How to Choose a Partner Organization

No matter what employment pathway you're interested in pursuing with opportunity youth, partner organizations can help you reach your business goals. However big or small your initiative—and it doesn't have to be big—partner organizations can provide invaluable support and expertise in making your efforts a success.

This guide is geared to those who have already chosen one of the four employment pathways to working with opportunity youth: mentoring, internships, school-to-work and hiring.

Overview

True partnerships are about shared agendas, combined resources and rewards. Your business might be strong on strategy but low on bandwidth. Partner organizations might have expertise and experience working with opportunity youth issues but need employers willing to provide jobs, mentoring opportunities, internships and industry-specific skills development. Combine your strengths, and your chances of success increase tremendously.

"In today's world there is an expectation that businesses give back to society, and the best way to do that is in collaboration with other organizations. In an ideal partnership, we are able to address business needs and be a good corporate citizen at the same time."

- Corporate Leader

Types of Partners

- Nonprofit community-based organizations
- High schools, technical schools, community colleges, colleges and universities
- Faith-based organizations
- Government entities, such as workforce investment boards

The Business Benefit of Partnerships

Partnering with another organization can create a number of bottom-line benefits for your business. A partner organization can:

- Provide expertise and support for implementing an employment pathway
- Streamline recruitment and hiring of opportunity youth candidates
- Offer access to a broader employer base
- Help grow a reliable talent pipeline
- Develop customized curricula to meet local labor-market needs
- Help increase visibility in the community
- Strengthen community collaborations and networks
- Offer low-cost training options

Best Practices of an Effective Partnership

- Consistent, open communications
- Identifying shared goals
- Setting clear expectations
- Mutual trust and respect
- Leadership support
- Dedicated staff commitment

Section 1: Prepare and Identify

Before entering into any partnership, it's important to establish internal planning and goal-setting. Here are some key ways to set you up for success:

Designate a relationship manager within your company.

This person will be responsible for leading the communications efforts with your partner organization.

Identify your business goals.

Before choosing a partner, identify the high-level goals you hope to achieve with your collaboration. These goals will help you recognize differences early in the relationship and develop strategies to help the partnership to thrive.

Questions to help you set goals

- What are your business drivers to partner (e.g., diversify your talent pool, boost community visibility, build employee morale)?
- What does success look like to you?
- What do you hope to get from a partner that you can't accomplish independently?
- What resources do you have (e.g., dedicated staff, budget) to help make this partnership successful?
- What will be your process for maintaining the partnership?

Identify the roles and objectives of this collaboration.

This will partially depend on the pathway you choose. For example, do you want a partner organization that has particular experience with building large-scale internship initiatives? Do you seek a partner that already has an established skills development training pipeline for opportunity youth?

Recognize what both sides bring to the table.

You are about to enter a relationship, and that means being prepared to give and take. Think about what you are willing to bring to this collaboration and anticipate what your partner will need. This might include access to youth, financial resources and public-relations expertise.

How Partners Add Value

- Connection to a target youth population
- Ability to select and support youth for the program
- Vibrant community network/ existing relationships
- Experience with the challenges and best practices related to opportunity youth
- Stable leadership and infrastructure
- A successful track record of corporate partnerships

How Businesses Add Value

- Passion and drive to make the program a success
- Clear understanding of resources, desired goals and business benefits
- Define scope, scale, model and management plan
- Financial resources and management expertise
- Access to volunteers
- A work-based learning environment

"Our role is to provide practical solutions, innovative thinking and sound management. Our partners bring a wide range of differing skills and experience that complements our own contribution."

- Corporate Leader

Step 2: Choose Your Partner

Now that you have assessed your goals, needs and resources, it's time to choose the right partner. To search all the partners in your geographic area with a track record of successful employer relationships, consult our Partner Directory. Here are some considerations to keep in mind as you determine your shared goals and expertise.

Research the prospective partners that serve your area.

Does the organization's mission align with your goals? Does its field of expertise complement your own (or could it help you fill a void in your own company)? Does it have the capacity to support you program's goals?

Consider what types of partners will be a good fit for you.

For example, in some internship programs, a nonprofit can act as a bridge between the employer, the school and the opportunity youth. Different types of potential partnerships are listed here.

Types of Organizations:

Nonprofit Community-based Organizations

Many national community organization such as Year Up, Genesys Works, Urban Alliance and others are committed to providing young adults with the support they need to reach their employment potential. These organizations have multiple outposts around the country.

Partnering with an established organization that has worked with many large corporations will offer a track record of success. But your partner doesn't have to be a big, national organization. A smaller, local nonprofit may be a better match, depending on your company's priorities.

Education Providers

Learn and Earn partnerships include employers partnering with education providers, such as high schools or postsecondary education institutions. A Learn and Earn partnership with a high school provides at-risk young adults with a paycheck and a high school degree while the employer prepares its future pipeline of workers. Southwire Company's 12 for Life program is the perfect example.

In addition, Learn and Earn partnerships include collaborations between employers and postsecondary institutions, such as community colleges, to develop real-world training programs for current employees- many of whom have to work while they complete their education. These employees have the opportunity to gain tangible skills while earning a degree or credential.

