.

At the state level, formal oversight responsibility for the ESN rests with the Human Resource Investment Council, the state's WIB, which has statutory authority for coordinating workforce development efforts in the state and thus functions as the intermediary entity to create employer engagement system in the state. The state's Department of Labor and Training maintains oversight of the ESN's implementation in four distinct local areas. Over 70 local and state organizations comprise the ESN membership. The majority of these organizations are direct providers of workforce development services. They represent an array of constituent customers, including welfare recipients, dislocated workers, youth, people with various disabilities, and other groups of job seekers. The local One-Stops are the focal point, or intermediary conveners, of the ESN in each of the four local areas. All of the ESN members at the

local levels agree to follow a well-defined set of operating standards, protocol and professional development designed to insure convenient and responsive service to employers.

Principles of operation

Members of the ESN sign a formal agreement to operate by a set of core standards/principles designed to insure cooperation and quality service. Prominent ESN principles include:

- Identification and adherence to the use of a "lead point of contact" for each employer (see protocol below);
- Sharing job openings, job referrals, and business information with other members;
- Facilitation of access for one another to employers, services, and job orders;
- Members functioning as representatives of the ESN/One-Stop to employers in addition to representing their own partnering organization - member agency identity is not subsumed under the ESN, but enhanced by the affiliation with it;

- Members committing to continuous improvement in their own operation and the overall system through professional development and regular member meetings;
- Members adhering to a defined "Job Referral Standard" which identifies minimum expectations for presenting a potential job applicant to an employer;
- Members committing to maintaining accuracy and currency in a shared electronic employer data base; and
- Members committing to sufficient and timely follow-up with employers to ensure customer satisfaction.

Operational Protocol

Care was taken to develop a protocol that included well-defined procedures for all members to follow and to which all members are expected to adhere. The protocol includes specific procedures for establishing/ designating a "lead point of contact" for each employer. Any ESN member may be a lead, assuming responsibilities to gather and report information on specific employer contacts that they

INTERMEDIARIES FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT AT THE STATE LEVEL

Employers' Needs

More direct links to job seekers

Well matched employees and effective follow-up service

Quality professional service and business practices

What Intermediaries Can Provide

- Convening state agencies to organize state plan for joint cross agency employer outreach;
 - Exploring opportunities for sharing resources for encouraging local WIBs and their partners to collaborate on dual customer service;
 - Creating a mechanism for sharing effective practices;
 - Conducting labor market and economic research that improves job matching and training; and
 - Using this feedback for facilitating improvements, and specifying expectations and standards for services to employer customers.
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- Bringing employers together for continuous feedback about quality/improvement of the workforce system;
 - Coordinating resources for training staff of employment service programs to be more business-like and effective in partnering with employers;
 - Helping WIBs revise contracting and RFP (Request for Proposal) processes, so that One-Stops and their partners who receive Workforce Investment Act (WIA) monies can meet a certain standard when operating with employers;
 - Helping to build long-term ability to use cross agency outcome data to evaluate and improve workforce investment system employer engagement activities; and
 - Reporting to state WIB about all of the above.



may cultivate individually. They then act to facilitate access to the employer on behalf of the ESN and its other members. The lead is responsible to maintain a relationship with the employer and to collaborate with fellow ESN members to satisfy the employer's needs.

All members agree to job referral standards — the intent of which is to establish a level of uniformity among ESN members relative to job placement services. The basic core standard for ESN is that a good job match occurs when a candidate is able to perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodations. Although the definition of essential job functions and reasonable accommodation is associated with persons with disabilities, it is a concept deemed helpful to all customers with cultural, linguistic or socio-economic barriers to employment. The core standard utilizes the “job ready” definition familiar in the disability employment field because it is the most inclusive and meets the principle of universality that is central to the Workforce Investment Act.

The protocol also establishes a core job referral standard that sets minimum expectations for job screening rigor. This insures that employers' customers are not presented with poorly qualified candidates that might dilute the quality of the ESN service and ultimately reflect badly on the ESN and its individual members. There are also standards for post-placement follow-up that emphasize service to the employer customer that are similarly designed to maintain quality across ESN member activities.

