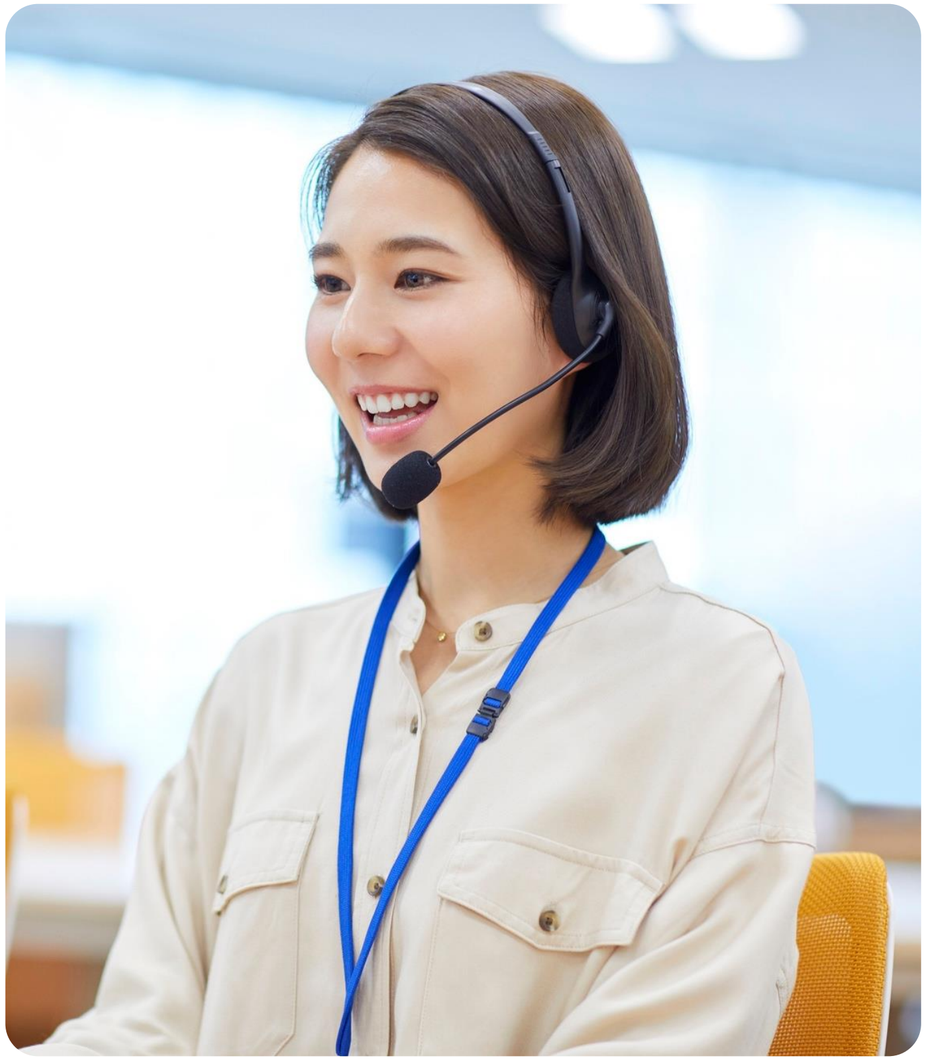


JOB TRAINING & Economic Development

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

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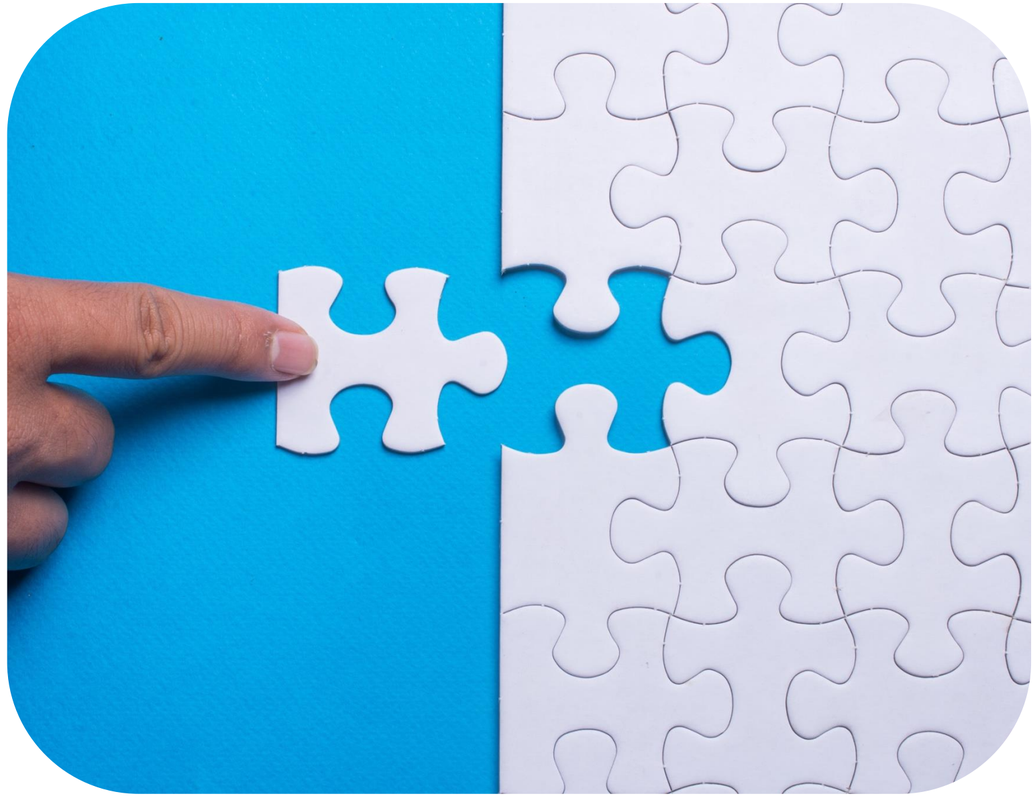
Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support,
Illinois State University, College of Education

Presented by Aimée Julian and Jalissa Jones—
ICSPS
October 2026

AGENDA

- Business Engagement Overview
- How to Engage a Business
- Business Engagement Steps
- Key Takeaways





“NEITHER EMPLOYERS NOR EDUCATORS CAN ACCOMPLISH THEIR GOALS IN THE LABOR MARKET ALONE. PARTNERSHIPS ALLOW BOTH SIDES TO ‘LEVERAGE THEIR COMBINED KNOWLEDGE OF LABOR MARKETS, SKILLS, PEDAGOGY, AND STUDENTS’.”

-LOUIS SOARES, VP AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION 2010

WHY ENGAGE BUSINESS?

Employers need programs for a workforce with the right skills and credentials.

Programs need employers to help them get the skills and competencies right.

Employers need schools, training providers, and communities to support students in learning essential skills.

Programs need employers to hire and continue supporting graduates.

Strong engagement leads to trust, referrals, and renewal.



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

WHAT DOES YOUR AUDIENCE NEED?



- Students/clients need easily understood on-ramps, clear lines to opportunity, exit strategies and a plan
- Trainers need to understand how workforce strategies connect to their field.
- Employers need strategies directly connected to hiring needs, how apprenticeships fit, and their connection to the community.

BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS

- Employees have the information and skills needed to make informed job and long-term career choices.
- Reduced turnover—excellent retention.
- Greater productivity.
- Lower costs.



TIPS FOR EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION:



- It’s sometimes tough to get employers to participate.
- Know your WBL strategies and concepts. Be persistent.
- Identify talent pain points—listen to the employer.
- Use other WBL examples from business and industry.
- Tight labor market—time to “grow your own” pipeline.
- Find, identify, or create industry intermediaries to assist employers.

WHAT COMPELS EMPLOYERS TO PARTICIPATE?

- Employers need to know that training will not be a loss leader.
- Employers need assurance that people will be productive from the start.
- Employers need to know that individuals will continue to receive support throughout their training.

WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT?

- Skilled talent
- Solutions that make sense
- A diverse workforce
- To understand apprenticeships
- Mutually beneficial partnerships
- Flexible and nimble training offerings
- Support for apprentices and the company
- Hire for attitude, train for skill

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS



- Engage other employers. Other employers are your best advocates
- Leadership matters. Bring in governors, college presidents, mayors, council commissioners
- Generate a buzz. Media reports, good stories, op-ed pieces
- Open houses and business events. Know what you’re talking about
- Share national examples. Be a leader
- Outreach and engage with Chambers of Commerce and local or regional industry associations



HOW DO YOU ENGAGE A BUSINESS?