Faith-based Organizations

Faith-based organizations are the core of the community in many cities and provide a variety of social services such as job training and counseling. They offer employers access to a diverse mix of young untapped talent. Many faith-based entities nurture core values of self-reliance and active citizenship—traits that benefit promising talent for employers as well as effective partnerships.

Government Organizations

Many government organizations focus on opportunity youth outreach. The U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps, for example, helps young people ages 16 through 24 with technical and academic training, serving 60,000 students at 125 centers across the country in fields ranging from construction to hospitality to information technology. Job Corps offers companies screening of eligible employees.

Understand your partner's capacity.

Your company is investing time and money when collaborating with a partner, so understanding its bandwidth is critical. Will your partner deliver on its share of your collaboration? Will your partner grow with you? Make sure the answers are yes.

Seek out partners who have a strong reputation in their fields.

Your company's reputation is on the line, so do your homework. Just as you would with any collaboration, ask lots of questions and check references (e.g., Have your top candidates worked with other businesses? What was their success rate?) Search the Partner Directory for organizations that have experience working with employers

Checklist: Where to seek out potential partners?

- Have you partnered with a particular organization in the past?
- Is there an organization that is particularly visible in your community (an affiliation that could result in greater name recognition for your company)?
- Which organization is related to your field?
- Are your employees affiliated with any organizations?

"Work with a specialist! They're the experts. They'll support your company throughout the mentoring program. They're someone you can lean on."

- Corporate Partner

Step 3: Develop Your Partner

Now it's time to build a trusting, effective relationship with your partner. This is the phase in which you align your goals with your partner's, work through any differences and, together, lay plans for realizing your initiative.

Identify shared problems and goals.

This is the most critical stage of your partnership. Open communication about objectives and capabilities is critical to a successful collaboration. Make sure to document everything in writing.

Best practice

As you develop your relationship, keep in mind that the most sustainable partnerships serve both business and social needs.

Set clear expectations of each party's roles.

Take the time to understand what your partner expects from you and vice versa. To provide accountability, put each partner's roles and responsibilities in writing for easy reference along the way. And, identify a company strength that you can bring to the collaboration, such as graphic designers to create brochures or media contacts to spread the word about your initiative.

Find a common language.

Know your partner's business fluency up front. When developing your partnership, be open and transparent about language and terminology—and ask the same of your partner. Many nonprofits have made strides to learn business language in order to build stronger cross-sector collaborations. But others have not—which doesn't mean they won't make great partners.

Build trust and respect together.

Trust is something that builds over time, but you should have a baseline of trust in your partner before moving forward with implementation. Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions around topics such as budgets and resources. Speak up about differences and work together to resolve them.

"Trust level must be created before any programming begins and then it builds through the due-diligence of the parties."

- Corporate Leader

Create a timeline and stick to it.

For both parties, having a clear understanding of the partnership's duration is paramount. Your timeline should include:

- Start and end dates of the collaboration (you can always extend a relationship, but to avoid awkward break-ups, it's always better to start with a limited-time contract)
- Events and milestones (these will vary but might include launch events, training sessions, staff meeting dates, deadlines for deliverables, etc.)
- Points of evaluation(schedule regular touch points for reflection)

Communicate often and openly.

Discuss how things are going with your partner, take and provide feedback, and implement suggestions that will help you reach your goals more effectively. Common misunderstandings often have to do with capacity, roles and work culture. Address these issues upfront.

Best Practices

- Ask hard questions up front
- Respect and align with the objectives of different partners
- Start small with a time-limited project, then scale up
- Be flexible but realistic about capacity
- Be open and honest about differences in values, language and culture
- Build on shared values
- Be creative because every partnership is unique

Common Challenges

- Different decision-making styles
- Power imbalance
- Different expectations, especially about goals and timelines
- Skepticism about each other's priorities
- Different language and culture

Step 4: Measure the Effectiveness of Your Partnership

Ideally, measuring the success of your partnership will involve both quantitative and qualitative measurements. While you will definitely be measuring the success of your company's specific initiative (internships, mentoring, school-to-work or hiring) evaluating your partnership on its own terms will also help you meet your goals. Ultimately, each company will want to measure its ROI.

Quantitative Measurement

- How many members of your staff did the partnership require?
- How many hours did your company dedicate?
- What expenses did your company incur?

Qualitative Measurement

- Satisfaction levels of both parties
- Professional growth of employees involved with the partnership

Partnerships should be evaluated on a regular basis (at least annually) to make sure common goals are being met and discuss possible improvements.

Checklist: Partnership Evaluation Questions

- How well did the partnership achieve its objectives?
- What challenges arose and how were they resolved?
- What improvements should be made?
- What were best practices?
- How can partnership evolve?
- Should the partnership continue?

Checklist: What might success look like?

- The partnership does what it set out to do
- The partnership has an impact beyond its immediate stakeholder group
- The partnership is sustainable and easily managed
- The partnership adds value for each individual partner

Any evaluation of your partnership must occur in tandem with an evaluation of your initiative. If you're ready to grow your program, for example, you will have to assess whether your partner has the capacity to grow with you. Your partner can also help you define what growth could mean for your company.