

Gain Buy In

Whether you're a small or large company, it's important to show leaders that building an employment pathway for opportunity youth is good for business—a win for your bottom line, your employees, your community and the opportunity youth being served.

This step-by-step guide is designed make it easier for you to build your business case within your company. You'll find suggestions for each step, as well as tips and tools for following through and gaining buy-in.

This guide is designed to help you:

- 1 Understand the key messages to effectively pitch an employment pathway effort within your organization
- 2 Walk through key steps for developing a business case that meets your company needs
- 3 Download helpful leave-behinds to strengthen your case

Step 1: Identify & Prepare

Identify your audience.

Who are the key stakeholders whose support your company will need to move forward? Take a look at your business, your board (if any) and your staff. What's most important to them? What are they most passionate about?

Conduct a baseline inventory.

Your partner organization will be a huge asset during program development. In this phase, you should establish roles and responsibilities, preferred communication channels and potential challenges.

Before building a business case, consider some high-level preparation and planning questions. There are several tools on this website that can help you, including the "Quick Start Guide" and "How To Choose A Partner", but here are the basics.

- What are your business needs? (e.g., increased retention, greater diversity, more skilled workers)
- What are your organization's short- and long-term goals for the initiative?
- How does your business want to connect with opportunity youth? Through a mentoring, school-to-work, internship or hiring pathway?
- What partner organizations might be a good fit for your organization?
- What is your organization's capacity to support an employment pathway for opportunity youth?

Step 2: Start Building Your Business Case

Compiling a business case that persuades stakeholders to invest in employment pathways for opportunity youth is most effective when it addresses specific business goals. From an employer perspective, research helps make the case internally for the investment as a business imperative—as does emphasizing the value and importance of collaborating with strong community partners.

Set up your company's business needs

Here are some common business drivers that employers cite for investing in employment pathways:

- Build your talent pipeline with more skilled, loyal and motivated workers
- Increase retention among newly hired and existing employees
- Enhance employee engagement, morale and satisfaction through employee volunteerism
- Increase productivity
- Boost workforce diversity
- Increase visibility with your community, your consumers, future leaders and potential talent
- Expand into new markets
- Enhance management experience for employees
- Earn community goodwill/stronger community impact
- Get your products and work in front of in-touch consumers
- Boost consumer confidence

You might also consider the following information to strengthen your case:

- Any internal company research findings around these issues (stats)
- Relevant community facts and stats about youth and your local economy

An overall messaging approach:

- Remind your audience about the company's business needs
- Appeal to the bottom-line business and social benefits
- Lead with the business need, then follow up by emphasizing the impact on your community and young adults

Best practices for building your business case

- Provide facts to support your argument
- Include figures that represent your local economy and demographic situation, such as from state departments of labor and/or economic development
- Make it relevant. Think about hot topics in the media and your community. Use these topics to connect to your issue.
- Give them a snapshot, not an encyclopedia

Set up the nation

After covering your specific company needs, you might want to educate your audience on a macro level by addressing the nation's economic need to engage with opportunity youth. The Business Case section of this website will give you many key messages and statistics to cite, such as:

- At a time of record youth unemployment in America, employers still struggle to find skilled entry-level talent
- 2/3 of employers report difficulty filling open positions.
- 40% of employers cite lack of skills as the main reason for job vacancies.
- American businesses currently need 97 million skilled employees—but only 45 million Americans have the necessary skills to do the work.

"Our graduation rate is terrible and getting worse. Our applicant pool isn't what it ought to be. We need to hire good employees. We had a business need to do things differently."

—Corporate Partner

Step 3: Introduce Employment Pathways As A Solution.

Building employment pathways can help expand your company's talent pipeline and experiences for opportunity youth. Again, The Business Case section of this website will provide you with key messages, which are highlighted below:

Make a definitive statement, such as the following:

- "Opportunity youth are an untapped talent pool of motivated, loyal young adults that can help our business thrive."
- "Innovative employers are partnering with community organizations and nonprofits nationwide to build a skilled pipeline of talent via opportunity youth—and they're getting results. At the same time, young adults are gaining meaningful career pathways and contributing to a better-trained and more diverse workforce."

“Pick up the phone and call the superintendent of the local school system... invite in the local mayor or whatever and have lunch and say ‘Let’s do something’...because you’re going to make \$2 million more a year if you do what we did...and so you have nothing to lose.”

- Stu Thorne, CEO of Southwire, on the success of his company’s employment

Be positive but realistic:

- 5.8 million young adults in this country ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and seeking work
- Only half of them held jobs in 2011—the lowest youth employment level since WWII
- They’ve been overlooked by traditional hiring methods, mostly due to lack of access to opportunities for skills development and meaningful employment pathways
- They’re motivated, resilient, loyal and often overlooked
- They’re hungry to prove themselves
- They’re engaged and tenacious

Explain how employment pathways can contribute to real ROI.

