

Strategies for Youth Workforce Programs to Become Employer-Friendly Intermediaries

For all youth, especially youth with disabilities, work experiences during their school years are necessary prerequisites to post-school employment success. Therefore, one of the most important functions of many youth-serving organizations is to link youth directly with work experiences and jobs. Although this requires knowledge of individual youth and their circumstances, it is just as important that these organizations have a deep knowledge of individual employers and their operational conditions so that effective matches are made — matches that meet both the youth's goals and the employer's needs. Quality work experiences simply are not possible without interested, willing, and well-prepared employers.

Meeting Employers' Needs

The term "intermediary" is growing in use in several venues within the public sector with multiple definitions attached to the term. In the broad sense, intermediaries are organizations or agents who form partnerships and develop relationships in order to connect and facilitate communication between two or more parties. For the purposes of this brief, the distinguishing feature of an effective intermediary is that the focus of the intermediary is the pursuit of a dual customer approach: that is, simultaneously serving both youth interested in advancing their careers AND businesses looking for qualified workers. It is with the latter customer that youth intermediaries must continually refine their interactions so that they are responsive to employer

This brief focuses on how youth-serving organizations can become more effective as intermediary linkages between youth and employers by adopting certain practices. This brief offers basic employer-friendly strategies that will assist intermediaries and their representatives in making productive connections with employer customers that can result in successful work experiences for youth. Increasingly, state and local workforce boards and their youth-service-providing partners are realizing the need to assess their capacities and strategies to link with and provide supports to employers.

needs. Workforce development organizations that want to become effective intermediaries have the responsibility to deliver competently what employers need if they are ultimately to serve youth effectively.

Employers typically do not have the time or resources to seek out youth on their own. However, with proper information, support, and access, employers can be recruited effectively for partnerships with youth-serving intermediaries. Generally, employers identify four key factors that contribute to both their willingness to bring youth with disabilities into their workplaces and their satisfaction with the contribution youth make in the workplace (Luecking, 2004):

- Competent and convenient assistance in receiving youth referrals;

- Good matches of youth skills and interests to job tasks;
- Support in training and monitoring the youth at the work site; and
- Formal or informal disability awareness and training for the youths' co-workers (when the youth chooses to disclose disability).

Customer Service Strategies to Gain Employer Partners

Table I illustrates basic employer expectations along with suggested strategies that intermediaries can adopt to serve employer customers. Specific customer service strategies for each area of employer expectation follow.

Expectation 1: Competent and convenient assistance in receiving youth referrals

STRATEGY 1: Conduct informational interviews with prospective employer partners to find out about their human service and operational needs. This is an easy and effective way to show interest in potential employer customers as well as to identify any human resource needs they have or opportunities for work-based

experience that exist.

Six tips on how to conduct such interviews follow:

- Ask to meet with a knowledgeable person in the business.
- Make the meeting





request easy to fulfill. For example, you might say, “I’d like to find out more about your business so I can better understand the human resource needs in your industry.”

Alternatively, you could say, “Many of my students are really interested in [industry type]. Is it possible for me to visit briefly and learn more about your industry’s needs?”

- Be prepared. Thoroughly research the business and prepare questions for the meeting. Here are some examples of appropriate questions: What are the most pressing production or business operation challenges? What are some of the biggest staffing challenges? What kinds of skills do your workers need? What are anticipated

future workforce requirements? What are the ways in which you like to be approached by applicants or youth-serving organizations?

- Indicate an interest in understanding the business’ staffing and operational needs and learning how you may be able to assist the employer in meeting them.
- Keep it short. Respect the employer’s time – 15 to 20 minutes should be more than enough.
- Thank the employer for his or her time. When you get back to your office, send a written thank-you acknowledging the employer’s time and interest.

