

Lessons from WIRED: *Strategic Employer Engagement 101*

Presented by: Jeffrey Padden, President

Public Policy Associates, Inc.
119 Pere Marquette Drive, Suite 1-C
Lansing, Michigan 48912
paddenjd@publicpolicy.com
www.publicpolicy.com

Recalibrating the Workforce System
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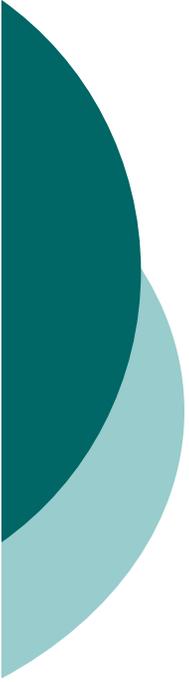




Content of this Presentation

- Introductions
- Background
- Practical steps for building, strengthening, and maintaining business partnerships
- Your most vexing challenges and everyone's ideas for addressing them

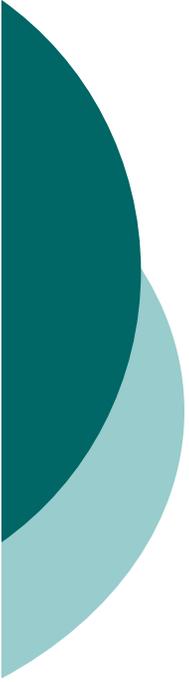
Please ask questions on the fly!



Introduction: Who is PPA?

- Founded in 1991; 26 employees
- Serves clients in the areas of public policy R&D, evaluation, and strategy
- Extensive experience with large-scale, long-term, multisite evaluation
- Major focus on workforce and economic development policy, strategy, and practice
- Works with all levels of government, foundations, nonprofits, school districts, and others across the U.S.
- Continual work with ETA since 1995

For much more, see www.publicpolicy.com.



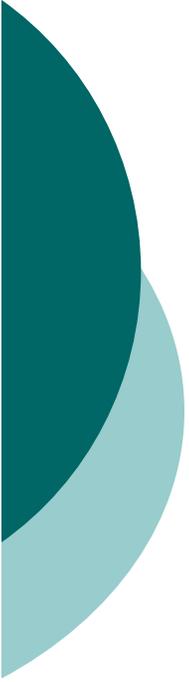
Introductions

- The WIRED evaluation team
- Attendees
 - Name, agency, role
 - Your employer engagement work



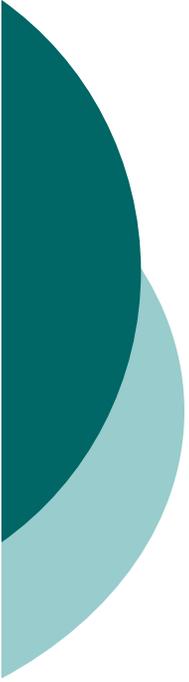
Background *(1 of 4)*

- Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED)
- Involved ongoing collaboration among workforce, education, economic development, and other relevant stakeholders



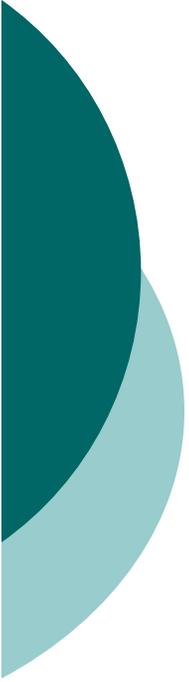
Background *(2 of 4)*

- Focused on industry sectors/clusters
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - Life sciences/biosciences/health care
 - Renewable energy
 - Information technology
 - Logistics/transportation
 - Many others



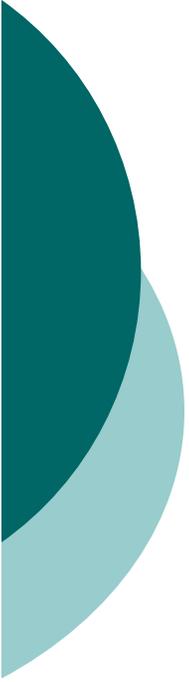
Background *(3 of 4)*

- Each grant was led by a convener that recruited employers to become active partners.
- Employers played a variety of roles over the course of the grant.
- Employers provided information and assistance that was vital to the success of each grant project.



