Building Business Relationships: Introduction

Background

Businesses drive our economy. They provide jobs and supply the market with goods and services that consumers want and need. Businesses are always looking for ways to stay and remain competitive and a key component is having a skilled workforce – now and in the future. Workforce and partner organizations help businesses find and retain workers and build a talent pipeline. Also, they can assist with other aspects of the business, such as strategy development within the community/region and aligning service delivery with other organizations that offer complementary services.

Now is the time for the workforce and partner organizations to make meaningful connections and build strong relationships with business in a variety of capacities. Businesses rely on workforce and partner organizations to develop customized solutions through an integrated service delivery approach across all partners. Knowing how to build relationships with businesses can be a critical step for maintaining trust and ensuring continued business.

This document is a refresher guide that accompanies the ***Interactions with Businesses: Guiding Questions Protocol*** and ***Measuring the Success of Communications with Businesses*** documents. It was designed to help identify promising practices/key elements, tips, and questions to consider throughout the different phases of a relationship lifecycle – from initiation to growth and maintenance – to eventually developing a true partnership. It expands on the topics discussed in the *Guiding Questions Protocol* tool and presents strategies on how agencies might build lasting relationships with businesses, identify business needs, and determine how business communities are best served.

It was developed as part of a [Disability and Employment Technical Assistance – Employer Engagement Cohort](#) which gathered agencies across the nation representing workforce, education, vocational rehabilitative services, economic development, disability partners, and other alliances that serves businesses. It is meant to be shared with workforce and partner organizations within respective states serving mutual business customers and is a guide to establishing stronger relationships and trust with business communities. The three documents represent the collective practical experience and wisdom of the cohort members from seven states.

In building successful and collaborative business relationships, a key success factor to remember is how important of a resource a business service representative from a workforce or partner organization can be to meet business' talent pipeline needs. Knowledge, access to information and contacts, and listening skills can make such organizations an invaluable partner to businesses. As you embark on relationship building, it helps to remember two things: 1) respect the time and space of the business; and 2) strive to make a positive first impression when representing available government services and resources.

Initiation Phase - Key Elements to Cultivating a Relationship with Business Customers

It's always essential to show the business that you are knowledgeable about their needs and interests and understand what is important to them. Your organization may have many valuable services to offer; however, a business is mostly concerned about their bottom line and what will be of most value to their needs. Remember the following preliminary elements as part of the framework for starting and maintaining a relationship with businesses.

Recognize the Business: Recognition and acknowledgement is shown to increase engagement between workforce and partner organizations and business. Genuine recognition makes a business feel valued and increases agency awareness and recognition when businesses communicate to other businesses. It's helpful to recognize that business culture is often fast-paced and focused on the "bottom line". Adapt your approach accordingly to support business participation and engagement.

Build a Relationship: Take the opportunity to learn more about the business, its mission, customers, and employees. Focus on the people involved, not just the organization itself. Make the effort to engage, without worrying about "winning" a placement. Understanding business-related needs helps one respond with helpful information and resources, providing value to organizations, thereby resulting in deeper relationships.

Get Out. Get Them Out: Getting out of the office and into an organization's space is key to encouraging business colleagues to discuss specific needs. When possible, meeting in a neutral space can be a good way to make stronger connections (job fairs, reverse job fairs, employer workshops, roundtables, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), conferences, open houses, etc).

Maintain Boundaries: Keep things professional and focused on the business at hand. Set and keep solid boundaries regarding business and personal sharing until the contact is comfortable and ready to take the next steps in the relationship.

Maintain Balance: A work-relationship balance comes from being attuned to and having sensitivity for how much interaction is too much; being aware of this helps avoid situations that may cause a business to become less engaged.

Growth Phase - Tips and Tricks Checklist: Building Strong and Lasting Relationships

Building a relationship with a business is not much different than building a relationship with any organization. The following tips and tricks hold true for any relationship. The following section will help your organization grow and maintain meaningful relationships with businesses.

Be Authentic: Simply be authentic and accept others as they are. Find a natural connection and commonality. Authenticity can accelerate relationships. Be mindful of honoring organizational boundaries.

Identify Shared Goals and Values: Listen for similar goals and values. Don't overlook honesty, kindness, knowledge, helpfulness and respect. Reinforce these goals and values to enhance relationships.