The ROI section of this website explains more (and provides stats) about how investing in opportunity youth can help your company achieve the following business goals:

- Increase retention (Example: CVS Caremark)
- Boost productivity (Example: PG&E)
- Increase diversity (Example: Accenture)
- Enhance employee engagement (Example: Gap Inc.)
- Add to consumer confidence (Example: PG&E)
- Strengthen community impact (Example: Stepping Up)

You might also consider the following to strengthen your case:

- Relevant statistics
- Relevant case study examples (See Success Stories)

Step 4: Provide Overview of Employment Pathways Other Employers Are Using

Employment pathways help bridge the gap between unemployed young adults and employers who need skilled talent by helping young adults acquire and demonstrate marketable skills, explore career choices, build networks and gain access to work opportunities.

Employment pathways consist of everything from a relatively modest investment in mentoring one or more young adults to a much more significant investment, such as designing comprehensive best-practice training and hiring programs. There are four main pathways to explore:

Mentoring

Developing a structured, trusting relationship between professionals (mentors) and young adults (Examples: Expeditors and Fidelity)

School-to-Work

Collaborating with an education provider to integrate the professional skills that employers look for into local education systems while providing young people with valuable workplace exposure. (Example: Southwire)

Internships

Work-based learning experiences that range from a short-term internship to an extended and structured large-scale program (Examples: UBS and Southwire)

Hiring

Growing a talent pipeline to establish a clear career path for long-term growth potential (Examples: CVS/Caremark , HEB Grocery Company and Southwire)

The pathways approach has a particular focus on employer actions at the pre-employment and hiring stages.

Step 5: Make It Tangible and Doable

Partnerships help employers with many of the steps to building an opportunity youth pathway, including setting goals and recruiting and training youth. Communicate the following key points:

- Employers can leverage partnerships for their support, expertise and experience with opportunity youth
- There are many types of partner organizations: Effective partnership models usually include an employer and at least one of the following:
 - Nonprofit community-based organizations
 - High schools, technical schools, community colleges, colleges and universities
 - Faith-based organizations
 - Government organizations
- Businesses can tap local partners in the community

“A true partnership is what makes us very successful. The communication... back and forth... keeps my job easy and keeps my department up and running through good and bad times.”

- Richard Curtis, VP of talent acquisition, State Street Financial

How partnerships can help employer efforts

- Provide expertise and support
- Streamline recruitment and hiring
- Help grow a reliable talent pipeline
- Develop customized curricula to meet local labor-market needs
- Offer low-cost training options

Provide clear steps.

Provide a recommended approach for your company. Make your case more compelling by allowing everyone to visualize how your investment might play out:

- Suggest an employment pathway (mentoring, skills development, internships or hiring)
- Summarize the key business goals you expect to address (e.g., increased productivity, increased retention, enhanced employee engagement)
- Illustrate the program development process at a high level

Step 6: Make Your Recommendation

As with any new initiative, it's important to make a concrete ask. Make a simple, clear, actionable recommendation for investing in employment pathways. It should be relevant, doable and meet business leaders where they are.

In advance of the ask, determine a list of ways your corporate leaders and colleagues can get involved. Be prepared to describe their involvement: volunteering time, helping develop a marketing plan, creating a budget, etc.

An example of your recommendation:

"We'd like to move forward with building a School-to-Work pathway. With your approval, we can start the process of identifying a partner organization and/or determining our scope."

Overcoming barriers

Here are some of the common barriers employers have told us they've encountered when trying to get buy-in from their decision makers to invest in opportunity youth.

Barrier

- A fear that it would be a risk for their business (potential liabilities)
- A belief that it would only work on a large scale
- A perception that this is just "charity"

Solution

- Emphasize the business benefits again and reference key Success Stories
- Suggest starting small, such as with a modest mentoring initiative. Emphasize the help partnerships can provide.
- Emphasize the ROI of investing in opportunity youth

Success Story: Gap, Inc.

Gap, Inc.'s This Way Ahead initiative provides opportunity youth with skills development and career exploration while providing employees with meaningful development opportunities, deeper connections with co-workers and increased loyalty to the company.

Business impact:

- 2/3 of interns hired as part-time employees annually
- 100% of employee volunteers find the program professionally rewarding
- 74% of employee volunteers said the program improved their leadership skills

Success Story: Southwire

Through contextualized work-based learning, a robust support system and a paycheck, wire and cable manufacturer Southwire's 12 for Life program gives high school students an opportunity to finish high school while undergoing an onsite training and education program that combines a four-hour shift at a specially designed Southwire plant with a four-hour school day.

Business impact:

- Increased revenue and productivity from the experience-learning plant
- Highly trained and motivated workforce: 21% of graduates hired as full-time employees
- Greater community engagement