Background *(4 of 4)*

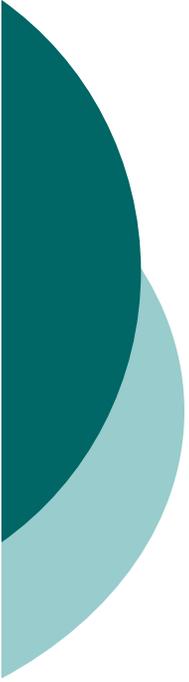
- Comprehensive evaluations were conducted of all 39 grants.
 - Evaluations conducted by PPA and BPA
 - Included extensive discussions with employers and conveners about their experiences
 - Documented what worked, challenges encountered, and solutions



Two Overarching Lessons *(1 of 2)*

#1: Treat employers as customers and strategic partners

- Demonstrate that you understand their business and their concerns.
- Show you have something of value to offer them.
- Deliver what you promise.
- Respect employer time and involvement.

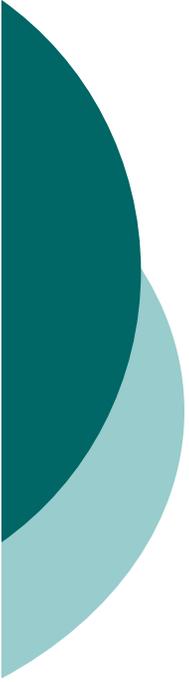


Two Overarching Lessons *(2 of 2)*

#2: Trust is critical

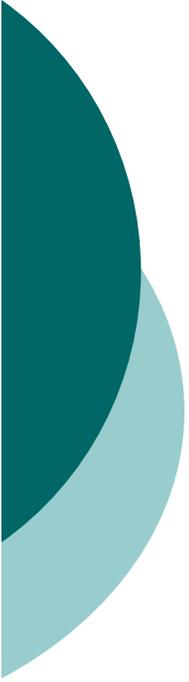
- Trust is the basis for meaningful employer engagement, collaboration, and partnership.
- Trust evolves over time, and must be nurtured to thrive and grow.
- Strive for early successes, which will encourage partners to tackle more difficult and complex issues.

Everything flows from these overarching lessons.



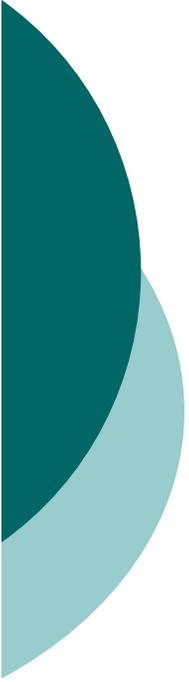
Engaging Employers: A four-step process

- Step 1: Prepare and Plan
- Step 2: Recruit
- Step 3: Build and Strengthen Relationships
- Step 4: Keep Employers at the Table



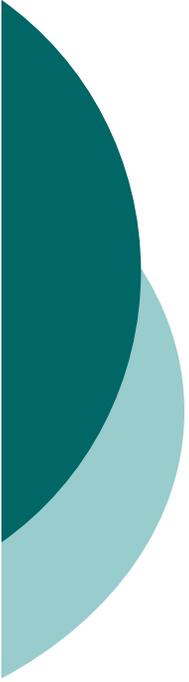
Step 1: *Prepare and Plan* (1 of 5)

- Establish a clear purpose for engaging employers.
- Clarify the roles you want employers to play.
 - Employer roles should reflect their strengths, their ongoing roles in the community, and what you need.
 - Possible roles include champion, advisor, board member, decision-maker, resource provider, consumer of training, and employer of participants.
- Employers can help refine the goals of the project.
- Roles may change over time.



Step 1: *Prepare and Plan* (2 of 5)

- Identify the right level of employer leader you need for your project. Examples:
 - Executives: Strategic decisions and commitment
 - Managers: Lead working groups
 - Line Supervisors: Identify skill needs and gaps



Step 1: *Prepare and Plan* (3 of 5)

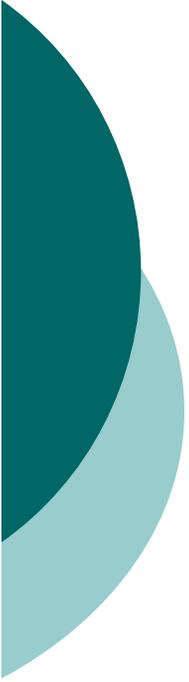
- Find the right mix of employers by size, type, and stature in the community.
 - Large corporations often view participation as community service.
 - Small businesses tend to focus on direct benefits of participation.
 - Competitors may be resistant to working together.

