



Engaging Employers: Partnering for Success

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Preface

An initial iteration of this brief provided guidance to emphasize the importance of involving employers in the development of practices that promote engagement in disability employment. Intentional focus was placed on the importance of maintaining and expanding employer engagement opportunities to enhance professional relationships. A five-level scale with descriptors was introduced as an assessment and reference tool for stakeholders in the field of disability services and supports. This engagement tool provides guidance essential to solidifying partnerships and encouraging advancement across each of the five levels.

This updated brief builds on the original publication by detailing specific strategies and verified examples of engaging new employers and leveraging existing professional relationships to enhance and strengthen partnerships across the five levels. These examples outline field experiences from a provider of disability employment services, SRVS, that operates in both rural and urban communities in Tennessee and Mississippi. Direct quotes from provider staff, employer testimonials and comments from enthusiastic workers offer compelling accounts that illustrate the efficacy of the five levels of employer engagement.

"SRVS, the family answer for disabilities"

Since 1962, SRVS (pronounced serves) has been a leader in empowering lives. Our mission is to provide the services that people with disabilities need to live meaningful lives as members of their communities.

SRVS offers a comprehensive array of services for people with disabilities in Tennessee and Mississippi. The organization proudly provides person-centered supports with a passionate commitment to Employment 1st methodologies. Based on SRVS's long term efforts to cultivate employer partnerships, below are examples of employer partnerships that have been developed at all five levels of employer relationships.



Introduction

While the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) stresses greater involvement of employers in the workforce development systems, voices of employers are often missing from research and policy discussions around disability employment. Many employers are disconnected and disengaged from the discussions around hiring individuals with disabilities. Most employers want information and advice from “trusted brokers” (Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas and Glover, 2010).

Employer engagement is a key strategy for workforce development as it aligns programs and services with employer needs (Barnow and Spaulding, 2015) and is necessary in connecting the business and disability communities. Employer engagement can range from advisory to long term partnerships. Working with employers over an extended period of time builds trust and increases mutual interests (Wilson, 2015).

All employer relationships are not equal – the ladder of employer engagement (in Figure 1) shows the development of relationships and how each level can leverage unique contributions to an employer (Wilson, 2015). Employer engagement can be understood as a continuum. This brief offers a framework called the ladder of engagement to identify different levels of engagement and strategies for advancing through the levels. These levels, which correspond to types of employer relationships, are defined as follows:

- **New relationship** – obtaining information: discussing hiring needs, skills needed and on-going labor needs and challenges
- **Working relationship** – proposing specific employer services, work experiences and employment placements that are beneficial to employers and demonstrates effective job matching
- **Stronger working relationship** – additional worksite tours, job shadows, work experiences, internships, and job placements
- **Partnership** – co-designing employer services and assessing the impact and benefit of the employer services
- **Strategic partnership** – advocates and promotes hiring - reaching out when there is a hiring need, participating in events (e.g., reverse job fairs); participates in Employer/Provider Consortiums or Business Advisory Councils or Disability:IN Affiliates



Figure 1. Ladder of Employer Engagement

	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV	Level V
Types of Relationships	New Relationship	Working Relationship	Stronger Working Relationship	Partnership	Strategic Partnership
Key Provider Role	Learning, assessing labor needs and organizational culture	Proposing specific employer services and job candidates	Capacity building; expanding services and placements	Advising; co-designing employer services; assessing impact of employer services and recognition of employers' commitment to disability employment	Convening; leading; disseminating information on internal policies and employment practices for hiring job candidates with disabilities; participation in employer/provider consortiums or business advisory councils or Disability: IN affiliates
Stage of relationship	Initial contact/new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
Activity examples	Informational interviews; labor needs assessments; work site tours; job analysis	Employer proposals and presentations; work experiences; community-based assessments; trial work placements; internships	Additional work site tours; job shadows; work experiences; community-based assessments; additional trial work placements; internships	Employer satisfaction surveys; interviews to assess impact of employer services; providing disability related training and promoting the business in various stakeholder circles	Advising on internal policies and employment practices for hiring job candidates with disabilities; developing and participating in employer/provider consortiums or business advisory councils

Source: Adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint

Examples of Levels of Engagement

New Relationship (Level I) can happen as the direct result of business research and cold calls to get a foot in the door. However, identifying an internal or external resource can prove invaluable. This process is termed “warm handoff” and describes the benefits of having a professional or personal introduction prior to engagement, which may allow the job developer to exponentially advance the conversation.