FOCUS IN…

- Common obstacles with employer engagement
- Steps for employer engagement
  - “Selling” your program to employers
- Speaking the language of business
- Q&A

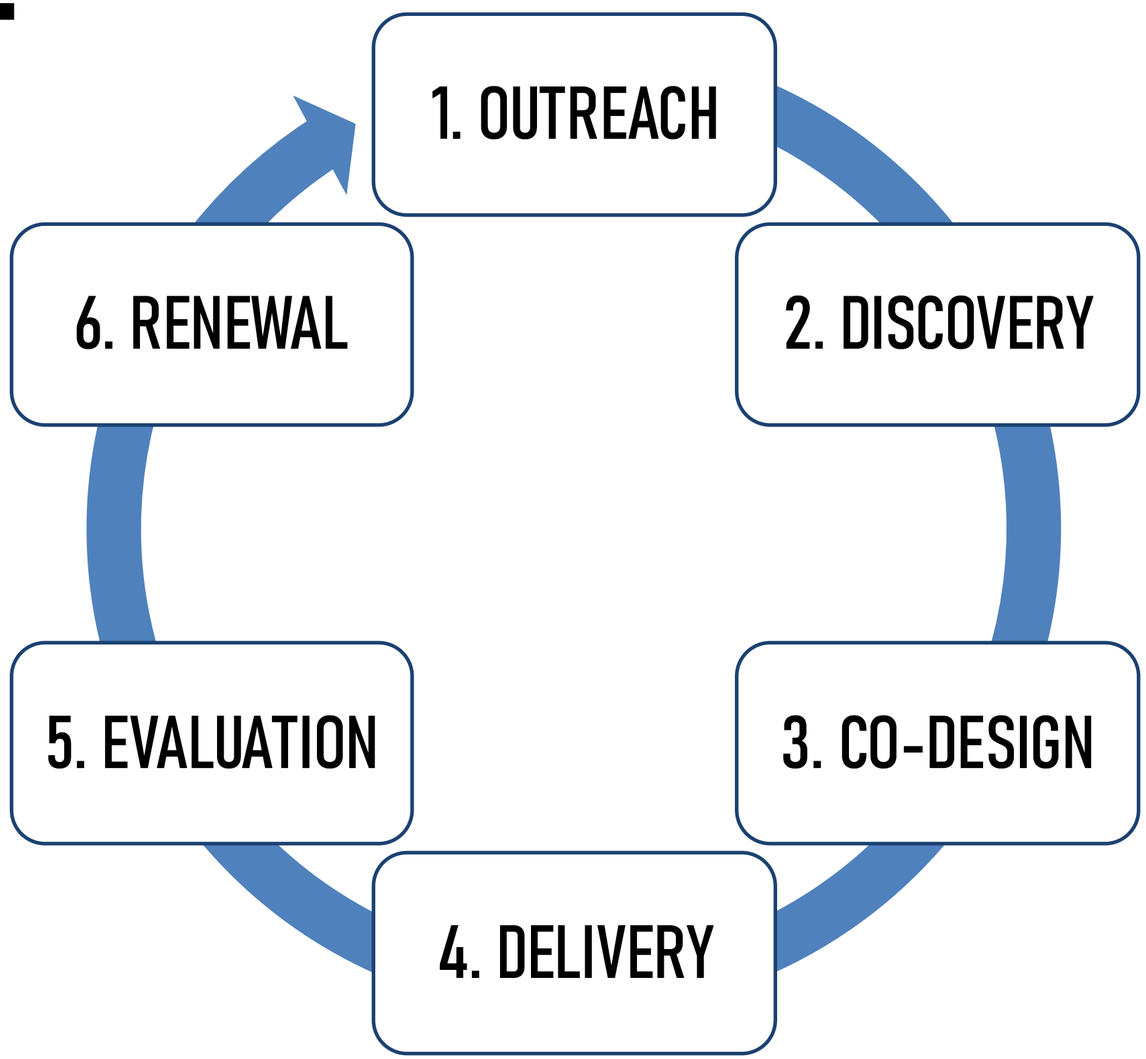
COMMON OBSTACLES

- Which companies should we start with?
- Who should we speak with?
- When should I approach them?
- How do I help them overcome their fears of working with youth?