***Don't** assume there is a formula for the right types of employers; it all depends on the mission and community.*



Step 1: *Prepare and Plan* (4 of 5)

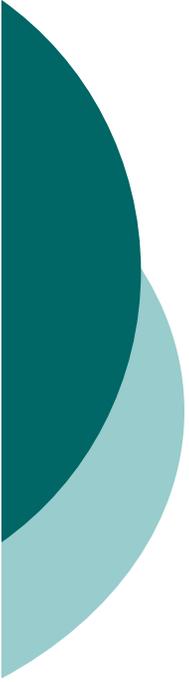
- To identify new business partners, or bring in new ones, use multiple methods.
 - Speak with businesses already involved.
 - Work through professional and social networks.
 - Contact business and industry associations, chambers, prior customers of One-Stop, etc.
 - Contact respondents to employer surveys.



Step 1: *Prepare and Plan* (5 of 5)

- Example of an employer survey: Indiana
 - As part of its agribusiness initiative, the project surveyed small niche market farmers (e.g., wool producers, small wineries) about the need for entrepreneurial training.
 - The Denver WIRED region surveyed employers in its four target industries to understand their workforce demands and concerns. The results helped build credibility with employers.

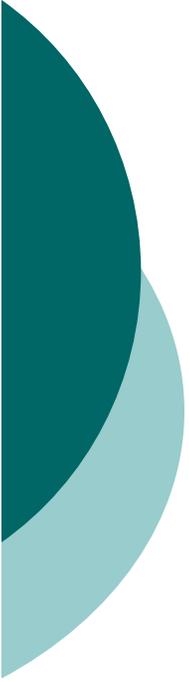
***Do** know your target industry and business partners; that's essential to gaining credibility. This merits serious effort.*



Step 2: *Recruit* (1 of 3)

- Identify and contact specific employers; make sure you understand their businesses. A trusted person should make the contact. One recruit can pull in others.
- Explain the nature and goals of your project and why you are seeking the employer involvement and input.
- Describe the benefits of the work to all involved: the company, sector, and community

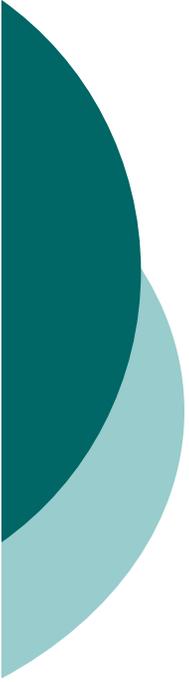
***Do** seek out employers with fresh perspectives to encourage creative problem solving.*



Step 2: *Recruit* (2 of 3)

- *Possible* employer benefits of a training program:
 - New data, new analyses, new insight
 - Training content and availability of new or revamped curriculum
 - Reduced training costs
 - Improved labor/management or supervisor/employee relationships
 - Reduced attendance problems
 - Increased employee retention
 - Greater productivity/lower costs of services
 - Improved customer satisfaction
 - Better staff productivity and efficiency of operations

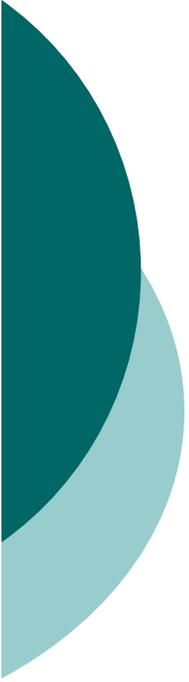
***Don't** promise more than you can deliver, but **do** deliver all that you promise.*



Step 2: *Recruit* (3 of 3)

- Other benefits:
 - Increased worker skills for a sector in the local economy, which may make future hiring easier
 - New professional and business contacts
 - Keeping abreast of state or federal regulatory changes affecting the company
 - Keeping up with the latest technology or innovations

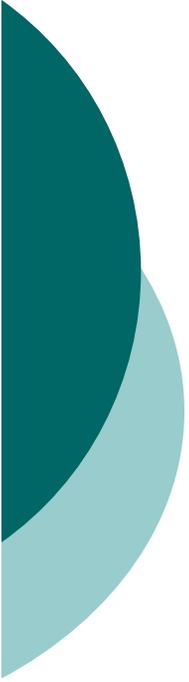
***Don't** misrepresent the demands on the time of employers that you are eager to recruit into your advisory group.*



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (1 of 8)

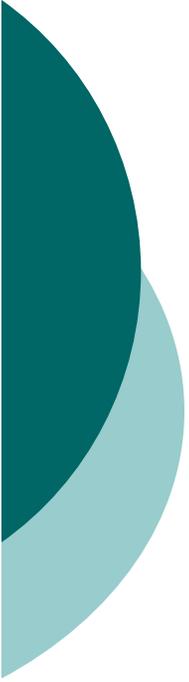
- Once business partners are on board:
 - Strengthen a common vision for your project.
 - Maintain communications.
 - Be patient. Allow relationships to develop over time.

