

By Design

Engaging **Employers**
in **Workforce Development**
Organizations

Carol Clymer

Working
Ventures

A PUBLICATION OF PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES

Prepared for THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION'S INITIATIVE ON ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

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P/PV

Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Working Ventures seeks to improve the performance of the workforce development field by providing practitioners and policymakers with the knowledge and tools needed to operate effective employment programs. We support the field by documenting effective employment strategies and practices, convening practitioner workshops and providing resources to encourage program innovation.

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Introduction

Recognizing that it is essential to their success, many workforce development organizations are committed to building productive relationships with employers. They include employers on advisory committees, post their job openings and invite them to speak to participants. Community-minded employers are usually happy to contribute in these ways. Still, workforce development organizations acknowledge that employers are not sufficiently involved. In fact, most employers know little about employment and training programs, and many do not take advantage of their services. Some employers hold limited views of what workforce development organizations can offer and consider them merely as places to recruit entry-level workers.

One explanation for the disconnect between organizations and employers—who quite naturally should be partners in training a skilled workforce—lies in the perception that the mind-sets and milieus of public not-for-profits and private for-profits embody vastly different, separate worlds. Private sector employers are in business to make a profit; workforce development organizations serve the public—or so the prevailing thinking goes. But some workforce development organizations have engaged employers substantively. They have found ways to both help employers achieve their business objectives and assist job seekers with barriers to becoming valued employees. In a time of changing demographics and an impending shortage of skilled workers, organizations help diminish the risk of hiring those with limited knowledge of English, lack of education or erratic work histories—and often do much more at little cost to employers.

This report examines three workforce development organizations that have successfully engaged employers. Although the orientation, size, structure and training style of each are quite different, all three use remarkably similar strategies to involve employers in vital ways. This report discusses those strategies and highlights the common elements underpinning them. It also describes the practices, refined over two decades, that the organizations employ to serve both job seekers and employers. Each organization's approach is described in depth so other organizations can understand the key principles and important nuances of what it takes to get employers actively involved with workforce development efforts.

The Organizations *and* Their Employers

WIRE-Net is the product of a community's determination to thrive. In the late 1980s, the west side of Cleveland, where more than 650 mostly small and medium-sized manufacturers were located, faced a devastating economic downturn. Almost weekly, companies were closing plants due to the recession. Alarmed that neighborhood jobs were decreasing steadily, three community development corporations joined forces to build a strategy to keep local businesses on the west side. Key elements of the strategy included providing businesses with an ongoing supply of skilled workers, helping businesses access financial resources to expand instead of downsize and creating a network so businesses could learn from one another to remain competitive. A new organization, the Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network (WIRE-Net), was launched to implement the strategy.

The heart of the WIRE-Net strategy is to foster the development of mutually beneficial relationships between public and private organizations in the community. Not a training organization itself, WIRE-Net plays an intermediary role between the business

community and the community at large. Job seekers and employers have equal access to WIRE-Net services. About 160 employers are WIRE-Net members, and 100 community members participate each year in services that include access to training, job placement, and employment retention and support.

Pete Accorti is co-owner of Talan Products, a small metal stamping manufacturer in Cleveland's Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood; Talan has annual sales of \$10 to \$12 million, and about 40 employees. In 1992, Talan was added to *Inc.* magazine's list of the 500 fastest growing privately held companies in the country. In 2000, Pete became president of the board of WIRE-Net. According to Pete, "We got involved with WIRE-Net because retention of new workers was a problem. We also needed to keep the pipeline of skilled workers full—we have to be able to hire die makers; a lot are going to retire soon. Our biggest fear has been that we aren't going to be able to keep skilled people. WIRE-Net lessens that fear." WIRE-Net benefits from Pete's involvement too. A WIRE-Net staff member indicates that Pete unselfishly gives

his time and knowledge to the organization. He is available anytime an employer's opinion or public support is needed. But Pete also believes that WIRE-Net gives a good return on his investment: "Learning through WIRE-Net-sponsored employer workshops and learner's groups, developing an increased sense of community through participation and improving the retention of employees have added value to Talan Products' bottom line."

Training, Inc., a program sponsored by the YMCA of Greater Boston, has involved approximately 200 employers in its efforts. The Boston program is a member of a national consortium of Training, Inc. programs, which operate in seven cities. Its job training strategy revolves around three interconnected elements:

- Creation of a learning environment that fosters the development of qualities such as work ethic, self-confidence, self-discipline and courtesy (soft skills);
- Use of a workplace simulation experience to immerse trainees in the culture of work and help them develop technical skills as well as skills in teamwork, communication and problem-solving; and
- Building collaborative partnerships among employers, mentors and local agencies to create a community of support that assures trainees' success.

Most of Training, Inc.'s participants complete training. In 2002, 124 received training in computerized office skills,

and 81 percent of them were placed in employment with an average wage of \$11.65 per hour.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, the City of Boston, Cellular One, Liberty Mutual, Mellon Financial Corporation, Massachusetts Behavioral Healthcare Partnership, Northeastern University and UNISYS participate. Smaller employers—Fischbach and Moore Electric, Inc., Consuelo's Travel and Upham's Corner Health Center—are also involved. These employers not only hire Training, Inc.'s graduates but also serve on committees, tutor and mentor trainees, teach classes, help design curricula, supervise interns, provide funding and lick stamps, when necessary. Training, Inc. involves employers in every aspect of its operation to create learning opportunities for employers, trainees and staff.

As an employee representative at Northeastern University, Renee Sayles recruits potential job applicants, including graduates of Training, Inc.'s technology-related training program. "Training, Inc. has really helped me learn what a workforce development program should be. I've learned how I can best use the services of a workforce development program. It also helps me be creative recruiting job applicants. I now look at programs in a different light." To Renee, working with Training, Inc. is more than enhancing the community outreach efforts of Northeastern. Renee recruits job applicants from Training, Inc., but she also helps the organization with

its internship program. “It’s supposed to be win/win. The intern is supposed to get a great work experience and the department is supposed to get some help with overflow work. The follow-up has been very good with Training, Inc. I always get email reminders: ‘Would you give me an update on this individual, how are they doing, are there any problems?’ It’s been a great working relationship.”

Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) is a nonsecular, not-for-profit corporation founded in 1973 to help individuals find employment throughout the San Francisco labor market. Originally, JVS helped college graduates in the Jewish community find jobs after graduation. In the late 1970s, JVS began to serve Russian refugees through job placements and vocational English language training. In the early 1980s, the economic recession prompted JVS to target new populations of displaced workers while continuing to serve the growing number of refugees. While JVS offers 23 different employment programs for adults and five for youth, health care and office and information technologies are predominant. Programs include:

- Computer training courses in AutoCAD, Pro/Engineer (drafting software), Cisco Networking Technology, UNIX Systems Administration, Web Design, Office Technology and Communications;
- Training in health care occupations, including Certified Nurse Assistants, Home Health Aides, Licensed Vocational Nurses and Allied Health Occupations;

- The Technology Access Center, which provides career advancement service to JVS participants;
- The @ Work Center, a retention program for working adults who receive public assistance; and
- Customized training to address employers’ specific needs.

In 2002, JVS helped 850 individuals find jobs with an average wage of \$11.95 per hour; 850 immigrants attended English classes; 1,000 youth and adults attended computer literacy classes; 250 low-income workers participated in career advancement support and classes; 300 adults participated in skills training in technology; 200 adults attended basic skills classes; and 100 individuals enrolled in health care programs.

Carolyn Duvall is the vice president for employee/labor relations for the western region of Macy’s Department Stores and a member of the JVS board. She is knowledgeable about the differences between the individuals who work for employment and training organizations and those employed by large corporations. “Many people have worked in the public sector long enough to be disengaged from the private sector, but this is not the case with JVS. They understand what we do; they are willing to learn about the needs of the business world. We have confidence that they will follow through.” Carolyn connected with JVS because she wanted to be personally involved with the community, and Macy’s believes that such involvement leads to

“stronger, healthier communities, which is good for business.” As a mentor to JVS participants, Carolyn not only gives individuals who are entering the workforce important tips about getting and staying employed, she also learns about who is in the labor market and what they face as first-time or reentering employees. JVS has also helped Carolyn and her colleagues in the human resources department, for example by setting up training programs for Macy’s seasonal workers. Both organizations do their best to integrate efforts. Carolyn says: “We’ve helped JVS understand that taking on an intern is a huge commitment. They’ve responded by sending individuals who have skills and supporting them while they are with us.”

The relationships that WIRE-Net, Training, Inc. and JVS have developed with employers stand out. The relationships have been cultivated systematically, and each partner

benefits and adds value to the other. As in a good friendship, communication is open, respect and support are mutual, and both parties are committed to understanding the other’s organizational culture and the people who shape that culture. Each organization began at square one, and each built relationships with employers over time. Each made mistakes and learned from them. But each organization was committed to getting employers involved in their efforts. As much as anything, engaging employers requires a commitment to activities that can benefit everyone—employment and training organizations, job seekers and employers.

Engagement Strategies *and* Principles

It is clear that employers are pleased and comfortable with JVS; Training, Inc.; and WIRE-Net. What brought this about? Why do employers give their time and money to these organizations? How have they overcome what many employment and training organizations claim as one of their most daunting challenges—engaging employers in meaningful ways?

Based on close examination of the work of these three organizations, we believe that success in engaging employers is built on four key principles:

1. Quality Counts

- Ensure that job seekers are well prepared.
- Demonstrate consistent program quality.
- Respond to needs efficiently.

2. Get Down to Business

- Develop private-sector expertise.
- Be business oriented.
- Coordinate and deliver responsive and personalized services.
- Market services in professional ways.

3. Know Your Customers

- Get to know employers and the people they might hire.
- Understand the skills employers need by mining current labor market information.
- Network.

4. Make Employers Part of the Woodwork

- Assemble an employer-led board.
- Have many ways for employers to volunteer.
- Involve employers in program design and delivery.

For most employment and training organizations, engaging employers by using all these strategies and providing the full array of services mentioned here is unlikely. Many organizations do not have the resources, capacity or desire, even if they could attract an individual with an MBA from Harvard to coordinate it all. It is still possible, however, to become more

business-focused and provide some services to both employers and job seekers that can improve everyone's bottom line.

Each section of this report contains a list of key actions that an organization can take to strengthen and increase employer engagement. These key actions are included to help organizations assess where and how employer relationships and services can be improved.

1. *Quality Counts*

Although many employers are cognizant of the social benefits of involvement, most do not get involved with employment and training organizations solely because of goodwill. Employers might make a donation, sponsor an intern periodically or provide tips on filling out a job application. But for most employers, a higher level of commitment must also be a good business decision—one that adds value. In fact, it is unlikely that employers would work with any of these three employment and training organizations if it did not positively affect their profit margin.

Most employers do not get involved with employment and training organizations solely because of goodwill.

Each organization described here has a good track record with employers and routinely delivers what it promises.

This doesn't mean that participants placed in jobs don't quit from time to time, or that the retention counselor doesn't ever get a call about an individual who is late for work. Although placement and retention rates are fairly high for each organization, each still has participants who do not finish training or have difficulty finding or keeping jobs. Nevertheless—while each organization uses its own strategy to prepare individuals for work—all three strive for quality. Employers can attest to this. They can see it in the graduates who are sent to their doors, and they can feel it in the staff's response to their needs.

Ensure Job Seekers Are Well Prepared

Skilled and reliable workers are what employers want most from employment and training organizations. Admittedly, working within the limitations of the current “work first” policy environment and delivering well prepared workers is not easy. But it can be done.

A case in point: Training, Inc. is situated in the heart of Boston's financial district. Walk into an attractive office building, ride

up to the fourth floor, turn down the hall and a friendly receptionist greets you. The receptionist takes your name and invites you to sit down. You look around: people are busy; the room is bright. You are at the Lester Hill Corporation—a most unusual enterprise. Although it looks and operates like one, Lester Hill is not a real company. It is a simulated training program designed to prepare individuals for jobs that require computer and clerical skills. The Lester Hill work experience is the centerpiece of Training, Inc.'s program.