STRATEGY 2: Use business language to describe what you can do for the employer. Nothing confuses employers more than language that is unique to education or workforce development fields. It is important to be able to talk about what intermediaries do in terms the target employer customers understand. For example, say that you offer help with “recruitment assistance” or “prescreened applicants” or “access to an expanded labor pool,” rather than promoting your work “helping youth with disabilities achieve employment.” Emphasize that you are helping prepare the future labor force, rather than promoting the work you are doing to develop work-based learning opportunities for youth. Phrases like “customized responses to human resource needs,” “reduction in

Table 1:
Customer service strategies to address employer expectations

<u>Employer Expectations</u>	<u>Customer Service Strategies</u>
Competent and convenient assistance in receiving youth referrals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conduct informational interviews. 2. Use business language. 3. Establish a single point of contact. 4. Maintain professional and responsive contact. 5. Under-promise and over-deliver.
Matching of youth skills and interests to job tasks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Know both the youth’s capabilities and interests and the employer’s circumstances thoroughly. 7. Identify tasks that are important to both the youth and the employer. 8. Customize assignments as necessary. 9. Propose and negotiate task assignments.
Support in training and monitoring the youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Clarify employer expectations about job training, coaching, and follow-up. 11. Follow through on agreed-upon follow-up procedures. 12. Solicit employers’ feedback on service from the intermediary. 13. Adjust support and service to employers based on their feedback.
Formal and informal disability awareness (only when youth choose to disclose disability)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Deliver information about specific accommodations required by the youth. 15. Ask employers what further information they want in order to be comfortable supporting and accommodating the youth. 16. Provide disability awareness information based on what the employer requests. 17. Model interaction and support appropriate for the youth. 18. Be prepared to give employers more guidance and information as needed.



recruiting costs,” and “help in managing a diverse workforce” are much more meaningful ways to describe your value to employers than trying to sell them on the importance of youth work experience.

Finally, avoid using language, terms, and acronyms such as vocational experience, work-based learning, IEP, WIA, work-study, and cooperative learning. Not only are they usually meaningless to employers; they also tend to take the focus off the needs of the employer customer.

Streamlining Employer Contacts for Better Service

Some communities have found that recruiting and partnering with employers is facilitated when multiple organizations coordinate their efforts and resources to create a process for employer single points of contact. One such initiative, jointly created by the Rhode Island One-Stop System and Office of Rehabilitation Services, is called the Employer Service Network (ESN). Through the ESN, over 150 local and state organizations, representing an array of job seekers, agree to follow a protocol for establishing and designating a lead point of contact for individual employer recruitment and employer support. For example, whenever any member of the ESN establishes a relationship with an employer, that member is the liaison through which any other ESN member must go for entrée to that employer.

The protocol assures that employers have the convenience of working with a single account representative who then assists ESN members with entrée into the companies. The ESN members benefit because the protocol expands each organization’s reach to the employer community. Most importantly, the employers benefit because they can develop relationships with individuals who really understand their operation and who can expand the company’s employee recruitment reach to the entire ESN membership.

STRATEGY 3: Establish a single point of contact so that employers have an easier time understanding and relating to youth-serving organizations and programs. This simply means designating a single individual to act as an account representative for each employer contact established. This allows the representative from the intermediary to become thoroughly acquainted with the employer’s needs and circumstances, and thus to be more responsive to these needs. It is easier and more convenient for employers when one intermediary representative handles all youth referrals to each company in order to avoid duplicative and time-consuming interactions. For employers, having a single point of contact also considerably decreases the confusion and duplication that typically occur when multiple people from one organization or program come in and out of an employer’s operation to place and supervise youth on the job.

STRATEGY 4: Maintain professional and responsive contact with employers; that is, observe basic courtesies such as keeping appointments and being on time, dressing professionally, returning phone calls promptly, and thanking employers for their time. Not only do these courtesies make a good first impression, but also they indicate ongoing regard and respect for employer customers, which will keep employers interested in working with intermediaries and their representatives. In fact, ongoing responsiveness to any employer request is important for maintaining productive relationships.

STRATEGY 5: Under-promise and over-deliver. This is a long-standing hallmark of customer service in any business relationship. This simply

refers to giving the customer more than the customer expects so that the customer will come back as well as tell others about the service. In the context of youth employment activities, this means giving employers service over and above what was promised. It can be a simple matter, such as filling an employer’s request before an agreed-upon deadline. Or it can be more involved, such as helping an employer recruit employees from another source (such as another intermediary) if an intermediary representative cannot provide applicants for a specific position.

Expectation 2: Matching of youth skills and interests to job tasks

STRATEGY 6: Know both the youth’s capabilities and interests and the employer’s circumstances.

This is a basic requirement. However, many intermediary representatives are tempted to bring a youth into a workplace just

because an employer expresses an interest or a need without full knowledge of what the youth and the employer require. Short-term expediency of a quick placement can lead to dire consequences if the match is not a good one. Never try to force the match. Ideally, intermediary representatives will have a thorough knowledge of the youth’s interests, skills, preferences, and accommodation needs, as well as a thorough knowledge of an employer’s operation, before a youth is presented for an employer’s consideration.