Level I Employer Example:

The Four Way Soul Food Restaurant is a storied dining establishment in the ‘Soulsville’ community near multiple historic landmarks in the Memphis area. This professional relationship began with a hungry SRVS Job Developer who simply wanted a delicious soul food lunch. However, the job developer quickly noticed unmet needs within the restaurant related to a staffing shortage. After returning to enjoy additional meals, the job developer began a dialogue with store employees and the business owner to introduce the workforce he represents. Consequently, getting great food resulted in the Four Way Soul Food Restaurant employing several people with disabilities over the past five years.

Working Relationship (Level II) provides opportunities for a job seeker to shine. This can be accomplished by presenting employment candidates that have a pre-determined desire to work in a specific industry. When an employer is advised the candidate(s) in question has gone or will go through performance assessments and aspires to work in a specific industry, this can often prove quite compelling.

Level II Employer Example:

Showtime Pictures is an affiliate of Elvis Presley Enterprises and provides quality pictures of Graceland visitors at their arrival and during tours of the Graceland Museum and other attractions. This professional relationship was started when a SRVS Job Developer approached the manager on behalf of a person he represented who shared the same birth date as Elvis “The King.” The job developer thoroughly explained that this lady had a burning desire to work at Graceland and felt a kindred connection to Elvis! This impassioned plea resulted in her getting a job as a greeter to direct guests to photo opportunities that would capture their Graceland experiences. Unfortunately, the person supported passed away several years ago. However, because of the wonderful experiences and positive guest comments, Show Time Pictures and Graceland continue to employ people with disabilities.

Stronger Working Relationship (Level III) is organically created through workplace success and established trust. When an employer has undeniably benefitted from the relationship, this can and often is the fundamental framework for a “professional partnership” that can lead to long-term collaborations. At this point, the employer is likely more willing to advocate for disability employment by providing testimonials and sharing workplace success stories. When a job developer is armed with the aforementioned, this can open doors more easily and create a continuum of warm handoffs, as referenced in (Level I.)

Level III Employer Example:

Service Master by Stratos is a custodial company in Memphis and provides services to the largest sporting and entertainment venues in the city. This professional relationship started with a casual introduction between the business owner and a SRVS Job Developer. Stratos had immediate staffing needs, presented job opportunities to people with disabilities, and quickly scaled to over a dozen hires. Based on the notable success, Stratos has gone to great lengths to share their stories about the people they hired, including participating in focus groups, and joining the SRVS Employment Advisory Council. In addition, Stratos received the “Employer of the Year Award” from Tennessee Community Organizations to honor their commitment to supporting and promoting disability employment. However, the most compelling aspect of this partnership relates



to the great sense of pride and enjoyment these team members get from supporting an ongoing list of high-profile events. The Stratos contract includes handling major events such as: National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball games, music concerts, monster truck shows and on-ice productions. Team members boast about meeting mega stars, taking pictures of and with top athletes, and sharing these experiences with friends and family.

Partnership (Level IV) is where the provider can gather quantitative and qualitative data and feedback to assess the employer's experience and satisfaction with overall process. Providers must be open to honest feedback regarding their performance and delivery of workplace services and supports, as outlined in levels I, II and III. Determining satisfaction using data driven metrics and direct feedback represents full transparency, a commitment to self-assessment and improvement and produces valuable tools for all future engagement efforts.

