



# Engaging Employers: Strategies for Sectoral Training Programs



Health Profession Opportunity Grants

OFFICE OF FAMILY ASSISTANCE

## ENGAGING EMPLOYERS: STRATEGIES FOR SECTORAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

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Many Americans struggle to find jobs that pay enough for them to support their families and accomplish their dreams. At the same time, many healthcare employers struggle to find qualified staff with the training and technical expertise required to provide the high quality of care their patients need. This difficulty occurs because many would-be employees lack the necessary skills to fill those positions.

The Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG), administered by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was created as part of the Affordable Care Act to address these challenges. HPOG provides education and training to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals for healthcare occupations that pay well and are in high demand. The program is responsive to community workforce needs and improves job prospects for adults from hard-working families, matching careers in a growing field with people who are eager to fill them. HPOG participants are given the opportunity to obtain higher education, training, and support services needed to secure positions that have opportunity for advancement and sustainability, ultimately leading these individuals on a pathway to financial self-sufficiency. HPOG participants enroll in a variety of training and education programs that result in an employer- or industry-recognized certificate or degree. HPOG programs equip their participants with skills to meet employer needs and provide wraparound services to help eliminate barriers to academic success and employment.

By **Debbi Perkul\***

Healthcare systems, including hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers, are major employers that have great economic influence. They also offer abundant opportunities for career growth and development. The healthcare industry encompasses a vast array of jobs ranging from direct patient care to corporate functions. This makes healthcare a prime area for a sectoral training initiative.

### THE STATE OF HEALTHCARE TODAY



The ACA is changing the nature of healthcare delivery. By September 2015, approximately 17.6 million uninsured people had gained healthcare coverage as a result of provisions of the ACA (Office of the Assistance Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Government funding under Medicare is now being disbursed based on quality of care measures such as the rate of hospital readmissions, the rate of hospital-acquired conditions, and overall coordination of care. To meet the demand for higher quality of care and to maximize revenue for medical services, healthcare systems are shifting their approach to the delivery of care. As the need for preventive care increases, there is a higher demand for primary care physicians. A shortage of primary care physicians has led to an increase in demand for physician assistants and nurse practitioners. Team-based care, electronic health records, and the proactive monitoring of released patients and possible delivery of home care has increased the need for more mid-level healthcare workers such as patient navigators and medical assistants.

At the same time that the U.S. population is aging and the demand for healthcare for seniors is rising, the healthcare workforce is also aging and rates of retirement are anticipated to rise. Across the country, there is a nursing shortage and a resulting increase in demand for nursing assistants and other ancillary workers who can perform the low-skill tasks. Healthcare systems are addressing the increased need for low- to mid-skilled healthcare workers by engaging in sector-based workforce development strategies.

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This involves healthcare systems within a region partnering with one other, including partnering with competitors, for the overall benefit of training and preparing people to fill the understaffed healthcare positions. The healthcare systems often collaborate with community-based organizations, train their own entry-level employees, and develop new relationships with training and postsecondary schools to move students through the graduation process as rapidly as possible.

Some community-based organizations and postsecondary schools initiate their own sectoral strategies, designing work-readiness programs for their constituents. As the number of sectoral workforce development programs proliferate across the country, it is critical to engage employers early in the planning process. Early engagement of employers can lead to more effective programs, higher placement rates for participants, and higher retention rates and advancement because the programs are more likely to meet the employers' hiring needs. In fact, many healthcare organizations are already conducting workforce development and may be looking to connect with community partners to make their own programs more effective. To engage employers, community-based organizations and workforce development boards should know how to approach an employer with their proposal to partner, understand how to speak the "language of business" when making their case, and be able to meaningfully maintain and build on the employer's engagement throughout the life of the initiative and beyond.

Schenectady County Community College (NY) uses employers for teaching. Employers participate in panels and discuss topics of their own choosing. Also, in a "reverse interview" approach, employers receive student resumes in advance of a session and each student asks one or two questions of the employers on the panel.

There are several proven best practices and many promising practices in effectively engaging employers. These include asking employers to assist in:

- Providing opportunities for work-based learning, including co-ops, externships, clinicals, and job shadows

- Creating, reviewing, and approving curriculum
- Assisting in developing industry-recognized credentials for targeted jobs
- Using community organizations and training providers as a recruitment source

Healthcare systems realize they are important to their regional economies but sometimes do not understand the important role they can play in workforce development initiatives or how those initiatives can help resolve some workforce challenges they may be facing. Providing solutions to a workforce challenge presents an excellent way to capture an employer's attention, engage with them, and provide employment opportunities for the program's constituents.