In practice, the Lester Hill Corporation is a small distribution company that links supplies and customers. Everything is computerized. About 25 people work in different offices to take and fill orders, process inventory, invoice customers, maintain accounts and answer the phone. Of course, sometimes there are problems—the inventory is miscalculated, an order is mis-taken or not properly filled and orders can get backed up. Customers complain. But, with the guidance of team leaders—trainees who try to keep things moving smoothly within and across departments—those who work at Lester Hill attempt to resolve problems and help when a co-worker or department falls behind schedule. They know how to enter data, word process and use Excel, Windows, the Internet and email. They can file, answer the phone properly and greet visitors, because they have done these jobs at Lester Hill. They also know how to work on teams, solve problems, get to work on time and dress appropriately. When trainees complete the simulated jobs at Lester Hill, they are ready for internships in computer companies, financial organizations, universities and hospitals.

“Our training is very much like a place of work. It’s slightly different than other kinds of training, and people have to want to do that. It’s not a school, and we want employers to see that too, to meet the trainees and see that they are working and learning,” says Willard Pinn, former Director of Training, Inc.

To enroll in Training, Inc.—and work for Lester Hill—applicants must be able to read and calculate at the seventh grade level. For those with basic skills below the tenth grade level, assistance is available to improve reading, math and writing skills, and, for those who need it, English as a Second Language. As important as basic skills are the applicants’ responses to two key questions posed by Training, Inc.’s intake coordinator: “Why here? Why now?” Applicants must be clear about their intentions, commitment and ability to stay in the program. They must have childcare arranged because, as employees of Lester Hill, absences and tardiness must be kept to a minimum. Training, Inc. invests much in trainees; in return, those who participate develop a solid set of hard and soft skills, get assistance finding jobs with good employers who pay decent wages and receive support keeping their jobs once they are employed.

Training, Inc.’s 16-week program includes seven weeks of classes in keyboarding, data entry, word processing, computer software and job search preparation; three weeks of the actual Lester Hill work-simulation experience; and six weeks in internships in companies throughout Boston. As part of the training, each trainee is scheduled to perform the duties of the Training, Inc.’s receptionist and each helps with filing for the organization. In fact, Training, Inc. has no full-time clerical staff—all clerical and administrative tasks are performed by regular staff and trainees.

During the last four weeks at Training, Inc., the job developer and the counselor help individuals with their job search. This includes developing a résumé, finding the right job, filling out applications, practicing interviews, visiting work sites, and making certain that barriers such as transportation and child care are addressed before individuals begin work. As part of the process, employers come to a job fair to talk about their companies and positions available, and to interview applicants.

Training, Inc. gives considerable attention to follow-up services with its graduates—not only because the organization wants them to succeed, but because of the importance of its relationship with their employers, some of whom help fund Training, Inc. and all of whom expect that Training, Inc. graduates will stay on the job. Graduates are prepared for this continuing relationship with the organization because, during enrollment, they discuss participating in postemployment retention services. Training, Inc. follows up in two primary ways: through mentoring and counseling. Prior to graduation, each participant is assigned an employer liaison (mentor) who provides ongoing support and helps the new employee develop job savvy during meetings twice a month, usually over lunch. (Their first meeting, during the job search process, is at Training, Inc., where both individuals feel more comfortable.) With Training, Inc. staff support, employer mentors become sounding boards, people the graduate can count on for advice.

The counseling provided by Training, Inc. is designed to help individuals with issues and challenges once they are placed on the job. Depending on the situation, some counselors and job holders may be in contact every week; for others once a month is sufficient. When the job match isn't quite right, Training, Inc. provides re-placement services. The organization remains in contact with participants for at least a year to ensure that graduates are truly prepared for work and that they maintain steady employment for the long term. Graduates stay in touch by referring friends and family for training, calling with job openings, and serving as mentors and volunteers.

Demonstrate Consistent Program Quality

Employment and training organizations that can demonstrate consistent program quality are more likely to attract employer involvement than are those who do not focus on measurable outcomes. In fact, successful organizations are able to use performance data to demonstrate not only that they are enrolling, training and graduating quality workers but that they can add value to a business.

To illustrate: Jewish Vocational Service is located in the heart of San Francisco, close to Union Square. Staff offices and classrooms are fully equipped with computers, and the environment is both pleasant and professional. JVS has more than 40 different contracts, with many different

fundlers, aimed at preparing individuals for work and for staying employed. According to Abby Snay, Executive Director, “Our mission is clear—JVS brings people and work together.”

Successful organizations are able to use performance data to demonstrate not only that they are enrolling, training and graduating quality workers but that they can add value to a business.

JVS training is organized around the development of core and advanced hard and soft skills, and a wide array of programs is offered so that individuals can develop these skills. Core skills include work readiness, career exploration, job search, basic literacy, computer literacy and Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL). Advanced skills training is offered for occupations in office technologies, information technologies and health care. This advanced training includes classroom and worksite-based instruction, and internships to help individuals learn on the job. Assessment, counseling, case management and support services accompany training to promote successful program completion and employment retention. Individuals can also access career and employment counseling and job placement services independently of training. Programs are designed

to produce high-quality customer service, foster innovation, use new technologies and respond to employers’ specific job needs.

JVS partners with many other organizations in the Bay Area to provide this training. For example, JVS provides computer instruction at the San Francisco Beacon Centers and is a member of the Information Technology (IT) Consortium that

offers career ladder training in partnership with City College of San Francisco, Glide Foundation and Bay Area Video Coalition. The Bar Association works with JVS on a welfare-to-work partnership. Health care programs are offered in cooperation with the University of California at San Francisco and City College of San Francisco. JVS provides targeted employment programs for youth and disabled individuals and works closely with the San Francisco Unified School District. Programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) and the Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (BPPVE).

Once participants are placed in jobs, JVS works with them individually, using on-the-job training plans to help increase skills. Plans may include mentoring, employer mediation, a work support hotline, peer learning groups, reemployment assistance,

skills upgrade training and professional development classes for career advancement. Since a goal of JVS is to enable participants to increase wages, staff routinely review individual career plans to assess training needs and identify appropriate courses. These reviews are compared to data collected about the labor market, such as job openings and requests for particular skills by employers.