***Do** engage employers in the initial and ongoing discussion of strategic goals, strategies, and activities.*



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (2 of 8)

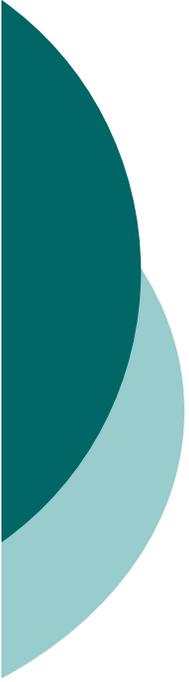
- Example of strengthening common vision: Metro Denver
 - The first-year structure used employers on eight panels along with other partners.
 - The task was to identify worker shortages and employer needs, and to design solutions.
 - Panels met regularly for a year.
 - The result was both strong relationships with business partners and a refined project vision.



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (3 of 8)

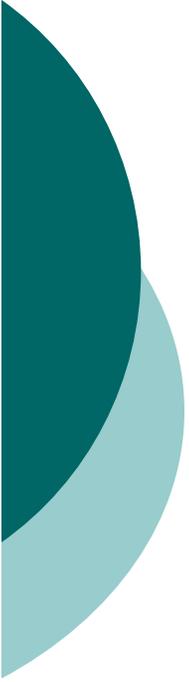
- Example of partnership principles: Indiana's Regional Compact

We are dedicated to leaving our region more prosperous than we found it. To do that, we need to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship by following these simple rules of civic behavior:



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (4 of 8)

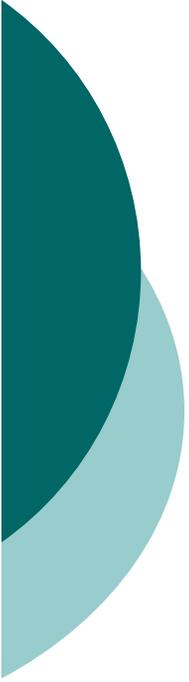
- *Tell the truth and build trust and mutual respect.*
- *Do not steal, poach, or plagiarize.*
- *Commit to learning and sharing information.*
- *Focus on new ideas, our assets, and our opportunities.*
- *Listen, link, and leverage.*
- *Collaborate and cross boundaries.*
- *Disclose conflicts of interest.*
- *Resolve controversies quickly.*
- *Concentrate on outcomes, not activities.*
- *Teach our next generation.*



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (5 of 8)

- Once business partners are on board:
 - Clarify how you work together, including decision-making rules.
 - Consider using a charter to make commitments concrete.

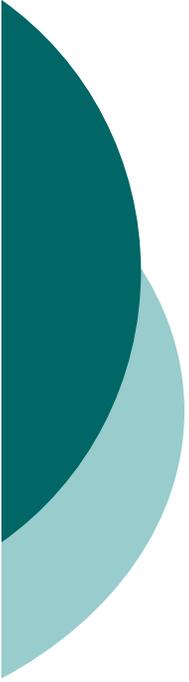
***Do** minimize the administrative burden on employers whenever possible, but be very candid about the burdens.*



Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (6 of 8)

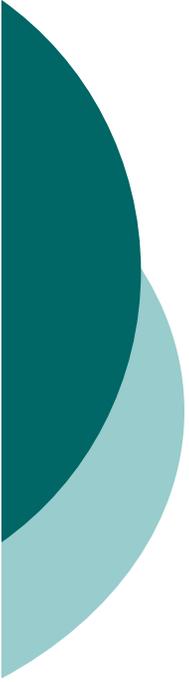
- Once business partners are on board:
 - Create opportunities for employers to take an active role and to derive concrete benefits.
 - Encourage creative thinking to achieve goals.
 - Create clear performance measures up front and review them frequently.
 - Provide opportunities to build trust.