STRATEGY 7: Identify tasks that are important to both the youth and the employer so that they both stay interested and engaged. This closely follows the previous strategy, and represents an important next step after knowing the youth’s interests and employer needs. Regardless of the type of work experience an intermediary



representative is seeking for a youth, it is important to look simultaneously at youth interests and employer tasks. “Make-work” situations are not likely to keep employers any more interested than the youth.

STRATEGY 8: Customize assignments as necessary. The availability of resources and the employer’s preferences will be an important determinant of how youth assignments are structured. For example, will a co-worker mentor be assigned to the youth? How much supervisor time will be available? Will

After an in-depth informational interview and tour of a nationally known retail chain store, an intermediary representative was able to recognize areas of operation that needed significant improvement. The most crucial problem areas included the mismatching of sizing tags on clothing with the size nubs on hangers (the local store was fined by national headquarters three months in a row after failing secret tests), the disorganization of the toy department (the only department to go down in sales profits since last quarter), and disorganization in the stock room (requiring personnel to work overtime at least once a week).

Based on this information, the intermediary representative proposed a task list that would address these key problems: 1) weekly accuracy checks of tags to size nubs to reduce incidence of fines and make shopping easier on customers, 2) weekly clean-up and organization of the toy department to make it more accessible and appealing to shoppers and therefore increase sales, and 3) evening clean-up and preparation in the stockroom for the morning shift to make all employees’ jobs run more smoothly and to reduce unnecessary overtime. The representative further proposed that these tasks be done by a youth who liked to work with people and excelled in detail work. After the necessary training supports were organized, the youth began the work. The manager is very pleased with the increased sales as well as with the reduced fines and overtime pay.

the youth receive in-house training? What are the employer preferences for on-site intermediary support? Determine how the tasks can be monitored most effectively through any combination of employer and intermediary oversight so that youth receive effective task training and performance feedback. It will be different for each youth and each employer.

STRATEGY 9: Propose and negotiate task assignments based on how it will help the employer. There is a range of competencies that individual youth might bring to any given workplace. Employers may get involved with youth-serving programs because they see it as an important means of addressing a community need, but most often employers’ involvement is based on addressing an immediate or projected workforce need. Negotiating with employers for a youth placement is most successful when employers see a clear advantage for them.

Expectation 3: Support in training and monitoring youth

STRATEGY 10: Clarify employer expectations about job training, coaching, and follow-up. Just as youth may require a range of supports and accommodations to learn and perform in the workplace, each employer presents a unique set of circumstances that affect their willingness and ability to host youth. Regardless of the level of support required by the youth, it is important to involve the employer in deciding how the support will be provided. It should not be left to chance. Make sure employer preferences are considered in deciding when, how often, and under what circumstances intermediary support is provided on the job site. The rule of thumb is to provide as much follow-up as you can until the employer says otherwise. It is better for the employer to ask that you reduce follow-up than

for the employer to be frustrated because the intermediary has dropped a youth into a workplace without any support.

STRATEGY 11: Follow through on agreed-upon procedures. In business terms, this means service after the sale. Be on the job site as often as the employer expects or requests. It does not hurt to be there more often than expected, as long as it is not an imposition, but it is never good to be there less than expected or promised.

STRATEGY 12: Solicit feedback from employers. It is, of course, important to get employers’ feedback on how youth are performing. But it is even more important from a customer service perspective for intermediary representatives to ask for feedback from employers on *what employers think about the intermediary’s service*. In order to elicit useful feedback, ask these basic questions: What does the employer like about the intermediary’s service? What does the employer not like about it? What can be improved? These

A children’s museum located in an urban center managed a program through which youth could volunteer for various activities associated with museum operation. A special education teacher realized that such volunteer experiences would be useful for some of her students. She negotiated with the museum manager to have these students volunteer in various areas of the museum. The teacher constantly solicited feedback from the museum staff about how she could make sure that she was supervising and supporting the students in ways that made their experience at the museum productive for the museum. As a result, she could quickly help re-assign students who were not performing well, or advise students who were not adhering to dress codes, or work with students who were not meeting time commitments. Eventually, the museum manager was so pleased with the teacher’s responsiveness that she contacted the teacher about new volunteers before she advertised openings.



questions can be asked informally during a phone call or a visit. They can also be asked in a more formal way through a brief written survey. No matter how employers' views on intermediary service are solicited, the key is that they be solicited in some way. Not only does this communicate concern for the employers' operation, but in addition, it gives the intermediary the chance to utilize this feedback to improve employer service.