To monitor its overall performance and ensure consistent quality, JVS uses performance scorecards to review outcomes each quarter. The scorecards identify a projected outcome and specific indicators to demonstrate progress toward achieving it. For example, a JVS goal is to place 1,000 individuals in jobs and achieve a 65 percent employment retention rate at the end of 12 months. The scorecard shows numbers of individuals served; increases in skills developed; wages and retention at 3, 6 and 12 months; employer involvement; volunteer involvement; and other outcomes related to funding, customer satisfaction, capacity building, outreach and program support. A monthly employer report helps staff track where participants are working, how long they stay, their wages and which staff member is assigned to follow up with the worker and the employer. Outcome information is also mapped according to goals and areas where improvement is needed so that staff can see the relationship between customers, organizational structure, program strategies and resources. When employers

want to know how long they can expect the average JVS graduate to stay on the job, staff can answer the question accurately for each of their training programs.

Respond to Needs Efficiently

An important way to engage employers is to identify their needs and provide services and assistance to help meet those needs. Employers are often too busy meeting customers' needs to take time to determine when and where they could use the help of an employment and training organization. Effective employment and training organizations anticipate employers' needs and meet them. For example, if a particular industry or company has large numbers of workers who are close to retirement, the employer-focused organization is ready to help by customizing its training to help fill those eventual job openings.

Through three primary activities—providing businesses with trained workers, offering retention and follow-up services and designing customized employer services—WIRE-Net staff members are able to respond to business needs efficiently.

According to Jacki Adams, Manager of Recruitment, Employment and Training, “I don’t recruit individuals for training. I try to expose them to the reality of manufacturing careers and what it takes to pursue this career choice. It is not about numbers. I’m not looking to fill the seats in the classroom. And we don’t send employers

bodies—we have an orientation and interview process for machining programs, and information sessions to help applicants self-select. This is seven to nine months of training, and I try to find out if they are committed and understand what’s involved. I ask, ‘What makes you any different?’”

The straight-talk approach is exemplified in a process that identifies individuals likely to complete programs offered through training partners—Max Hayes Career and Technical School, Cuyahoga Community College, Polaris Career Center and NASA Glenn Research Center. Each of these training programs is different and, after an extensive interview that involves assessment of basic skills, soft skills, interest in manufacturing, mechanical ability, legal history, financial issues and potential barriers (families are sometimes involved), staff match individuals to training programs. “We are very, very tough in the application process. We encourage honesty and look for clues that individuals may be covering up past problems such as incarceration and substance abuse. When they leave their applications blank in these areas, we know that there may be aspects of their history that they aren’t telling us, so we try to build trust and get them to talk about it. We are thorough in the information we obtain. We keep problem-solving and try to get people to change the way they think about themselves. We balance the number

of students in training with the number of jobs available. Then we try to match individuals to the training programs available, since settings, times, locations, instructional approaches, teachers and funding streams are different. If manufacturing is not an appropriate choice, we refer them to another WIRE-Net employment service.”

Being proactive and responsive is also exemplified by support services such as transportation assistance, training materials and counseling to keep individuals in training and eventually in a job. Employers and WIRE-Net staff also visit classes to meet participants and offer tips about employment and particular companies. Employability workshops, job search, and matching and placement services are provided by the intake specialist, building a bridge from the training class to employment. The retention specialist meets with students weekly during training and routinely after they are employed. If there is a problem on the job, the retention specialist works with the participant and employer to resolve it.

In working with employers, WIRE-Net helps build retention strategies—supervisor training programs, customized training and retention support are structured to help employers improve productivity and reduce turnover. Professional development programs are also coordinated for employers. Employer learning groups

meet three to four hours a month for several months. Employers choose topics and tour each other's facilities to learn from one another. Groups have focused on topics such as sustainability, productivity and workforce training. Participation in each learning group costs about \$800 per company. WIRE-Net also schedules luncheon forums and workshops on current issues relevant to participating businesses.

To keep current about employer needs, WIRE-Net staff call employers once a month and visit twice a year. "In our contacts, we take the temperature of the company and find out what's going on and what services are needed to help them out. We record contact notes and services needed in our database so the appropriate staff can follow up. Whenever someone contacts an employer, they are supposed to look at those notes," according to Joan Cook, former Associate Director of Workforce Development.

Actions to Consider to Improve Quality

- Enroll only those individuals who really want and will benefit from your services.
- Refer individuals who will not benefit from your services to other programs better suited to their needs.
- Have an effective process for job matching.
- Ensure that participants demonstrate the hard and soft skills employers need to succeed at work.
- Partner with other successful organizations that provide services that are beyond your organization's focus and expertise.
- Collect and routinely analyze outcome data to make program improvements.
- Use program outcome data to market your services and achievements.
- Follow up immediately with an employer if an individual you placed has caused a problem at work.
- Evaluate the success of your placements.

2. *Get Down to Business*

Many employers are not aware of employment and training organizations and do not know how to take advantage of their services. Others have limited views of these organizations and consider them merely as places for recruiting workers. And, unfortunately, some employers believe that employment and training organizations work with damaged goods—individuals with bad attitudes, few skills and too many problems to “fit in here.” All too often, employers have had negative experiences with employment and training organizations—experiences that make a lasting impression—in part because some organizations lack savvy about approaching or serving a business customer.

Employment and training organizations that successfully engage employers are business-oriented. They

The organization is not only outwardly competent about business practice but operates internally like a business.

try to have key staff with experience in the industries for which they prepare and place participants. Staff members understand the business world and see the value of meeting employers’ needs as well as the needs of participants. A senior-level person is usually in charge of a defined and intentional process for developing and managing relationships with employers. The organization is not only outwardly competent about business practice but operates internally like a business. Organizational leadership is reliable, and employers are confident about its consistency. The organization feels like a business. It is clear to everyone—staff and participants—that the organization is serious about quality and customer service.

Develop Private Sector Expertise

Although it is a good idea for employment and training organizations to hire individuals who have worked in the private sector, expertise can be developed in a number of ways. Site visits to employers—designed to increase staff awareness of an industry, its jobs and the skills that are required to succeed in them—happen at all three organizations. Expertise is also developed in other subtle yet routine ways.