Develop Mutual Trust: Developing trust takes time. Promote your respective organizational values through continued activities, experiences, relationships, knowledge, and consistency. Chambers of Commerce, professional groups, and online communities are excellent environments to develop relationships.

Don't Oversell: When a workforce or partner organization promises to do something, that promise must be delivered in a timely manner. Not delivering makes the agency less trustworthy. One strategy is to undersell and over-deliver.

"You're Not Alone:" Let organizations know about respective workforce and partner organization supports to business communities as a way of showing commitment.

Make Meaningful Connections for People to Network with Each Other: The greatest compliment in business is a referral. Be thoughtful about creating business-to-business relationships (and other connections). Always have the right motives and connect people for the right reasons.

Let Go of Preconceived Expectations: Go into conversations with an open mind, realistic expectations, and never assume. Accept people for the way they are, not as they "should" be. Preconceived expectations set state agencies and businesses up for disappointment.

Schedule Brainstorming Time: Block out dedicated time to brainstorm, engage, and do business together. Set a regular time, a time limit, and an agenda for what needs to be accomplished. Provide some time for unexpected discussion.

"Serving is the New Selling": In 2010, Trendwatching.com highlighted "serving is the new selling" and acknowledged that educating customers is essential and integral in building trust. When workforce and partner organizations collaborate to educate, help, and inspire others with personal experience and expertise, a culture of trust underlies relationships that endure.

From Initiation to Expanding the Partnership Phase - Key Internal Questions:

In the previous sections, tips and elements were provided to guide service organizations on ways to develop relationships with businesses. The following section provides more practical applications and includes key internal questions to help prepare service organizations for initiating and growing a relationship built on trust, into partnerships.

Initiating the Relationship: Define essential preparatory work and initial communication needs internally, before reaching out to a business

Have you done your homework to find the basics about the business ahead of time?

Company Name, address, phone, location[s], business emphasis or products and services, customers, number of employees/labor force, mission statement. These demographics are the basics one would want to know before establishing a relationship. Research information to discover the origins and history of the business (e.g. Do they have multiple or single sites? Where is their headquarters?).

What are they doing and what is important to them?

Recognize a business for their accomplishments. Find out about a new product coming out, a Board Member or leader recognition, an expansion plan, etc. Look at their website, the Chamber of Commerce, Better Business Bureau, Boards of Trade, Workforce Development Boards, company newsletters, trade associations, industry recognized publications, their business lobby, customers, etc. Congratulate, appreciate, and share how this recognition impacted your desire to connect.

Based on your research, who is your best contact at that business?

If the business is large, connecting with the Chief Executive is less reasonable. Make a connection with the personnel manager, HR director, or public relations manager. Do not underestimate the capacity of the receptionist as a contact. They often know how to open doors and gain access to the right people. For smaller businesses, target relationship building efforts with decision makers.

Scripting: Defining and Communicating the What and to Whom

Using business language, develop your script to introduce yourself and define why you want to establish a relationship with their business.

Your introduction is their first impression of your organization. Therefore, it is best done when well-practiced. Draft a script of your desired initial communication with the business. The script need not be complicated but must have a professional flow. Communicate as an organizational contact worth remembering by knowing the business culture enough to highlight services/supports that will be an asset and resource to them. A sample dialogue is found in *Appendix A: Script to Introduce Yourself*.

What essential things do you need to engender initial and ongoing trust?

Research shows that three critical elements exist for trust: relationship, knowledge, and consistency. Relationship is the greatest single characteristic in creating trust. Developing trust between respective workforce and partner organization representatives and local businesses will initially be based on how they relate to you. Some do's and don'ts to consider in developing relationships and trust are noted in *Appendix B: Essential Do's and Don'ts to Engender Trust in Relationship Establishment*.

What opportunities are available to interact with your business contact away from a normal business setting?

Invite company/business contacts to professional meetings/conferences/events within or sponsored by the workforce and partner organizations. Explain how it may support their company's mission or meet a company need. Examples could include training on disability awareness or accommodations, job fairs, and reverse job fairs. Offer to meet with them, show them around (if appropriate), and show additional

ways workforce and partner organization services can be a resource to them. Depending on the setting, introduce them to others who are prepared to demonstrate or discuss available resources. Use business-to-business contacts and/or organizations to invite them to join.