***Do** give employers a sense of ownership by enabling them to assess effectiveness and make changes.*



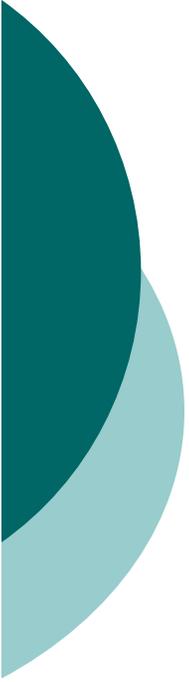
Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (7 of 8)

- Example of thinking creatively: Mid-Michigan
 - Local manufacturers identified training needs
 - The project created a jointly funded incumbent worker training program (Employment Builders Alliance - EBA) that was offered at \$10 per worker.
 - EBA brought in over \$50,000 per year and provided the needed training.



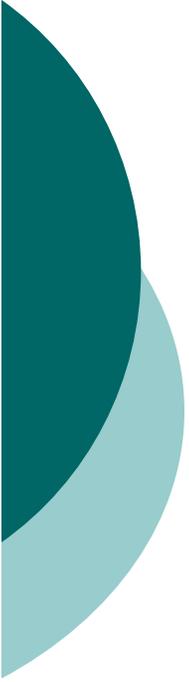
Step 3: *Build and Strengthen Relationships* (8 of 8)

- Example of building trust: California Corridor
 - The goal of the forums was to create trust.
 - In designing proposed common STEM curricula for the state, the project hosted carefully planned forums.
 - The forums brought together all of the project partners.
 - The lesson learned, according to one respondent, was: "Trust. Can't force it; can't rush it; can't regulate it; can't mandate it."



Step 4: *Keep Employers at the Table* (1 of 4)

- Provide an ongoing role for employers regarding current activities:
 - Keeping an eye on performance
 - Reviewing investment decisions
 - Leveraging additional funds



Step 4: *Keep Employers at the Table* (2 of 4)

- Provide new opportunities for substantive employer input:
 - Identify new priorities or new ideas.
 - Examples: cost reductions for joint training; more in-kind contributions; and new collaborations to address other interests/needs such as on technology and insurance
 - Specific examples:
 - Evolving roles of employers (Minnesota)
 - Self-sustaining worker training (Michigan)



Step 4: *Keep Employers at the Table* (3 of 4)

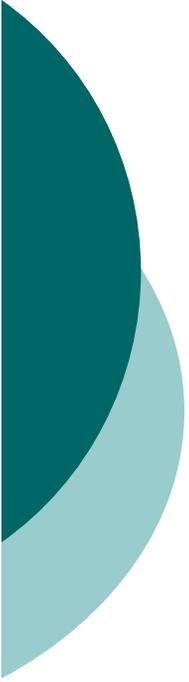
- Active management is essential.
 - Plan meetings carefully.
 - Provide meeting agendas and materials in advance.
 - Facilitate meeting discussions.
 - Track and report on assignments.
 - Provide accurate and timely meeting summaries.
 - Measure effectiveness of the meetings and initiative. Act on the results!

Don't let those who missed a meeting hijack the next one.
Do use summaries to build and maintain momentum.



Step 4: *Keep Employers at the Table* (4 of 4)

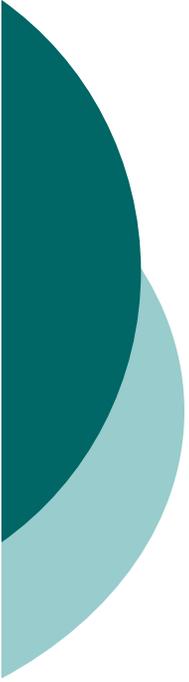
- Manage relationships actively.
 - Maintain contact between meetings.
 - *Ask* what want, need, and value.
- Avoid or mitigate conflict:
 - Clarify in advance the standard for making decisions.
 - Find cooperative solutions, examples include:
 - Joint training for workers from competing companies
 - Making “Train the Trainer” programs work as a community capacity-building strategy



Challenges that Keep You Awake

- For each of the four steps, what are the problems, questions, or worries that might impede your engagement with employers?
- Prioritize challenges.
- Group discussion to address each challenge

Everyone contributes, everyone learns!



Thank you!

- Feel free to contact me with additional questions.
- Let me know how your efforts toward employer engagement unfold.
- Please fill out the session evaluation.

Jeffrey Padden, President
Public Policy Associates, Inc.
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paddenjd@publicpolicy.com
www.publicpolicy.com