Training, Inc. staff learn from employers who help teach classes in the organization’s training program. Stacks of trade magazines, business journals and company reports are kept throughout the Training, Inc. office. Staff are encouraged to read everything they can about the employers they serve and those they want to get involved.

A board member who is a vice president of a large national corporation invited JVS staff members to attend management training programs offered by the corporation's human resources office. This provided JVS staff with free professional development and the opportunity to see how a corporation trains its employees.

Several individuals at WIRE-Net have worked in the private sector, but staff gain expertise by attending activities that are organized for employers whenever possible. WIRE-Net also produces written materials that use the language of business, which employers highly value.

Be Business Oriented

“Working with JVS San Francisco is a transparent process. By that I mean they are businesslike, they have organizational process down well, they are classy, they are located in downtown San Francisco—that means a lot, they make it very easy to do business, they know how to relate to employers on protocol and etiquette, they're nice.”—Jason Mooring, Manager of Staff Development, Tiburon.

Employers want their work with organizations to be rewarding and uncomplicated. They appreciate meetings that are short, focused and on task. Effective communication with employers is typically direct and to the point. According to Jason, “JVS gets right to business issues; they are able to stick to an agenda; they make it very easy; and it's free.”

JVS periodically receives state grants to develop customized training classes and placement and retention services for low-income individuals. JVS has developed a straightforward process to create the customized training that helps employers feel confident and comfortable. Clear and efficient communication is an important part of the process, but JVS staff also operate in other businesslike ways. The process of developing the customized training begins with a business lunch to discuss what the employer and JVS each need, the expected outcomes of their interaction and what each can do to make the project work. The roles and responsibilities of the employer and JVS are agreed upon. Each organization brings staff with decision-making authority. Phone calls and emails to clarify, refine and nail down expectations follow the lunch. When details of the partnership are agreed upon, both parties sign a memorandum of understanding. To design the training, short meetings and phone calls get staff from JVS and the employer involved, informed and working together. These meetings are used to select participants and choose the instructor. JVS staff also visit the company to understand the work environment and culture so they can incorporate it into training. Once the training is underway, JVS staff routinely check on the project to make needed changes and improvements. Respect for everyone's busy schedules is paramount.

Coordinate and Deliver Responsive and Personalized Services

Although the three organizations use different approaches to coordinate and deliver services to employers, as a rule, each assigns one staff member to be the point of contact for the employer. Information about each employer is shared and staff have a process for responding to needs. Services are customized according to the requirements of individual employers.

At JVS, one individual coordinates outreach to employers. The employer services manager works with job developers and employment specialists on a daily basis to identify participant needs and provide information about employer needs. The employer services manager meets monthly with the job development team, which independently contacts employers to make sure needs are met and services are coordinated. The employer services manager also provides training on job development and employer involvement for all direct-service staff.

To ensure staff share a common vision for engaging employers, indicators, key strategies and staff responsibilities required for five levels of engagement are mapped out in the JVS Employer Engagement Model. JVS requires every staff person working directly with employers to visit them once a month. These visits increase staff sensitivity to employer needs and demands, and help staff working with participants to understand how employers think.

The scope of employer services at WIRE-Net is quite broad, so services are divided among three senior staff. The associate director of WIRE-Net's manufacturing services is responsible for direct services to employers, such as organizing learning groups, workshops and forums; recruiting employer members; producing the newsletter; and keeping the website updated. The associate director of workforce development is responsible for coordinating training services to employers. The manager of real estate focuses on physical expansion financing, site inventory and planning. The three staff members are conscientious about how, when and for what reasons they contact employers. They are careful about exchanging information with one another regarding their contacts. The division of responsibility among their positions is also clear to employers, who know that one handles activities primarily related to management issues, one to training, and the third to real estate and expansion.

Training, Inc. is smaller than either JVS or WIRE-Net, and its management strategy is less formal but still very deliberate. At Training, Inc., employer services are handled primarily by the director, who works closely with the job developer. The director is responsible for general outreach and recruitment of employers, orienting them to the organization and ensuring that their needs are met. The job developer sets up the internships, job fairs and site visits.

Market Services in Professional Ways

Investment in professional marketing materials, use of the industry's terminology and sensitivity to the famous business creed "time is money" are all essential to attract and engage employers. It is critical that an organization be clear about the services it offers to employers so that both staff and employers know what is available. And, in all communication, it is important to recognize that terms such as "WIA training vouchers," "TANF support services" or "work-based education" may be unfamiliar to employers.

The JVS business awards luncheon, WIRE-Net's newsletter and Training, Inc.'s employer recruitment memo illustrate a few marketing strategies used to engage employers.

JVS hosts the "Strictly Business" luncheon to acknowledge employers who have helped job seekers with employment and to honor job seekers who stand out in their accomplishments. The luncheon also informs employers about JVS's services and performance, and a professional video documenting award winners and their success stories is shown. The invitation to the event is professional and visually appealing.

WIRE-Net's newsletter is written for employers. It is filled with news about companies in the network, information that companies can use to improve business and reports about WIRE-Net events, activities and services. The newsletter is concise and easy to read.

Training, Inc. sends a one-page memo to employers requesting their help in preparing participants for job interviews. The memo provides clear information about what is happening, when, where, for how long and how to sign up. Employers are asked to circulate the memo among their colleagues to get the word out about Training, Inc.'s program.

Actions to Consider to Increase Business Orientation

- Hire staff that understand the industries you serve and/or who have private sector expertise.
- Ensure all staff value meeting employers' needs as much as they value meeting participants' needs.
- Join employer associations and professional human resources organizations.
- Keep up with business trends affecting employers in your community by reading journals, the newspaper and the Internet.
- Make your organization look, feel and operate like a business.
- Communicate with employers in clear, concise and straightforward language.
- Keep meetings with employers short and focused on specific tasks, and follow up with brief notes about outcomes and decisions.
- Appoint a senior staff member to coordinate services to employers and designate a single point of contact for each employer.
- Market services to employers in professional ways.

3. *Know Your Customers*

Employment and training organizations are in the business of helping people get jobs. Increasingly, organizations are expected to help people stay in the jobs and advance. Organizations that are successful at job development, retention and advancement services know their customers—both job seekers and employers. This requires collection and management of up-to-date information. Although maintaining a database with information about customers is important, it is also essential to analyze this information routinely. This ensures that employment and training services effectively help job seekers develop skills that employers want.