STRATEGY 13: Adjust support and service based on feedback. Feedback is only useful if it is acted on. If the employer says he or she wants more or less follow-up on youth on the job, act accordingly. If employers ask for faster response time to a youth problem, be there quicker. Again, such service improvement efforts impress employer customers. They also increase the likelihood that the employer will do two things: continue the partnership with the intermediary and tell other employers about the intermediary. Good service is also good marketing!

Expectation 4: Formal and informal disability awareness

Whether or not to disclose disability is a personal decision that should be made by each youth, not by intermediary representatives. The strategies that follow are only to be used in those instances in which the youth, acting on his or her own initiative, has given the intermediary permission to disclose the youth's disability and related needs for accommodation to potential and current employer partners.

STRATEGY 14: Deliver information about accommodations required by individual youth workers in the context of the specific work environment and specific work tasks. This can be done both during and after the negotiation process. This is best done after tasks are negotiated with

employers (see Strategy 9 above). Therefore, it is important to describe accommodations in terms of how they will help the youth perform to the employer's satisfaction, rather than in terms of legal requirements.

That said, the intermediary should be direct and open about whatever accommodations might be necessary. To provide accommodations effectively, it will be necessary for the intermediary to ascertain the employer's preferences and expectations and to clarify whether arranging accommodations will be the intermediary's or employer's responsibility.

STRATEGY 15: Ask what further information and help the employer desires so that he or she will be comfortable in supporting and accommodating the youth. This is a similar concept to Strategy 12 in that the intermediary needs to solicit from employers their comfort level with the accommodations and their satisfaction about the accommodations' effectiveness. This is easy when the accommodations are straightforward, such as giving written directions to the youth rather than verbal directions. However, when the accommodations are extensive or involved, more help by the intermediary may be required to ensure that the employer is comfortable and satisfied in the employment relationship.

STRATEGY 16: Provide disability awareness information based on what the employer asks for. For example, one employer was particularly concerned about co-workers' response to having a young man with a significant communication disability in the workplace. She asked the intermediary representative to provide a general disability awareness brown

bag training to the staff, as well as to offer specific techniques to the co-workers on how to interact effectively with the youth. This employer-initiated awareness training was useful in the youth's eventual acceptance into that workplace. Just as importantly, it was useful in making the supervisor and the staff in that workplace comfortable with the youth.

STRATEGY 17: Model interaction and support appropriate for the youth.

Every time the intermediary representative is at the workplace, he or she has an opportunity to show, by modeling, how best to interact with and support specific youth workers. This is especially true when a youth has unique or involved accommodation needs. While this helps ensure that the youth will receive the necessary support in performing assigned tasks and interacting with co-workers, it is also important in helping supervisors and co-workers become comfortable in interacting with the youth.

STRATEGY 18: Provide periodic guidance as necessary. This is another instance in which follow-up, both self-initiated and based on employer feedback, is useful and necessary (see again Strategies 11 and 12). It is important for the intermediary representative not to assume that everything is working fine as long as there is no request from the employer. Checking in periodically to see how accommodations are working gives the employer the impression that the intermediary wants it to work for the employer as much as for the youth. In addition, there is always the possibility that new wrinkles will occur in the workplace that may require adjustment of accommodations or re-acquaintance with disability awareness issues after



the youth begins the work experience.

An Enhanced Emphasis on Meeting Employer Needs

The success of linking youth with work is as much about meeting employers' needs as it is about serving youth. Therefore, much more emphasis needs to be placed on providing ongoing support and training to intermediary personnel on strategies to recruit and address employers' needs effectively. Viewing the employer as a customer will make the workforce development system for youth with disabilities more attractive and friendly to employers.

Resources

Employer Referral Assistance Network (EARN) – <http://www.earnworks.com> EARN is a nationwide cost-free referral and technical assistance service for employers.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) – <http://janweb.icidi.wva.edu>. JAN is

a free consulting service designed to increase the employability of people with disabilities by providing individualized worksite accommodations solutions and providing technical assistance regarding the ADA and other disability-related legislation

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