**Harnessing Employer Partnerships**

Employer partnerships depend on finding the right person at the right time and managing expectations. This Mr. or Ms. Right Employer will most likely be someone who is already connected to the college, you, or your programs. Having carefully examined emerging fields and doing your homework you make the strategic decision to extend your current training courses to a new area. Your first task is to look for an employer who will advise on curriculum and at the very least interview the graduates. An employer partnership does not begin and end with job placement, but rather needs to start during the first stages of training development and continue at every step thereafter.

**What is an Employer Partnership?**

At its heart, an employer partnership is a relationship between company and a training provider. Like all relationships, employer partnerships come in a wide variety of sizes and flavors. Employers can contribute some or all of the following, depending on their level of engagement: job placement, internships, instructors, industry connections, curriculum feedback, scholarships, guest speakers, projects and scenarios for the training, site visits and/or information about the career path and industry. Training providers bring access to talent. A company is only as good as the talent it employs. To be sustainable and successful both partners must see the relationships as a win-win.

Your employer partner may be connected to the college as a donor or through an advisory board; you may find the partner through an instructor or an alumnus; the employer may already host interns or hire students, or you may even find the employer through a professional organization. Recently, a graduate of the LaGuardia Community College bookkeeping program obtained employment and then came back to the college to ask for customized Excel training for her co-workers. Networking with individuals who already have a positive relationship with the college is the easiest way to approach a potential employer partner.

Employer Engagement Process: There are three key stages in employer engagement: training development, training delivery, and job placement. Employer engagement in the earlier steps paves the way for job placement and retention.

**Stage 1: Training Development** is an iterative process, involving extensive checking with the employer to fully understand the job itself and what will make the most effective training (and therefore result in the hiring of the program graduates by the employer).

First, you, as the training provider, need to completely understand the job and where it is situated in a career ladder or path. You will need the employer to provide an organizational chart and a job description, but this may not be enough. These job outlines can often be misleading or omit key information, so the training developer needs to go to the worksite, shadow someone doing the job and interview “star” employees to find out what skills, knowledge, experience and attributes make them stellar performers. The training developer also needs to interview hiring managers to understand what they are looking for and find out about hiring cycles and job demands. Is there more work around the holidays? Tax season? How long do people usually stay in this job? What is the turnover and what are the opportunities for promotion? The training developer should also meet with HR to find out how the employers screen the applicants. Find out the forms the applicants have to fill out, any assessments (Microsoft Office testing?) and the format of the interview (individual or panel). Does the employer require references? It’s helpful to see examples of resumes of rejected and accepted candidates and find out why people leave the position. Perhaps they are recruited by another employer, perhaps there are aspects of the job which may be unpalatable to some people or the hours are unsocial. This is all important information for you to consider when building your training program.

You will also want to find out whether other employers of this kind are looking for the same qualifications and qualities or have varying requirements (for example, do all healthcare providers need the same training for medical billers and coders?). Ask your employer partners to recommend other companies or subject matter experts that could help you understand the job and the career path.

**Training funding** is an area requiring tact and firmness. You need to communicate the real cost in training development and delivery as well as the value of top job candidates. Ask the employer for the amount they spend on recruitment and retention annually. Explore whether the employer will pay for this training (for example, for incumbent workers) through a contract or if the employer is expecting that the college will obtain grant funding. If it’s the latter then you will need letters of support and an agreement that the employer will at least interview program graduates. The employer may also be able to help to identify funders/grant opportunities and may provide scholarships for talented candidates who can’t afford training.

All of this information about the job and the ideal worker is then fed into theactual **curriculum development** byteachers or subject matter experts (SMEs) who will map out the topic areas, plan projects and scenarios, decide on instructional approaches, and if this is literacy or training curriculum--integrate the basic skills into the workforce development. Your employer partner should help you identify and vet your SMEs. Your employer partner should also review the curriculum to ensure that nothing is missing, that the overall emphasis is appropriate, and that the scenarios are accurate and the training flows well.