Organizations that are successful at job development, retention and advancement services know their customers—both job seekers and employers.

It is no coincidence that Training, Inc. develops programs that lead to entry-level jobs in the financial industry, a sector for which Boston

is known. Or that, located near Silicon Valley, JVS has focused on jobs in information technology and, with the downturn in the software industry, is now developing more training for the health care industry (where jobs are available). Or that WIRE-Net in Cleveland was established to halt the closing and exodus of local manufacturers. Because Training, Inc., JVS and WIRE-Net are different kinds of organizations, their approaches to understanding their customers are also different. The following three approaches are used by these organizations.

Get to Know Employers and the People They Might Hire

Good customer service requires knowing the personalities and abilities of the job seekers and whether they'll make a good match with a particular employer for both the short and long term. This requires developing relationships with employers so that staff can really understand how they make hiring

decisions, what the work culture and environment are like at a workstation as well as in the lunchroom, and the nature of daily work tasks and responsibilities.

At the heart of WIRE-Net's strategy is the development of mutually beneficial relationships between public and private organizations in the community. To

do its job of providing a solid, safe and dependable bridge between the supply and demand sides of the local workforce, WIRE-Net must have accurate and up-to-date information about both employers and job seekers. To identify and keep track of employer members' needs, WIRE-Net has implemented an account management system. Thirteen staff members are assigned 10 to 12 "key employer accounts," whom they are responsible for calling once a month to check on needs and issues. Employers are also visited twice a year; staff ask them a common set of questions to keep up with labor market trends, employer needs and ways that WIRE-Net can assist. "The Company DATASHEET" helps staff remain current and consistent with employers. This employer database includes issues that require action, such as the need for training, which are referred to the appropriate staff member.

Most people appreciate good listening skills and employers are no exception. WIRE-Net staff are careful listeners. According to Joan Cook, former Associate Director of Workforce Development, "We interact with employers so that they don't go through too much pain and suffering. They won't listen to us if we don't listen to them. We've nurtured them and they feel safe with WIRE-Net." This behavior is applauded by small business owner Pete Accorti, who feels that businesspeople, especially those with small businesses, don't have time to

think ahead about staff issues or go too far out on a limb. WIRE-Net helps them think outside their usual routine. "Businesspeople don't always know what we need. Ideas come from WIRE-Net. The staff knows what questions to ask and how to ask them. They listen to our needs, structure a program and bring it back to us to validate."

For WIRE-Net employers, a major concern is the lack of skilled workers, since fewer individuals are choosing to pursue careers as machinists and tool and die makers, for example. "There are not enough people in the pipeline for manufacturing jobs," according to WIRE-Net's manager of recruitment, employment and training. To respond to this need, WIRE-Net staff try to influence employers to make manufacturing careers more appealing. Staff also work closely with job seekers to identify issues that prevent them from participating in and staying in training programs. For example, through WIRE-Net's assessments, enrollment process and case management services, staff have noted that some individuals might have strong aptitudes for work as machinists but lack the reading and math skills needed to master the curriculum. WIRE-Net staff work with teachers in the training programs to adjust the curriculum so that these individuals develop basic skills in the context of learning about manufacturing.

Understand the Skills Employers Need by Mining Current Labor Market Information

We live and work in a time when the labor market is continually changing. Large companies often downsize when they are sold. Businesses sometimes move locations to take advantage of reduced labor costs or tax benefits. Changing technologies and demographics require new skills and create new positions. Successful employment and training organizations keep on top of these changes so workforce preparation programs are appropriately focused on the jobs available and skills required. Organizations need to remain informed about the fluctuating wages and benefits of entry-level positions and about how one employer compares to others in an industry. They also need to know about policies related to wage increases and promotions, as well as training and advancement opportunities. And they need to know how their job seekers fare in the midst of these changes.

“We are constantly assessing employers’ needs through our job development efforts, through our database and through our personal contacts with employers,” explained Abby Snay, Executive Director of JVS. JVS’s process of data collection, analysis and performance improvement was institutionalized early in its history. In the 1980s, JVS enrolled large numbers of Russian immigrants who needed help finding jobs; many had obtained college degrees or certificates and developed job skills in their homeland.

Although skilled and educated, these émigrés needed to quickly learn English so they could begin supporting themselves and their families. Committed to serving both job seeker and employer, JVS designed training programs in which immigrants could learn English for specific jobs and the protocols of American work culture. To develop the training programs, staff learned about employers’ styles by visiting their workplaces and talking to their managers and supervisors. Staff educated themselves about specific work tasks, skills and working environments, and the vocabulary used on the job. JVS training programs then reflected what staff had learned from employers.

Because JVS is located in the heart of the technology industry, its programs became more focused on the development of skills required for jobs in information technology. JVS continues to believe that these skills will be in demand for the long term, but has also increased its focus on jobs in health care, where there are many openings. Health care training is available in direct patient care, such as certified nursing assistants, licensed vocational nurses, and allied health and front-line clinic assistant positions.

Network

Also essential to good customer service is networking with employers and employer associations to learn about industry trends, standards and characteristics, and to develop

a presence so employers view an organization as a colleague, not an outsider. Among other strategies, networking helps an organization know employers well enough to prepare job seekers for the realities of working in a particular job. It helps ensure—before the first day of work—that the employer and the new worker are compatible.

Training, Inc. is fiercely strategic about its routine employer events and uses them to learn about employers' needs. For example, staff use the two or three job fairs held for each graduating class to ask employers what was missing from the training. When they were told consistently that workers who understand billing or accounting were needed, Training, Inc. added components to build skills in these areas.

Another example of strategic networking involves the design of graduations at Training, Inc. According to Willard Pinn, "Graduations are a time to celebrate and a time to do business. It is a marketing opportunity." Employers sponsor graduations and 50 to 100 employers, depending on the size of the graduating class, come to a graduation luncheon. Luncheons are held in elegant settings such as the dining room of Boston's Parker House Hotel. Staff carefully seat people in groups that can produce something of value for the employer, the graduate and Training, Inc. "If we know this grad will be a great employee for a particular company, we put them at the same table. If we have an employer that we are trying to recruit to hire grads, we put them at a table that has

an employer who has hired so that the conversation is very focused on needs that we have. We spread out big sheets of paper and plot where we are going to seat people. It's important; that's what a company would do. It's not just so people have a seat. We don't have too many opportunities where employers and participants and staff get together like this; we have to make the most of the time."