In thinking about approaching an employer for an initial proposal for partnership, one thing to consider is that because of their size and influence, healthcare systems receive many solicitations for sponsorship, partnership, and engagement on a regular basis. Because of this, it may be hard to cut through this noise and get noticed.

Also, healthcare systems tend to be inward facing. Healthcare leaders may be disconnected from what is happening outside their walls, such as in the communities in which they are located. **Their primary mission is not to employ people but to heal patients.** And in healing patients, they are focused on raising their Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores. HCAHPS is the indicator of patient experience and the metric for Medicare reimbursement. To accomplish this, they must hire and retain top talent. Unless your program can provide them with the skilled employees they need, healthcare systems will not be interested in talking to you. And because of the large number of solicitations for partnership they receive, they may not even pay attention to your request or may be skeptical of what you are offering.

Rogue Community College District (OR) approaches employers with “professional humility” and asks what their challenges are. They gear their training programs toward HCAHPS, which are patient satisfaction measurements.

If your organization is aware of the needs and challenges of the healthcare system and what its priorities are, you may have a great opportunity to engage with healthcare employers and provide them with the help they need. In approaching the employer, it is important to understand that the employer is **the customer**. With the right approach, your program will allow the employer to stay in control, help it hire and retain top talent, increase employee engagement, and deliver excellent service that results in increased patient satisfaction—the key to higher HCAHPS scores and higher reimbursement. In short, your program can help the healthcare system meet its mission in healing patients by providing a quality entry- to mid-level workforce.

### CHAMPIONS

The first step to engagement with a healthcare system is to find the right person in the organization who can be a champion for your program and its mission. The champion should be someone inside the healthcare system who has leverage to assist you in gaining an audience. This person can provide you with information about and introductions to the appropriate decisionmakers. From the inside, the champion will work to get buy-in from the right people, paving the way for your program to come in and make its case for engagement and partnership. The champion should also be able to pull together internal working teams who can take the lead on the different programs you are offering.



In searching for a champion, the best strategy is to use existing networks. Cold calls are the most challenging way to find that champion and should be the strategy of last resort. Partnerships and collaborations are built on personal relationships, and person-to-person connections are the best way to engage with someone new. Networking to find the champion should be the main engagement strategy. In networking, an organization can look to its board of directors, its donors, and its leaders and staff. They should see if there are influencers and advocates in the community who know someone who works in the target healthcare system—someone who is a leader or influencer who can open the doors to your program.

In considering who an internal champion might be, there are many possibilities. A champion could be a senior leader from the start, or an employee who is familiar with your program and organization and can

advocate to his or her boss from the inside. Human Resources (HR) is a great place to find a champion, but so is a target department leader, such as nursing or an allied health field. Healthcare systems are complex, with many different departments that must interact with each other to have the business function well. People talk to each other and have the opportunity to share ideas and contacts. You can take advantage of that in looking for your champion. Other possibilities for departments that may be an entry point for engagement include Talent Acquisition, Organizational Development, Community Relations, Diversity and Inclusion, or another target department. The most important thing to remember in seeking a champion is that while relationships are everything in getting your foot in the door, it's only your ability to build the relationship with the target managers through trust and integrity that will keep you in.

### **CONVENERS**

Another strategy of engagement is to find and work with a convener. A convener would be someone of great influence in the community, such as a mayor or a leader in a major foundation or workforce development board, who can bring the top leaders of the healthcare systems together to discuss the workforce development initiative and the needs of the community. The convener can present the case to the leaders as to why they should engage in the initiative. Because of his or her political influence, the convener also would most likely be able to persuade healthcare system leaders to participate. The convener can then ask the leader to appoint an internal champion to lead the engagement process. Your program can assist the convener in making a clear, cogent case for how you can help both the healthcare system and the community. Your program can offer support, background material, and talking points to the convener to make that person's job easier.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council (AK) has grown its employer engagement from having no access to having full access. The Council was able to achieve this by having one of its graduates placed in the employer's HR department. Due to the graduate's success and advocacy, Cook Inlet now has direct access to the HR department. In addition to the HR department, the student has also been able to link the Council to other departments. Before this person was placed there, the employer was not familiar with HPOG or the quality of the educational programming that Cook Inlet was doing.