Level IV Employer Example:

A long-term professional relationship with Canteen Vending was the direct result of advocacy during a business merger. Canteen was acquiring a similar business and company management presented people with disabilities as valuable team members. Canteen was impressed with the attendance records and performance indicators that painted a clear picture of why they should retain their staff with disabilities. Canteen's decision to retain staff members was made based upon the above referenced data and internal advocacy. In fact, the people with disabilities working at Canteen, their perfect attendance and notable work ethics were highlighted by the TN IDD agency for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). These accomplishments and esteemed recognition remain sources of extreme pride for all involved.

Strategic Partnership (Level V) manifests when the culmination of the first four levels is fully realized and all parties have achieved their desired outcome(s). At this integral point, the provider can and should request designated time for a brainstorming session(s) with the employer and all appropriate internal stakeholders. This is an optimal time to present and discuss strategies for promoting successes and highlighting positive experiences and outcomes from the perspective of the employee, employer, and provider.

Level V Employer Example:

Zaxby's is a highly regarded restaurant franchise in Tennessee and sixteen other states. This impressive chain serves delicious chicken meals, salads, and a host of delectable food items each day. The Zaxby's organization has been an excellent partner in providing job opportunities to people with disabilities. Individuals working at Zaxby's restaurants who are engaged in Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) are afforded opportunities to advance within the company. Job seekers with a disability are encouraged to apply for employment at any location without fear of discriminatory or exclusionary practices. Because of their organizational philosophy and commitment to inclusion and acceptance, Zaxby's is noted as an exceptional business partner. SRVS is truly excited about this professional relationship and expects continued success for many years to come. Furthermore, one Zaxby's team member, supported by SRVS, recently received an Employee of the Month recognition for his exceptional job performance. This gentleman is filled with pride regarding his accomplishment and has vowed to work even harder as a Zaxby's team member. Zaxby's and SRVS will continue working closely to provide jobs and opportunities to people with disabilities in Tennessee and beyond!



The following are potential next steps for strategic partnerships:

- Create or identify internal/external “Disability Employment Champions”
- Draft letters of recommendation
- Direct referrals to their professional/personal contacts
- Create or join an Advisory Councils
- Develop virtual presentations for various platforms and venues
- Organize co-presentations
- Consider recognition awards
- Create a schedule for periodic surveys/feedback

Building Relationships

Depending on the size of the business, a relationship might look different. For example, a larger business may have relationships across all levels, while a smaller business might only have relationships in one or two levels. Understand that building relationships is a gradual process – it’s about establishing trust and validating how the partnership benefits all involved, which can only be accomplished over time. We must refrain from using a social services dialogue, but rather develop business-centric engagement strategies – avoid acronyms and social service terminology; focus on needs and solutions versus talking about “programs” and identify ways to bring value to the employer or business. Familiarize yourself with terminology used in the business, which will demonstrate that you have done your homework. This can help the conversations progress faster; thereby showing respect for the employer’s valuable time.

When building long-term relationships, it is important to keep the lines of communication open, learn more about each employer/business, and establish ways to engage decision makers as often as possible and appropriate. Here are some examples of engaging with employers:

- Worksite tours
- Job shadowing
- Periodic labor needs assessments
- Advisory board memberships
- Event speakers
- Mock interviews
- Testimonials

The provider may consider offering free disability awareness training. When employers are presented with methods of educating their staff and creating a more inclusive workplace, many will gladly accept free training from experts in the field.

For a business relationship to be successful, it is important to get commitment on four levels, and all four are essential to build and maintain a dynamic relationship. This is important because you



may have identified a champion within the business, but if you have not identified a willing supervisor, then the long-term relationship may fail. The Commonwealth Corporation (2013) identified four types of “Yes” relationships:

- **Champion** – Someone who cares about employment of individuals with disabilities and is connected at any level to the business but has connections with others within the business. This person can introduce you to key decision makers.
- **System** – Someone who understands how your organization can be a resource, understands the business and provides guidance or structure in the process of hiring job seekers with disabilities.
- **Supervisory** – Someone who will provide supervision and assist in designing experiences or work opportunities, as well as providing feedback regarding the services and individual’s performance.
- **Fiscal** – Someone who provides guidance regarding the ability to hire based on financial investment and based on the value the individual and the employment service brings.