Training, Inc. doesn't underestimate the power and value of "word of mouth" and has found ways to formalize this process to cultivate champions of the organization. "Our open house is a time to get new employers in to talk with us. An employer who sponsors the Training, Inc. graduation sent a holiday message to other employers—ones they do business with. The message mentioned Training, Inc. as a place to look for potential employees. We followed up with a mailing about our open house. We mentioned the employer's holiday mailing and said, 'We would love you to come and find out more about us.' If we can get other employers to open the door for us, that goes a long way to expanding the network."—Willard Pinn, former Director of Training, Inc.

More traditional activities to get to know customers are also in place at Training, Inc. Trainees are taken to businesses to tour work sites, a database is maintained to track outcomes for employers and trainees, and staff follows up with graduates to ensure that their program is targeted to ever-changing customer needs.

Actions to Consider to Get to Know Employer Customers

- Have up-to-date information available about jobs, business and industry trends, and the various employers in your community.
- Develop and use a system for contacting employers, assessing their needs and taking action when appropriate.
- Know what questions to ask employers and listen to their answers.
- Follow up on decisions made with employers.
- Have a process to learn about specific skills employers need and design training to develop those skills.
- Evaluate employer services and interactions.
- Invite employers to visit your organization to learn what you do and whom you serve.
- Cultivate employer champions to recruit other employers.
- Use employer events to network.

4. *Make Employers Part of the Woodwork*

Employers need to be both actively and routinely involved in organizations' efforts—fixtures, not visitors. At JVS, Training, Inc. and WIRE-Net, employers are part of the woodwork, built

into the mission, leadership and activities of each organization. At each of these organizations, during any week, it is common for

Employers need to be both actively and routinely involved in organizations' efforts—fixtures, not visitors.

an employer to be tutoring, giving a workshop or meeting with other employers to raise scholarship funds for participants. More structured periodic activities such as receptions, job fairs or seminars for employers are scheduled too, but employer involvement and commitment are part of what happens day to day. Here are several examples of efforts that JVS, Training, Inc. and WIRE-Net have developed to ensure employers become and stay actively involved.

Assemble an Employer-Led Board

Many organizations periodically include employers on advisory committees or survey their needs when developing a program or service related to their business. This type of employer involvement is significant and needs to happen regularly. But organizations should not stop there. All three organizations use employers to strengthen their leadership and have involved them in strategic decision-making.

According to the Executive Director of JVS, Abby Snay, "We recruit board members to represent major local companies and industry sectors, and design board operations to accommodate their busy schedules." Board work is conducted at five meetings

each year, plus an annual planning retreat. Board members receive an extensive orientation and a comprehensive board binder with information about JVS, board responsibilities and procedures. Every new board member is also connected with an experienced "board mentor."

The board at JVS has 25 members, each of whom sits on at least one board committee. The committee structure is revised on an annual basis to align with board and agency priorities. Committees recruit community members based on specific expertise and connections. These committee members then form the pool for board recruitment, so that all new board members have prior experience with JVS.

The executive director communicates frequently with board members on matters such as the organization's long-term space requirements, labor market issues and, recently, the loss of technology-related jobs. Although board members are not involved in JVS operations, they are responsible for fiscal oversight, help with fundraising, development of the strategic plan and review of performance outcomes. Board members also volunteer as speakers; serve as industry advisors; develop curricula; help participants with job search, résumés and interviews; make donations; and provide internships.

In 2003, in support of a priority to deepen its relationships with employers, JVS formed an employer engagement committee. This committee has developed a plan to implement and measure employer engagement. A subcommittee focuses on business systems to support employer involvement. Sector-based advisory groups are also formed to support placement activities for job seekers who participate in related training.

Have Many Ways for Employers to Volunteer

In addition to including employers in strategic decisions, it is essential to have a variety of opportunities for employers to interact with the organization and its participants in informal and practical ways. In fact, taking stock of areas where business expertise would be useful to an organization is a good way to begin to determine

opportunities for employer participation. More than likely, employers will help out where needed and will value options.

At Training, Inc., employers have many roles. "Employers participate in the 'life' of training. If we didn't have employers involved in all levels, trainees wouldn't be ready for employment." Training, Inc. provides employers with many choices for participation. "We take employers where they are ready to give, not just for job development or an immediate need, but we take whatever they have and develop it. We plug them in where they would be most comfortable." Employer liaison (mentor), tutor, office simulation caller, software assistant, practice interviewer, workshop presenter and committee work are some of the ways that employers can become involved with Training, Inc. The length of time employers are asked to commit varies—tutors volunteer for about one hour a week, while the employer liaison can devote as much time as the employer and trainee decide it should be.

Volunteers participate in an orientation to Training, Inc. to learn the duties of the position. And although Training, Inc. tries to plug employers in where they feel comfortable, staff give thought to assignments. For example, not everyone who signs up to be an employer liaison is chosen. The assignment of an employer liaison to a participant is carefully made. Employers must be committed to the time required and sensitive to the challenges trainees face. Although employer liaisons must be able to

listen and be supportive, they must also be able to speak plainly with participants when they make poor decisions.

Many employers also become involved with Training, Inc. by providing internships. Each trainee is required to intern so they can use skills learned during training—computer software, ten-key calculator, data entry, processing checks or creating spreadsheets, for example. Supervisors of interns help them learn about the work environment and evaluate their performance at least twice during the experience.

Employers also provide financial resources to Training, Inc.—on average about 20 percent of Training, Inc.’s total annual budget. One corporation underwrote remodeling Training, Inc.’s offices and many provide scholarships for students.

As a unit of the YMCA, Training, Inc. does not have a board of directors. However, it has an advisory group of employers—the Partners Council—that is active in all aspects of the program. The Council has helped form several committees that meet monthly—Employer Relations, Volunteer, Finance, Scholarship and others as needed.

