

Leveraging Close Ties to Business and Industry: Employer Associations as Workforce Intermediaries

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In August of 1997, the Manufacturing Institute/Center for Workforce Success started what would turn out to be a long-running initiative—using employer associations as “workforce intermediaries.” The key premise of this initiative was that employer associations, acting as intermediaries, can help to align the activities of the workforce development system with the needs of employers and potential workers to:

1. Better meet employers’ needs to recruit, develop, and advance entry-level workers.
2. Hire more underemployed, unemployed, and hard-to-serve individuals into family-supporting jobs with greater opportunity for additional training and advancement.

Originally, the initiative was created under the Workforce Innovation Networks (WINs) partnership—a collaboration of the National Association of Manufacturers’ Manufacturing Institute/Center for Workforce Success (CWS), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Center for Workforce Preparation, and Jobs for the Future. Now, nearly ten years later, the WINs initiative is still going strong. In fact, other employer-led workforce intermediaries have sprung up outside of the WINs collaboration. Today, the CWS has intermediaries in twelve regions around the United States.

Why Employer Associations Make Good Workforce Intermediaries

Most of the attention given to workforce intermediaries today defines these organizations as community-based training and job placement organizations. But the concept of the employer-led workforce intermediary is a natural—who better to understand the workforce needs of business than their business associations? And who better to match up the workforce needs of business with local workforce stakeholders such as community colleges and technical schools, One-Stop Career Centers, ethnic societies, and community-based organizations?

Employer associations have a clear understanding of the regional industries, available jobs, and the skills that are in demand. With this knowledge, employer associations are the perfect “vehicle” for matching up businesses that want to hire and organizations that want to help people get hired.

The Importance of Collaboration

Employer-led workforce intermediaries help match up labor-market demand with labor-market supply, but they do it in a way that helps support the already defined roles of community stakeholders. For example, employer association CEOs sometimes sit on local community college boards or on workforce investment boards, representing their employer-members as the business voice. Employer associations may also provide business services to One-Stop Career Centers or collaborate with community-based organizations to provide support services for member companies’ employees or to job applicants.

Overall, employer-led workforce intermediaries organize, advise, and advocate for their member firms, provide or broker workforce services, work with education and training providers to improve workforce services, help advise workforce institutions and systems, and engage in research on effective human resource policies and practices that can be communicated back to both the private and public workforce systems.

On the flip side, employer-led workforce intermediaries do not take on other organizations’ specialties—they are catalysts and collaborators, not we-do-it-all shops. Workforce intermediaries do not want to replicate existing services in their regions. They want to complement those services and provide input from the business community. Their value comes from their ability to provide the business voice. And, as such, they help others understand what businesses offer or want in the way of skills acquisition and development, employability, internship and apprenticeship opportunities, connections to potential workers, career paths, training, curriculum development, good-paying jobs, and supportive workforce policies.

Economic Development and Workforce Development—the Manufacturers Association of South Central Pennsylvania (MASCPA) Experience

Employer-led workforce intermediaries embody the concept that economic development and workforce development are synonymous. A perfect example of this is the Manufacturers Association of South Central Pennsylvania (MASCPA).

From having virtually no role in workforce development a few years ago, MASCPA has become the primary workforce intermediary in south-central Pennsylvania. It is also seen as a major force in workforce and economic development programming by state and local governments. MASCPA's CEO is now a member of the local workforce investment board.

MASCPA received a \$30,000 grant from a local workforce investment board to develop three industry consortia—the most successful of these being a Food Processing Consortium that includes more than twenty-five companies, three workforce boards, an Industrial Resource Center (IRC) office, and two manufacturers associations. With MASCPA's assistance, the consortium has received more than \$500,000 in training grants.

MASCPA also secured over of \$1.4 million from a variety of sources for training programs that it developed for incumbent workers across south-central Pennsylvania. MASCPA leads a Career Link Relations Committee that works with local Career Link offices to find jobs for 250 non-English speaking displaced workers, to meet the increased demand for technical workers, and to investigate the lack of qualified workers for employers in general. Career Link is Pennsylvania's One-Stop Career Center system.

With funding from the Pennsylvania State Department of Labor and Industry, MASCPA will roll out its successful Your Employability Skills or YES program to forty-eight schools across south-central Pennsylvania by 2007. YES will be a senior-year elective in high schools to prepare young people for the competence and commitment they will need to be work-ready and successful in the workplace.

All of MASCPA's activities epitomize the employer-led workforce intermediary role, and its success demonstrates how effective employer associations can be in facilitating the discussions and driving the implementation of strategies for workforce system improvements.

Forging Links to Community Colleges and Technical Schools

Some of the most important relationships in these regional collaborations are those between businesses and education providers. Community colleges and technical schools have long been the educational providers of choice for employers looking to upgrade their employees' skills or to hire technically qualified workers. The most important ties intermediaries can support is the one between business and education—working with local employers to craft apprenticeships, internships, and mentorships; and helping colleges develop curricula that give students the skills they will need to get good jobs when they graduate.

A Model for Working Together

It is not too strong a statement to say that the economic success of our citizens and our nation depend on the effectiveness of our school systems and industry sectors to work together. Employer-led workforce intermediaries have demonstrated their success in enhancing those relationships. At the Manufacturing Institute/Center for Workforce Success, we continue to work to increase the number of and the effectiveness of these intermediaries. We see them as keys to America's economic success and hope to use these keys to open as many doors to the future as we can.

For more information about the associations, activities, and organizations discussed in this article, visit these Web sites:

NAM's Center for Workforce Success: www.nam.org/s_nam/sec.asp?CID=89&DID=87

Workforce Innovation Networks: www.workforceinnovations.org

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Workforce Preparation:
www.uschamber.com/issues/index/education/workforce.htm

Jobs for the Future: www.jff.org

Manufacturers Association of South Central Pennsylvania: www.mascpa.org