STEPS FOR ENGAGING BUSINESSES

1. Develop a targeted list of employers – who are the most responsive to intervention
2. Reach out to businesses – email and call (yes, the phone is still a tool to talk with people)
3. Identify the businesses’ needs – you are a solution to their problem
4. Share how you can address their problem - Pitch your services
5. Follow Up and confirm what has been agreed upon
6. Build a Relationship!

ENGAGEMENT LIFE CYCLE





STEP 1:
CREATE A LIST OF BUSINESSES

KNOW YOUR TARGETS



Before you can target employers, you should know:

- Your program model
- Target population
- What is your ask
- What is their need

Short-term career Youth with disabilities Young Apprenticeship parents

Paid work experience Youth Pre-Apprenticeship

Be Targeted in your business list…

Create a list of 5-10 companies to target by researching:

- Growing sectors and businesses in your region
- High Turn Over Industries
- Youth-friendly opportunities

IDENTIFYING GROWING SECTORS

Start with a Search:

- Formal data sources:
  - Bureau of Labor Statistics: For 10-year projections
  - Illinois Department of Employment and Security
  - Chambers of Commerce
  - LWIAs
- Informal sources:
  - LinkedIn, Indeed, Glassdoor
  - Personal and professional networks
  - Company website
  - Press releases/news

HIGH TURN OVER INDUSTRIES

Retirement booms in:

- Manufacturing
- Government
- Agriculture

Areas where turnover or advancement creates openings

IDENTIFYING COMPANIES

Look for

- Accessibility
- Flexibility
- Entry-level jobs
  - Beware of education inflation
- Mentorship
- Civic-minded or corporate social responsibility plans
- Safety
- Locally-owned

WHAT WE ARE INITIALLY TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH WITH OUR PARTICIPANTS

- Help participants to see the breadth of our services and which ones match their needs.
- Gather information to help participants make the best decisions for their future careers.
- Help participants consider what occupations pay well and are in demand as they decide on a course of action.
- Find out what challenges a participant may face and what other services the participant may need to be successful.
- Set a foundation for ongoing case management.
- Build long-term relationships with participants so they stay active with us throughout their involvement.
- Gather all the information necessary to process their requests for services.

INDICATORS OF GOOD PARTNERS!

CHALLENGE	DESCRIPTION	INDICATOR
Skills Gap In Hiring	Businesses need to hire and have plenty of applicants, but applicants do not have the skills required to do the job.	Job positions stay open for a long time.
Development of existing talent	Businesses have opportunities to advance current employees, but those employees lack required skills for these positions.	Instead of promotion from within, businesses are posting job openings for mid-level positions.
Attracting and Retaining Talent	Businesses are experiencing unusually high turnover and/or having difficulty finding interested applicants.	Jobs are constantly being posted and reposted.
Retiring Workforce	Businesses are experiencing high levels of retirements in skilled positions.	A business is posting multiple job openings for skilled positions that have not been open in the recent past.
Advancing Technology	Businesses have enough workers but are struggling to keep pace with technological and industry advances.	No jobs are open, but the business has expressed an interest in customized and/or technical training.

Source: A Targeted Approach to Apprenticeship Business Engagement



STEP 2:
REACH OUT TO BUSINESS

CONTACT TARGETED BUSINESSES

- Identify who in the company has knowledge of hiring and operations
  - May need to interview more than one person
- Request an interview
  - Speak to the business needs: “We’d like to speak with you about how we could support your recruitment and retention goals.”