You should not ask the employer for a deep level of engagement or partnership upon initial contact. If the potential champion is a new acquaintance, the initial request should be for seeking guidance and information. An initial meeting will be an opportunity to introduce them to your program and the solutions your program can provide the employer. Asking for guidance is a great strategy for approaching an employer because it is a nonthreatening way to introduce your organization. Most people enjoy helping others and being able to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise. In addition, like any good business developer, your program would serve the customer optimally if you knew the specific challenges the employer was facing with its hiring and employees. Some areas to explore with the employer could include its workforce challenges, high-demand positions, high-turnover areas, and hard-to-fill positions. In an initial conversation, you also could ask for information to ensure your program aligns and will fit into their existing systems and processes for hiring and retention.

### **WHAT KIND OF PARTNER ARE YOU?**

As you move beyond the initial employer contact and conversation, it is important that your program do a little introspection. Can your program help solve a workforce challenge for this employer? Is your organization a reliable partner?

In thinking about what kind of partner you are, consider whether you are promising what you can deliver and not more. Promising too much and not being able to fulfill that promise could end your relationship with that employer. Talking too much and not listening to the needs of the customer could prevent you from finding solutions to the customer's problems. When providing the right solution for the employer's workforce challenges, it's important that you tailor the solution to that specific employer and not provide a generic solution that may fail to meet the employer's needs.

As you move forward in developing a new relationship, it's important to prove yourself and experience success on a small scale, and then build from there. It's always good to start small and even "under promise and over deliver." The employer wants to see you succeed, as it will help them, so start on a scale you know you can execute successfully. Some other strategies that may help your

program solidify its relationship with an employer would be to widely publicize the positive results you achieve to all the appropriate leaders in the organization, including your champion. Prove you are a great partner by being responsive and asking for feedback. Then, use the feedback you receive and look for opportunities to adjust your program and make continuous improvements.

Some red flags that signal potential trouble to the employer about the partnership include mistakes that occur but are not acknowledged or resolved. Everyone knows nothing is perfect, especially when working with people, but employers do expect you to address any issues that get in the way of success. The best thing to do is to own your missteps and take action to resolve those issues as well as you can. Be sure to answer emails and phone calls in a timely manner. This contributes substantially to a feeling of confidence in your partnership. If your staff turns over frequently, causing the employer to have to build new relationships with your designated point person repeatedly, the employer may get frustrated. Try to put your best and most stable employees on your employer engagement projects. And finally, if your internal systems and processes conflict with the employer's systems, one of you may have to change something. If your program is unwilling to negotiate change within its own systems, it's less likely the employer will want to work with you and consider changing. The goal is to make the partner's life easier and to solve problems, not to create more.

The best workforce development partners deliver what they promise. They are responsive and provide quality candidates. A good partner effectively solves problems and adheres to timelines that are mutually set. A good partner continues to treat the healthcare system as its customer and is dedicated to delivering excellent customer service. This includes being flexible and nimble as the healthcare system's needs and priorities change, as well as being transparent about challenges and owning up to mistakes.

## WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO THE RECRUITMENT/ HUMAN RESOURCES TEAM?

When approaching a potential employer partner, it's important to craft the pitch you will make to capture the employer's attention. The elements of the request should include what you can do for the healthcare system to help it address its workforce challenges. You will be bringing something of value to the healthcare system that will help it meet its mission. Identify and articulate what that value is. What value will you be adding to its already existing recruitment and retention strategies? To address these questions effectively, your program must learn and understand the existing challenges and strategies. And finally, it's important to know the profile of a successful employee in that target area. Each system and each entity in the system may have a different culture. Understanding that culture can help your program find and train applicants who would be a good match to that place of work, which will enhance employee engagement and retention.

## HELPING THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM UNDERSTAND THE LABOR MARKET



Your program also can bring additional value to the table by educating the healthcare system about things it may not be paying close attention to. For example, if the employer is having a hard time attracting talent in a certain area, it may not know the state of the local labor pool. Having an understanding of the local high school graduation rate and percentage of degree holders in the region may help the employer shift priorities to developing the talent pool it needs. The workforce development partner can advise the employer about enrollment in technical school programs, and the possible need for more clinical sites or instructors in that area. All these factors affect the labor pool but may be beyond the scope of knowledge of a typical talent acquisition department. By bringing this information to the employer, your program can help bring understanding and potential changes in how the employer does business.