Co-Worker Supports – An example of using a Systems or Fiscal Strategy to take your Employer Relationship to the Next Level.

[TN Employment and Community First Pre-Employment & Employment Services \(2017\)](#)

Co-Worker Supports: The Managed Care model allows an employer to assign an existing employee to mentor a colleague with a disability who would be eligible to receive reimbursement up to 50% or \$12.00 per hour of that employee’s pay.

The Employer Relationship Mapping Tool (Commonwealth Corporation, 2013) contained in Figure 2 can be used to identify the relationships you have or need to cultivate for long-term relationships.

Figure 2. The Employer Relationship Mapping Tool

Champion	System
Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?	Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?
Supervisory	Fiscal
Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?	Name/Title Concerns/Needs How can my organization address these needs?



Business Case for Hiring

In a report from Accenture in partnership with Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities, it was found that many employers have not leveraged the talents of individuals with disabilities for three primary reasons: 1) lack of understanding of the scope of the talent available; 2) lack of understanding of the potential benefits; and 3) misconceptions about return on investment. However, companies that have hired employees with disabilities have higher revenues, net income, and profit margins. Beyond revenue, employers noted additional benefits of hiring employees with disabilities such as increased innovation (adapting and ensuring products and services are accessible); improved productivity (including lower turnover of employees); and improved market share and enhanced reputation. (Accenture, 2018). Providers should study and reference verified data on the positive financial impact of partnering with the disability community. Also important to note is the total disposable income for U.S. adults with disabilities, which is about \$490 billion (American Institutes of Research, 2019).

In focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019 with employers, discussions were organized around pre-determined topics related to customized employment and economic impact. To meet the selection criteria to participate, employers must have hired at least one individual with a disability into a job that meets the WIOA definition of customized employment and have experienced an operational or economic benefit from the recruiting, hiring, and retention of a worker with a disability through customizing a position in their company/organization. The findings supported specific impacts of customized employment from the perspective of participating employers. These included:

- Reduced costs to recruit, hire, train, and manage employees
- Increased productivity
- Increased job retention and quality of hire
- Use of alternative/flexible hiring processes
- Assessment of labor needs

Findings also supported general impacts of hiring individuals with disabilities from the perspective of participating employers. These included:

- Access to employer/provider coalitions and single point of contact
- Universal application of supports and accommodations
- Use of internships and other onboarding strategies
- Expanded hiring and employee promotion
- Improved workplace culture
- Identification of internal champions



Job Developers should assess the benefits of offering free disability employment/awareness training catered to industry type(s). Some examples and benefits listed below:

- Providers of disability services and supports are experts on integration and inclusion
- Job developers can leverage free training into engagement opportunities
- Standard training models can be modified/customized with minimal effort
- Training can reference existing partnerships with similar employers or industries
- Developers can reference the purchasing power within disability communities

Several items were repeated by all employers, namely reduced recruitment, hiring, training, and management costs as well as increased productivity.

What Employers Want

In an independent study, 2500 employers were surveyed to determine what they look for in employees, with or without disabilities (Owens, 2007). Of the 2500 surveys, 838 responded (response rate of approximately 34%) and seven agreed to participate in a small focus group. The employers were from urban, suburban, and rural communities; large (over 500 employees), medium (under 499-250 employees), and small (less than 249 employees) businesses; and from various industries (e.g., manufacturing, retail, hospitality, health care). Employers were very clear that there were three traits they look for in any employee they hire: 1) reliability/dependability; 2) flexibility/availability; and 3) productivity/quality. During the focus group meetings, employers discussed that while they looked for these traits in employees, they were willing to negotiate. For example, one employer noted that in his business, the most important traits were dependability and flexibility. His turnover was high and while he also needed productivity, if someone came to work every day and was able to work when they were needed, he had other people who could ensure the productivity and quality was there. Another employer explained that in his industry, the most important trait was accuracy (quality). He would be willing to overlook or accommodate absences or only having to work a certain day or time if the employee was accurate on their job.