Another key aspect of the ESN is the commitment of the members to jointly plan, deliver and participate in professional development. There are regularly scheduled training activities that serve to promote competency across member agencies and across

topics. Training events are frequent, varied and cover a wide range of topics. Topics include meeting employers' needs, job development protocol, resume development, screening for barriers, as well as disability related topics. Further, each of the four local ESNs hold regular monthly meetings during which members share experiences, job leads, and iron out potential “turf” issues. These meetings also regularly feature employer guests who provide information on job needs as well as feedback on how the ESN is working for them. To complement the efforts of the local ESNs, the state Department of Labor and Training maintains a group list serve which is used to regularly impart information about relevant events and issues to all ESN members, such as labor market information, job fairs, and employer viewpoints. It also maintains an up to date directory of ESN member agencies, their individual staff representatives, and contact information.

Indicators of effectiveness

In operation since 2002, the ESN membership has grown to include

virtually every workforce development entity in each of the state's four local areas. This fact alone suggests that the concept is working for the workforce development system. Although data is not kept on the number of job placements made as a result of shared ESN member contacts, the members regularly report anecdotal success, according to the Department of Labor and Training officials. The ESN members also report vastly improved and expanded access to employers. Thus, the job seeker customers are key beneficiaries of the ESN's activities.

Just as importantly, the employer customer is being served well by the coordinated and convenient access to the ESN membership and the job seekers they collectively represent. All ESN members use a common format for soliciting regular customer service feedback from employers. These are used for operational evaluation and consistently yield a very high level of employer satisfaction with both the concept and the service. Consequently, the number of employers now involved with the state's workforce development

A Sectoral Approach to Business Engagement

The Northwest Workforce Development Council (NWDC), the workforce investment board for four counties in Northwest Washington engages in a sectoral approach to employer outreach. They have engaged business customers through a recruitment and training initiative that targets the health care, shipbuilding and manufacturing industries. NWDC staff meets with employers from these industries on a regular basis to identify industry-specific skills required of employees. They then work with educational institutions in developing either certificate, degree, or training programs that can deliver those skills to individuals. NWDC has developed protocols for engaging business customers, and all programs

and jobseekers are included in the marketing of WorkSource (One-Stop Center) services. NWDC also uses the sectoral strategies approach in developing programming for youth. They have engaged employers in the creation of program that markets Health Occupations to middle and high school students. This program develops awareness of career opportunities in the health professions; educates youth students regarding the entrance requirements for health care professions; and builds capacity within the system for preparing students for such professions. Such sectoral outreach approaches are often directly responsive to high growth, high demand professions.



system has been exponentially expanded.

Implications for Workforce Development and Employment Service Practice

The approach instituted in Rhode Island is still an evolving concept, but it is clear that there are a number of mutual benefits to all partners. For the employers, having a single point of contact decreases considerably the confusion and duplication that they might otherwise experience trying to sort out the various categorically-based employment programs. They also benefit from a much larger pool of workers than might be available to them when working with an organization representing a single category of job seekers. The quality controls to which the ESN members adhere minimizes the perceived risk employers might feel when approached about workers with employment barriers.

ESN members benefit from a much expanded universe of employer contacts. In practice, their number of potential employer contacts is multiplied by at least the number of ESN members. The well-defined standards and protocol insures the likelihood that there will be universal quality built in to all of the members' relationships with the employers, elevating every members' effectiveness. Members still maintain stewardship of the employer contacts that they directly cultivate and act as gatekeepers for contact with the employers with whom they have developed relationships. Finally, members benefit by pooling their resources for staff training with ESN partners. Their training budget goes farther and their staffs receive quality professional development opportunities.

Ultimately, the job seekers benefit from being served by organizations that have numerous employer contacts at

their disposal and well-trained staff to assist them in their job search. They also are less likely to rely on single, categorically based employment programs, since the ESN can market its services to employers with a more broad based appeal that is not dependent on selling particular, often stigmatized, categories of job seekers.

In the Rhode Island example, the state One-Stop system, netWorkri, acts as the intermediary at the state level to develop the state plan for coordinated cross agency collaboration. It also now serves as an active intermediary to oversee the development and implementation of the ESN across the state through training, information sharing, and resource allocation. At the local level, the One-Stops are the convening intermediaries to insure that ESN members follow the agreed upon employer contact protocol, meet and share resources regularly, initiate joint training opportunities, and other activities similar to those illustrated in Table 1.

As intermediary models emerge, there is the potential to re-cast employer partnerships with youth and adult employment service providers in a coordinated manner similar to that which WIA intended for the job seeker. Such streamlining of employer engagement, when it includes well-conceived strategies to serve employers as customers of One-Stop services, could result in more employers being willing to participate with One-Stops and ultimately better employment outcomes for youth and adult job seekers using the services of One-Stop Centers and their partners.

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