### HUMAN RESOURCES LANGUAGE

There is a language gap when HR teams talk to workforce development teams that may make it hard for each to understand what the other is doing. The two teams speak very different languages and have different methodologies for meeting their goals. Talent acquisition teams may receive very large numbers of applications for an opening, and, out of necessity, look for reasons to screen applicants out of the system. Their goal is to find a few of the most qualified applicants for that specific job opening to interview. At large systems, the number of jobs each individual recruiter has to fill may be very high, and so each recruiter must use his or her time as efficiently as possible. Resumes that are hard to read, include misspelled words, and don't show the person meets minimum qualifications will get tossed to the side very quickly. The idea that "if you just give them a chance they can prove themselves" or "they can learn the job very quickly" just doesn't work when there are numerous applicants that do meet the qualifications, have relevant experience, and have easy-to-read resumes. The main goal of the talent acquisition team is to funnel people out to get to that one best-fit candidate.

Workforce development organizations think very differently. They tend to funnel people in. They want the employer to be inclusive. They are trying to find jobs for people who may not have a stellar work history. They may have clients who are considered "hard to employ." Workforce development organizations are trying to bring people in rather than weed them out. This difference in strategy and outlook can lead to an impasse in communication. If your program can learn the mindset of talent acquisition and some of its language and priorities it will be more successful in gaining traction with that partner.



It is important to learn what each talent acquisition team cares about, as they certainly may differ. But some things to ask about include their screen-to-hire ratio. How many applications does the recruiter have to review before there is a hire?

Can you reduce this ratio by bringing more prepared candidates to the organization? What is the 1-year turnover rate? Turnover rather than retention is what the employer may talk about.

Zepf Center (Toledo, OH) has employers come onsite to recruit. The Center conducts healthcare success seminars about proper work etiquette, has students write essays on why they want to enter healthcare, and requires students to obtain two letters of recommendation. Employers like to see the rigorous activities the applicants go through before being presented to them to interview. This process includes HPOG participants in the “funnel before the funnel” for employers.

Can you decrease the turnover in a specific department? That would be a great benefit to the employer. How many days does it take to fill a position? If there aren't a great deal of qualified applicants, can your organization provide some, thereby reducing the time it takes to fill a job? This is another great value you can bring to the employer. And finally, will your constituents be excellent employees, with the right set of workplace skills and behaviors that will lower the number of corrective actions given? Again, another great value you can offer.

Workforce development organizations may want to be aware of other terms used by the healthcare system, including:

- Pain points: Areas in which the employer is experiencing enough hardship that they may be willing to do business differently to solve a workforce need
- HCAHPS scores: First national, standardized, publicly reported survey of patient perspectives on hospital care; indicator of patient experience and metric for level of hospital Medicare reimbursement
- Employee engagement: Known to directly influence patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores, yet difficult to measure
- Talent funnel: The process of screening applicants to get to the most qualified to interview and then hire
- Entry-level, frontline workers: Low- to mid-skilled employees who usually have a great deal of patient interaction; may include environmental service personnel, nutrition service workers, and nursing assistants

## **THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS AND SYSTEMS**

When trying to place the program's clients in healthcare positions, it is critical to understand the employer's recruitment process and systems. It is one thing to have a healthcare system agree to work with you. But to understand exactly what that means and how it will look when it is operationalized is critical to the success of the initiative. Some points to consider include: how will your program fit into the employer's existing system?; how will you let the employer know who your clients are?; and when it knows who your clients are, what will happen to them? A lack of understanding of how this will work or a failure to consider the details could lead to bottlenecks and a lack of placements. Once you do understand how the employer's system works, you will need to analyze whether this existing system will be effective for your organization's and clients' goals.

You may need to request a modification to the existing system. Or you may need to make modifications in how you help your clients. Some examples include knowing how the healthcare system does its initial screening of applications. Does a person, or a computer, look at the applications first? What will the recruiter be looking for? Are you using any keywords? What format is the application in? Is it online only? How will your clients be identified? Can they be tagged in any way, either manually or in the applicant tracking system? If the employer conducts behavioral interviews, are you preparing your clients for these types of questions?