Using business language, what will your script be with them when you eventually get them into neutral space?

Tailor communications to the event (i.e., job fairs, forums, workshops). A few examples of elements to help craft what you want to do and say are: ask what they hope to gain by attending; introduce them to partners (business and system) who can help address any questions; debrief as the event concludes; send a thank you note with a resource included; and follow up.

Growing the Relationship: Defining the Range of Services to Businesses

When the relationship is strong, what can you commit to help the company continue and advance as a thriving business?

Define parameters and be prepared to talk about what partnerships and supports respective agencies can offer. Describe the workforce and partner organization's capacity to impact talent/skills development, retention, accommodation provision, technical assistance, and access to the talent pool. Avoid being viewed as a resource only for applicants and hires; work to establish a relationship where you are a specialized point of contact.

When the relationship reaches the point of trust and becomes stronger, how will you respond to the hidden "what's in it for me" question a business has when they come to realize how the workforce and partner organizations can be a resource to them?

This is the 'reading between the lines' of the communications one has with businesses to discern the questions-behind-the-question. It is the trust point, where communication can become more candid and when businesses ask questions that need a non-judgmental and safe reply, allowing supportive communication in sensitive areas (e.g. asking: "Are you really asking whether or not hiring a person with a disability can honestly be of value to your business?").

Growing the Relationship into Action: Let me be a Resource and Help with your Hiring Needs

When the relationship becomes stronger, what will be your approach to meeting business needs, including matching them to qualified candidates, customizing employment, linking people to post-secondary education, creating apprenticeships, providing vocational or job readiness training opportunities, etc.?

Communicate the desire to provide resources to meet business needs. Ask directly what the needs of the business are, hear their needs, and introduce them to respective agencies or other workforce system partners. Refrain from answering off-the-cuff, as partnerships are better served in the relationship by responding to questions with well-prepared responses. Use the opportunity to introduce

other workforce and partner organizations that can help meet their needs. For those needs outside the typical services delivery system, refer them to other resources outside scope or capacity. By doing so, businesses will still be served meaningfully.

Expanding the Relationship into a Partnership

What are the established criteria you will work to meet and use to define when you have a bona fide relationship/partnership with a business?

This can be any set of 3 to 5 criteria that respective state agencies have in place to meet the basics of a healthy relationship. Here are a few to consider:

- Being on a first name basis with the business contact.
- When they contact you for information, service, data, etc.
- When they have participated in activities offsite to their business.
- When the contact introduces you to others within the business.
- At the point you are asked to present your resources to others.

Appendix A: Script to Introduce Yourself

"Hello. My name is _____. I am here representing _____. I work to connect businesses with qualified candidates. Some of the people I work with are interested in your industry. I wanted to just take a few minutes of your time to introduce myself to you and say that I have been impressed with [business] because of [state the recognition(s) and how that is important]. As a person who wants to be a resource to businesses, [restate recognition] makes it clear that you have an eye on success. I would like to become a resource to help you meet some of your business/hiring needs. I do not want to take a lot of your time today, and recognize you probably get lots of contacts like this. I would like to follow up soon to learn more about [business], your needs, and see how you may want to utilize my interest in helping you and [business] going forward."

Any script will seem 'canned' when read on paper. The key is in how it is presented, in verbal, non-verbal and affective characteristics.

Appendix B: Essential Do's and Don'ts to Engender Trust in Relationship Establishment

Do:
- ◆ Know your purpose.
- ◆ Present professionally and knowledgably.
- ◆ Be prepared with a game plan for each contact.
- ◆ Plan your time appropriately & respect their time.
- ◆ Make it meaningful to them, not so much you.
- ◆ Talk less and listen more.
- ◆ Talk to understand, discover and learn.
- ◆ Dialogue to gather as much information as you can.
- ◆ Share information that is relevant to the conversation.
- ◆ Learn what professional organizations they belong to.
- ◆ Promise something by a timeline, then deliver.
- ◆ Document key points to remember & "to-dos."
- ◆ Complete "to-do's" and follow-up.

Don't:
- ◆ Drop by without a plan.
- ◆ Be casual or overly familiar.
- ◆ Talk more than you listen.
- ◆ Work with them to meet workforce and partner organization requirements.
- ◆ Forget names and positions of people you meet with.
- ◆ Be job placement-centric in your communications.