Clearly, Training, Inc. receives a significant amount of professional assistance through employers’ volunteer efforts, but there are other valuable by-products. Some employers have a tendency to make assumptions about Training, Inc.’s trainees because they typically have modest incomes. They may believe that graduates do not have adequate

skills when they complete training, or they may stigmatize individuals who participate in Training, Inc.’s programs. Through volunteering, employers get to know the quality of the trainees and the depth of the challenges that some face. “One student was holding down four part-time jobs to support his family and participating in training 40 hours a week for 14 weeks,” according to Willard Pinn. Through participation, employers sometimes see that they may be mistaken about the organization and its graduates. It is common to stigmatize individuals who participate in community-based training programs or employment retention efforts. As employers get to know trainees, they begin to recognize their misperceptions and often dispel myths they hear others perpetuate.

Involve Employers in Program Design and Delivery

Ensuring that program activities and services are in line with the realities of work can be a monumental task, especially since realities can change overnight for a particular employer. Nevertheless, employers are generally aware of trends in their businesses, how they like things done, and the ins and outs of an industry or company.

When employers are involved in the design of training, help determine the content of curriculum, provide information about the application of skills in an industry, and offer insights about workplace culture and how to adapt to it, job seekers gain a competitive edge over other applicants. Moreover, when employers are involved with designing and

delivering training, they have a greater stake in the outcomes of the organization and the success of its participants.

Since WIRE-Net's origins and roots come from community development corporations that saw the need for an employer-driven organization to revitalize the manufacturing industry, employer participation at WIRE-Net is pervasive. The board consists

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almost entirely of representatives from manufacturing businesses on the west side of Cleveland and the five community partners—Bellaire-Puritas Development Corporation, Cudell Improvement, Inc., Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization, Stockyard Redevelopment Organization and Westtown Community Development Organization. Along with an executive committee, six committees conduct the business of the board: membership, finance, fund development, manufacturing improvement, training and industrial real estate development.

WIRE-Net board members and other employer members help with policies and the design and delivery of training in several ways:

- Several institutions provide manufacturing training to WIRE-Net participants. Staff connect employers to these training programs by arranging for them to validate curriculum, speak in classes

and host plant tours for students during training. “To be honest, if it wasn’t for WIRE-Net’s involvement, these schools wouldn’t have 90 percent of their students—and that would hurt everyone: the schools, the

manufacturers and the job seekers. In the past two years, we’ve seen unprecedented enrollment in machining and metal-forming programs, and I attribute much of that directly to WIRE-Net’s job fairs, placement strategies and many other ongoing support systems.”—Robert Meeker, Anchor Tool and Die.

- WIRE-Net formally recruits employer volunteers to serve on an advisory council for the Youth Career Development program offered by Max S. Hayes Career and Technical School. As members of the Business Advisory Council, employers

have input on procedures, equipment and materials needed to prepare young students for careers in manufacturing.

- NASA-Glenn helped develop a video for applicants to learn about the manufacturing industry, develop an awareness of “what it takes” to succeed in manufacturing training that can last for seven to nine months, and observe the types of soft skills needed for work in manufacturing.
- Four trade associations helped WIRE-Net shape its pretraining workshops, which educate individuals about the “nuts and bolts” of careers in manufacturing so they can make informed decisions about entering training, prior to investing time and funding. With the encouragement and support of WIRE-Net, these organizations formed the Northeast Ohio Metalworking Association Consortium (NEOMAC). NEOMAC also helps update and ensure the viability of the curriculum used by local training providers, and coordinates awareness efforts that have helped to increase the number of students enrolling in metalworking training and apprenticeship programs.
- Employers and WIRE-Net often work collaboratively to design customized programs for incumbent worker training. For example, an English as a Second Language program was developed especially for Thermagon, Inc., whose workforce was 60 percent Hispanic. Recognizing their difficulties

reading English work instructions and documenting work tasks, WIRE-Net collaborated with a company manager and the adult education program of Cleveland Municipal School District to develop courses in English and math so that workers could improve speaking, writing and math skills needed for jobs in technology. The courses were offered at the company and employees were given time off to attend classes. “We got results from the training WIRE-Net arranged to help our workers speak English.”—Ed Weston, Thermagon.

WIRE-Net employers have played key roles in helping maintain a pool of workers who have the skills and credentials needed for employment in the manufacturing industry. Through WIRE-Net, employers are a part of the workforce development system. Employers help set skills standards, improve training programs, discover and polish raw talent, obtain funding for training and provide support to one another. Del Kitzel, owner of a small tool and die company and member of WIRE-Net, simply says, “We get good bang for our buck through WIRE-Net.”

Actions to Consider to Make Employers Part of the Woodwork

- Include employers in the leadership of your organization.
- Give employers an active role in your events and activities, and promote frequent interaction with staff and participants.
- Provide many opportunities for employers to volunteer in your organization and market those opportunities.
- Communicate expectations of employers clearly.
- Encourage employers to allow staff and participants to learn about jobs and the work environment.
- Ask employers to help design and review training curricula.
- Include employers in the delivery of services.
- Make trade associations active partners in your organization.

The Challenge

Most employment and training organizations claim that employers are involved in their organizations—and rightfully so. Employers participate in their job development efforts, help prepare individuals for interviews, serve on advisory committees, give presentations to training classes and host company tours. Important activities, yes, but as the three organizations in this report demonstrate, more advantageous partnerships can be developed.

These three organizations started with a quality product—job seekers who have developed the skills that employers need. Each organization has a different way of relating to business: WIRE-Net exists to support business; it is similar to an employer association, but serves both job seekers and employers. Training, Inc.’s simulated training requires that it “be a business.” And, as a program to help people get jobs, JVS, from its inception, has seen the need to make employers an integral part of the process. Each organization developed its network of employers over time, and accomplished these close employer connections primarily by understanding the employer’s needs and offering services that are valued.

Although the organizations are grateful for what their employer partners contribute in time, money, guidance and employment expertise, the relationship is not unilateral. These organizations and employers engage with one another because needs are met on both sides. Most important, the organizations and the employers have moved past thinking of one another as inhabitants of different worlds. Instead they see their partnerships as valuable community investments essential to the development of a skilled workforce.

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