STEP 3:
THE INTERVIEW

THE INTERVIEW

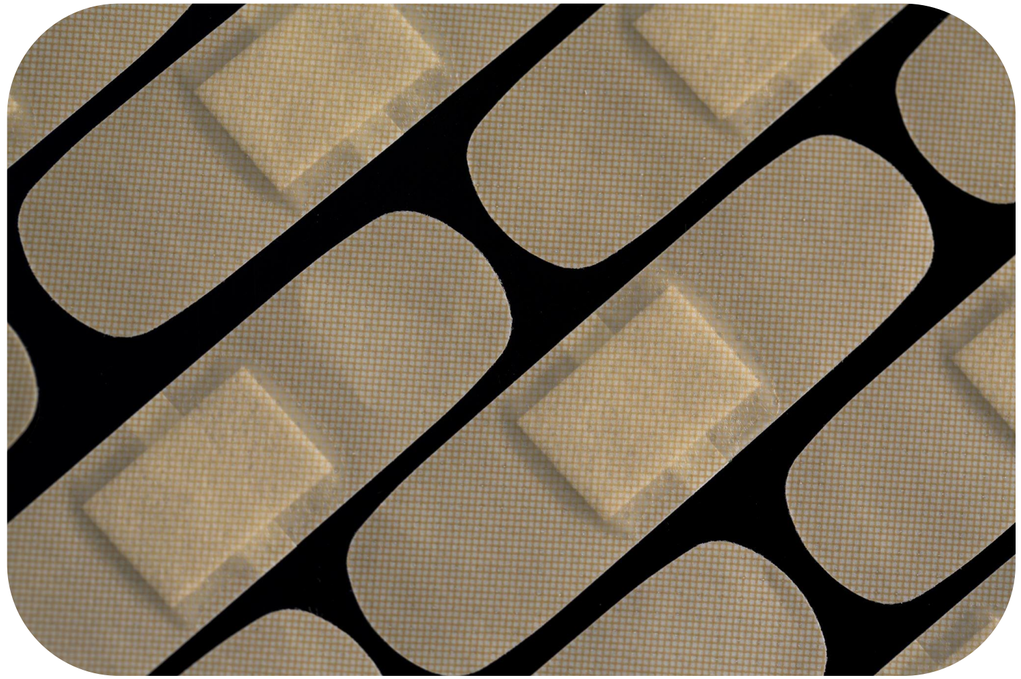
Understand their needs.

- What entry level jobs do you have the most difficulty filling?
- How easily are you able to find workers with the right skill sets?
- What positions have the highest turnover?
- Do you anticipate the retirement of highly skilled workers soon?
- If your company has diversity goals and strategies, do you have difficulty attracting new and more diverse talent pools?

Understand how they fit with youth.

- Do you have staff available who could serve as mentors?
- How common is it for this occupation to be a young person’s first job?
- What kind of training is used to onboard new staff?
- How do you invest in your employees?

POTENTIAL PAIN POINTS



- Recruitment
  - Locating and attracting talent
  - Diversifying the pipeline
- Persistent Vacancies
  - Retiring workforce
  - Skills gap in the community
  - Frequent turnover
- Low employee retention rate
  - Wage chasing
  - Turnover
  - Benefit/pay structure
- High training costs

Source: https://www.doleta.gov/oa/employers/apprenticeship_toolkit.pdf



STEP 4:
SHARE HOW YOU CAN ADDRESS THEIR PROBLEM

TOP REASONS FOR BUSINESSES TO ENGAGE IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

From a United Way Study in Northeast FL:

1. Diversity
2. Ability to tap into a future labor force
3. Unfair hiring advantages
4. Cost-effective employees
5. Temporary work opportunities/alternative work times.

“While the majority of respondents believed that participating in youth employment initiatives was beneficial to the community, this reason alone did not serve as a significant impetus for participation.”

TOP REASONS THAT BUSINESSES DO NOT ENGAGE IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

From a United Way Study in Northeast FL:

1. Disconnect between opportunities and youth applicants
2. Finances
3. Time
4. Transportation
5. Limitation of Public Resources

ADDRESSING PROBLEMS THROUGH TRAINING AND CONSULTING

Look for:

- Offer tailored solutions
- Training is not the only solution!
- Include the employer in the program design
- Invite them to help shape the curriculum/project

Source: https://unitedwaynefl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/18-YEP-Executive-Summary.pdf

VALUE PROPOSITION

- After the interview, paraphrase the needs using business language
- Share your agency’s value-add that speaks to their needs
- Demonstrate ROI: productivity gains, reduced turnover
- Share success metrics and case studies.
- Highlight flexible delivery options.
- Make it easy to work with you!



SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS



Do not use bureaucratic jargon

1. Job Readiness Training (JRT)
2. Asset-based/client-centered
3. 21st Century/Employability Skills
4. Job Developer
5. Case management /wraparound services
6. WIOA/CBDG/TANF
7. Incumbent Worker
8. Justice Impacted – Returning Citizen

Source: Reimagining Employer Engagement

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS

Use Business Language

1. Trained or Ready to Work
2. Focused on connecting qualified candidates with quality employment opportunities
3. Employees who have customer service skills, are team-oriented, effective at time management, etc.
4. Staffing Specialist
5. Employee Assistance Services/Retention Services
6. Funding to offset costs





STEP 5:
FOLLOW UP AND CONFIRM THE AGREEMENT

FOLLOW UP TIPS:

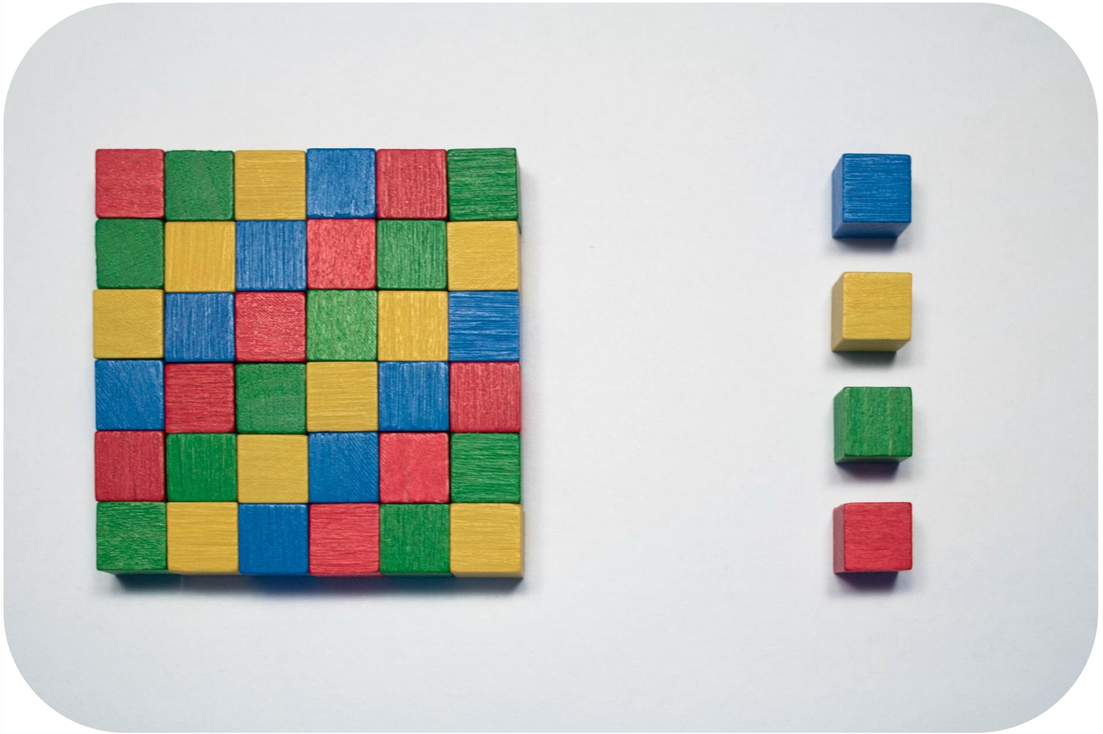


- Send a summary of your meeting that outlines:
  - Identified needs
  - How your program can address those needs
  - What your agency can offer
- Summarize the benefits of working with you



STEP 6:
BUILD THE RELATIONSHIPS

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TIPS:



- Send great candidates!
- Build great programs!
- Use business language to address any challenges
  - i.e., Instead of case management, refer to retention efforts with your young adults
- Offer ongoing technical assistance
  - i.e.: Employee/mentor training
- Create a schedule for check-ins
- Develop MOUs
- Demonstrate ROI: productivity gains, reduced turnover
- Attend employer events



STEP 7:
KEEP EMPLOYERS ENGAGED

ENGAGEMENT TIPS

Recognize and Appreciate:

- Launch an Employer Advisory Panel
- Publicly recognize employer partnerships
  - Quarterly employer newsletters
  - Create a "Partner of the Month" feature.
  - Publish a short success story
- Send personalized thank-you notes
- Offer early access to new programs
- Host an employer coffee chat/networking session
  - In-person or virtual



TAKE AWAYS!



- Listen First!
- Be a solution provider
- Build a relationship
- Be flexible
- Be Creative
- Be willing to do the heavy lifting
- It’s not always about the money

QUESTIONS?



THANK YOU

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