**Stage 2: Training Delivery**

Training delivery starts with **outreach and recruitment**. You want to attract the adults who will be best served by the training and who will be successful. Your marketing materials and methods need to be appropriate to your audience and include information about your employer partners. Students don’t want training programs; they want jobs, and your employer partnership is your competitive advantage. Does your marketing material sell the career? Does it include your employer partners and their companies’ logos? You can also offer recruitment events, such as open houses, online ”meet-ups,” and hotlines where the employer partner can talk directly to students about the job and the career path.

In line with the criteria for the ideal candidate you will need appropriate **screening tools**. The application for the training program should mimic the employer partner’s job application. If there are certain employment requirements for the position, such as having a valid driver’s license, these should be incorporated into the application and intake process for the training program. If a candidate is not eligible for employment it is better to address these barriers before you and the candidate invest in the training. Screening assessments for basics skills, such as a writing sample, are important to determine whether the training will be able to bring the student’s skills to a level accepted by the employer. You can involve employer partners directly in the screening process through joint interviews of training applicants. Having both parties interview candidates before acceptance allows you to hear concerns about candidates first-hand from the hiring authority and to determine whether the concerns can be allayed by training; it also creates accountability with the hiring managers when the time to hire program graduates comes.

Throughout the training, the employer stays engaged through **job readiness activities,** which prepare students for employment through job shadowing and site visits. It’s also helpful for students to engage the employer partner’s hiring managers informally before students go for actual interviews. Internships and externships are helpful during the training to provide background and hands on experience. However, these engagements require careful planning ensuring that employer feedback is captured and filtered back to students and instructors. After each engagement, even site visits, the employer partners score the students; Scores are shared with instructors and case managers, so they can coach students on their hard and soft skills. As with all training programs, the students will need resume assistance, interview preparation as well as coaching and grooming tips before each employer engagement, and direct feedback after each engagement.

**Stage 3: Job Placement and Retention**

It is unlikely that your employer partner will agree to hire a certain number of the program graduates, but you can certainly require that they interview successful graduates. If the employer has participated in the training design, they should have confidence enough in the training program to interview graduates. This agreement is only sustainable if you have confidence in your training program and in the graduates you send to interview. If you have a weak screening process or send students who do not participate fully in the training, then the quality of talent you are sending to the employer is compromised and you are not holding up your end of the relationship.

Job placement begins before training is finished. You should integrate the job application and interview skills directly into training. Students should complete the job application in class with assistance. Then you can collect the application and the resumes (which you help the students prepare since day one) and send them directly to your employer partner’s HR department. Candidates should not have to navigate the HR process individually.

The interviewing of graduates by the employer is an integral part of the training program. Interviews should be scheduled at the same time you are writing the course schedule and be communicated to students upon enrollment. You and the employer partner should agree upon format and questions during training development. Again a feedback form for each candidate interviewed is a key employer deliverable. If the employer partner does not invite the student back for a second interview, knowing why allows you to coach the student before sending him or her out for interviews with other employers.

After the initial interview the employer should indicate which students can be scheduled for full-length interviews. The training program should be the primary conduit of information during the hiring process. As part of the training, students need to be prepared for the actual **job offer,** and your training program should track acceptance, start date, job title, and salary. It is also important to follow up on the students’ job performance (at 6 months and 1 year) so that the training program staff knows which parts of the curriculum or the overall program need revision for the next cohort. Program staff need to know any surprises and the overall outcomes by interviewing the candidate and the hiring manger, looking at performance evaluations, and tracking overall student success.

**Partnership Tools**

As with any relationship, the greatest danger is miscommunication. In initial discussions be sure to discuss engagement expectations for all three stages. Then, codify these expectations in a formal partnership agreement signed by both parties. This will help prevent conflict further down the line.

By **working with an employer partner** from start to finish it is possible to create and deliver a workforce training program that meets the needs of the employer and the employee. The employer hires someone who will be an asset, who is reliable and well-trained, and who will not need to be replaced in the immediate future at considerable cost and effort. The program graduate enters the workforce confident of having the skills, knowledge, and experience to fulfill his or her employer’s expectations while beginning a new career path.

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