What this means for employment consultants is that your questions draw out these needs. Asking questions about employer need or industry expectations can provide us with valuable information about the business needs and the question then focuses on what the candidate has to offer – the value they bring. For example, focusing on the strength of the candidate and the need of the business. One employer noted the importance of developing long term relationships, “The most important thing service providers can do is develop relationships with employers. If you come to me with a person looking for work, I had better know you already. If there is no personal relationship it is doomed to fail.” Employers stated that they are neutral about hiring employees with disabilities and that employment consultants tend to start and end by talking about their candidates or services without knowing anything about the business. The employers noted that the first meeting should be about building a trusting relationship.

When developing employer engagement strategies that provide an overview of best practices and studies. Never overlook the benefit of directly asking each employer “what do you need to improve your business model and reach desired goals?” Showing interest in the success of the business can



shift the momentum of a conversation to a win-win discussion. Below are some examples of how a job developer might prepare for a meeting with prospective employers.

- Research the business and industry prior to initial meeting.
- Demonstrate a general understanding of the industry.
- Present employment statistics specific to the industry, such as number of vacancies.
- Present a compelling business case for disability employment.
- Refrain from making a social services pitch, unless invited to do so.
- Subtly reference to the number and qualifications of job seekers you represent.
- Reference industry specific success stories and businesses, if authorized.
- Use visual aids, if appropriate and authorized.
- Provide disability specific data such as retention rates and tenure.

What Works

A partnership model of employer engagement is one in which employment consultants/disability employment organizations provide competent service delivery and develop a trusting relationship over time; providing customer service to employers, identifying mutual benefit, and providing ongoing services is critical (Hagner and Cooney, 2003). A strong model of employer engagement respects and empowers the business community over time, which ultimately leads to increased employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The following are strategies to support engagement.

1. Employment consultants provide support and expertise to business that develops employers' knowledge and skills when it comes to hiring persons with a disability. This could include training co-workers to support employees with disabilities both at work and socially (e.g., holiday parties, company picnics, break room) and address the employer's perception of increased risks and liability.
2. Business advisory councils and employer/provider consortia where employers can share and discuss successes, challenges, and resources for building inclusive hiring practices.
3. Expanding diversity and inclusion programs to include individuals with disabilities.

Summary

Employer engagement is a key strategy for workforce development as it aligns programs and services with employer needs and is necessary in connecting the business and disability communities. Employer engagement can range from advisory to long term partnerships. Working with employers over an extended period builds trust and increases mutual interests. We should view employer engagement as a continuum – New Relationship, Working Relationship, Stronger Working Relationship, Partnership and Strategic Partnership. Depending on the size of the business, a relationship might look different. For example, a larger business might have relationships across all levels while a smaller business might only have relationships in one or two



levels. Understand that building relationships is a gradual process – it is about building trust and demonstrating the benefit to the employers which can only be done over time. When building a long-term relationship, keep the lines of communication open, continue learning about each employer, and establish ways to engage the employer as often as possible (e.g., worksite tours, job shadows, additional labor needs assessments over time, advisory board, speaker at event, mock interviews, community-based assessments, work experiences). To establish and maintain an employer partnership, we need to make a business case for why they should continue to work with an employment program. We have evidence from companies that have hired employees with disabilities to demonstrate higher revenues, net income, and profit margins as well as reduced costs to recruit, hire, train, and manage employees, increased productivity and increased job retention and quality of hire. A strong model of employer engagement respects and empowers the business community over time which ultimately leads to increased employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Consider the benefits of discussing the economic impact of supporting people with disabilities through networking and shared best practices, which is often of particular importance to small businesses. Note the importance of conducting periodic employer surveys that can gather essential information, testimonies, and data. Once this information is assessed, it can be used to make industry specific modification regarding employer engagement.