If the system and processes as they currently exist are not conducive to getting attention for your clients, can changes be made? For example, if a community college is relying on healthcare systems hiring students upon completion of an externship or clinical experience, are systems in place to identify the students the employer liked and communicate that to the recruiter? Or if one manager doesn't care for an applicant, is there a way to have the applicant interviewed by a different manager? It would be helpful to know this level of detail to facilitate job placement.

Because healthcare systems are so complex, one part of the system may not know what another part is doing. Your program may notice bottlenecks in a system or duplication of efforts before a

Alamo Community College District (TX) has great champions to help it with employer engagement, including the Mayor's office, the Vice Chancellor of the community college (who is closely connected with employers), United Way, chambers of commerce, the workforce board, and temp agencies. It has a key partnership with the housing authority, whose director is a doctor and a huge champion of the program. Some strategies for maintaining employer engagement and champion support include inviting someone from the mayor's office to attend graduation and asking employers to help shape curricula. As a community college, it possesses the flexibility to shift training programs to meet the needs of employers.

specific department in the healthcare system notices. The workforce development partner may also bring value by calling attention to these systemic or process shortcomings. And fixing these shortcomings may bring more positive attention to your clients and how your organization can help.

If your attempts at building a new employer partnership are not successful, some longer term strategies may open doors in the future. Attend local Society of Human Resource Management meetings, which has local chapters around the country. Get involved in other healthcare professional organizations, such as nursing or an allied health area, or whatever target occupations for which you are training people. Tell the target employer what you are doing, and then keep in touch with that potential champion by sharing regular updates and successes you are having. Tap other community leaders who can advocate on your behalf. All of these people can be powerful influencers.

### **THE CRITICAL ROLE OF AN ONSITE JOB COACH**

An onsite job coach who has contact with both the new employees and their managers for the first 6 months of employment can make the difference in a program's success or failure. Even the most prepared program graduate may have a hard time transitioning to the world of work. An onsite job coach who is regularly present and can act as a conduit between manager and employee, teach new employees the language to use to advocate for themselves, and help resolve emerging issues

in those first critical months, such as transportation or childcare falling through, can make the difference between a “write-up” and eventual termination or a successful employee. Job coaching is a very effective strategy that can add a great deal of value to the initiative.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In a multi-partner sectoral strategy, some questions to clarify among the partners that will help define roles and expectations might include:

- What does each partner do?
- What is the chain of communication and follow up?
- How are handoffs managed?
- How will job developers learn about the recruitment process at the healthcare system and how their participants will fit in and successfully find a job?
- How will we plan for consistent messaging to employers, including terms and vocabulary?

When evaluating the capacity of you and your partner organizations, some questions to consider are:

- What systems and processes might have to be **modified**?
- Where are there gaps or overlaps in service provision or engagement processes?
- How are you guiding participants into training programs? Where are you sending them for training? How are you working with colleges to ensure they are placed in jobs after training? How are you working with employers to ensure placement and then retention?

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Healthcare systems are experiencing a great deal of economic, regulatory, and mission pressure and have many competing priorities. While these may seem like insurmountable barriers to your program, they actually offer a great opportunity. If you engage the employer with a solutions-driven approach, and with the mindset that the employer needs to be driving the process and is always the customer, it could lead to a very productive, deep relationship in which both partners benefit tremendously. The proposal that you can solve some of its workforce challenges, articulated in language the healthcare system understands, may be the very thing it is looking for.

Goodwill Industries of the Valleys (VA) has been able to partner with its community college to revise curriculum and have a shorter path to some technical programs' completion. For example, the Medical Assistant Program is now a short-term certification rather than an associate's degree program. This has made its employer partners very happy, as they can hire these graduates much sooner, filling an immediate need.

However, after the initial introduction and agreement for partnership is made, to build and deepen the initial relationship it is imperative that you can deliver what you promise. Ensuring that your own staff is prepared for this work and understands the nature of “keeping the customer happy” will be integral to the partnership. Open communication, regularly scheduled check-in times, and the ability to receive feedback constructively and make improvements are all critical.

The ability to create partnerships among workforce development organizations, education and training providers, and healthcare providers can be a very productive and effective way to help people find rewarding careers while resolving workforce needs and gaps experienced by those employers.

### RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This resource and others sponsored by Health Profession Opportunity Grants at the Office of Family Assistance are available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/hpog/>

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