



Working with Career and Technical Education: *A Guide for Business Partners*

There are countless opportunities for businesses to get involved in their communities, working with any number of groups doing work in important areas. With all of the choices available, it makes sense to consider the return on investment (ROI) each opportunity provides – and few opportunities provide a greater return to your business than working with Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.

Secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) programs are preparing a highly skilled, world-class workforce with the technical expertise, work ethic and employability skills that American business and industry need to remain globally competitive. CTE is aligned with the interests of business and industry—and the interests of our nation. In today’s high school CTE programs, students are being prepared for advanced training and college programs, not just entering the workforce after high school. There are several paths to postsecondary learning that CTE students utilize, including 2 year degree programs, 1-2 year industry-certification programs, employer-based apprenticeship programs, and 4-year degree baccalaureate programs.

If your business is experiencing a labor shortage in a skilled technical area, odds are that there is, or could be, a CTE program in your area working to introduce and prepare students for those jobs.

Obviously, helping students learn about, and prepare for, the kinds of jobs you have had trouble filling produces a direct return for you: you’re increasing the future candidate pool, and improving its quality. But there are other benefits available to you as well. For example, giving employees opportunities to work with students as volunteers or mentors is shown to boost staff morale and retention; you may also find that employees are able to develop or strengthen their skills by taking on larger projects with your school partners. Stakeholder relations can also improve, particularly those with regulators, vendors, unions, and the media, and you can also benefit from an overall improvement in community goodwill.

What Do Your CTE Partners Want?

For businesses that want to work with students, CTE programs present a particularly good opportunity: Their very existence is based on the idea of preparing students for the world of work, and they cannot do this unless their structure and instruction are grounded in the current needs and practices of local employers. This makes business partners a critical element in their makeup. In addition, many staff members (most often instructors) come from industry, making them comfortable with, and receptive to, talking with business people about what they do and how they do it. So in terms of what your CTE

partners want, expertise and industry knowledge are high on the list, and the next section details some of the ways in which that can be incorporated.

In addition, the funding environment for K-12 education overall is changing, and CTE programs face an ongoing need for resources: They need to keep up with industry needs as they change, which means new equipment and materials that are not always possible through current funding. Donations of used equipment, or access to relevant materials, are similarly welcomed.

Which Partnership Models Should You Consider?

Many CTE programs already look to area businesses for student support (mentors, internships, site visits and the like) and to secure needed resources. But there is a much wider array of opportunities to consider, all of which can benefit students, staff, and/or management in some way. These include:

Advisory Boards

Most CTE programs are expected to have an advisory board, and for good reason: They offer an ideal forum for businesses to share their workforce needs and requirements, helping schools to shape their programs and better prepare their students for the future. But advisory boards can be much more than that: Engaged business leaders can help CTE programs set and achieve major program goals, provide invaluable guidance on their work, offer management expertise and needed skills, and connect them to others in the community.

Expertise

Business partners can offer their expertise in a number of areas. You can share your expertise with students through guest instruction or judging student work and competitions; you can also offer your knowledge and skills at a program level by helping educators make decisions about the structure and focus of their programs. You can even help at a management level, either assisting programs individually in areas like public relations or website design or by having your company take on a major project on behalf of a program.

Mentors

Mentoring is a valuable component of career and technical education, and business partners are a primary source of mentors for students. Mentoring can focus on academic, social, or career outcomes, and there is a significant body of evidence supporting work in each of these areas. Some schools and businesses have also set up mentoring programs for administrators, particularly new school or program leaders who would benefit from experienced guidance in areas like facilities management, goal-setting or culture change.

Real-World Challenges

Students benefit greatly by being involved in real-world scenarios related to their focus area, and businesses can offer the goals, resources, and talent to support these kinds of challenges. This can range from business volunteers participating in a program like the FIRST Robotics Competition to building and selling a house to designing and executing a marketing campaign.

Student Work-Based Learning

Businesses are deeply involved in providing students with work-based learning experiences; these can involve introductory programs, such as workplace tours and job-shadowing, to more in-depth opportunities such as short- or long-term internships or summer employment. Many CTE programs and academies require this type of exposure, and business partners are necessary to achieve it.

Teacher Learning Experiences

In the effort to connect students to the workplace, it's easy to forget that teachers need to maintain a connection to industry as well. Businesses regularly train employees on the latest equipment and practices, and you can invite your teachers to participate in these sessions as appropriate. Some businesses even offer teachers summer externships to give them extended exposure to the workplace, which helps their instruction immeasurably.

Advocacy

Business partners who understand and feel part of a CTE program can speak on its behalf in ways that educators sometimes can't; further, because of their positions in the community, these businesses may be able to influence people those educators may not otherwise be able to reach. There are numerous examples of business leaders lobbying for schools at the local and state levels, advocating for passage of bonds, and promoting programs across the business community.

Resource Support

Business partners, particularly those who are already connected to a program in other ways, are reliable sources of support for the kinds of resources educators need. Business can provide raw materials for programs, and can offer special gifts of equipment and supplies; they can offer scholarships, and underwrite the cost of student participation in trips and competitions; and they can offer targeted support, such as teacher grants.

Pioneering New Programs or Retro-Fitting Old Programs

Sometimes there may be a large gap between the current mix of CTE programs and the current and emerging employment opportunities in your region. In fact, a needed program may simply not exist. It could be that the industry sector is relatively new to the region or there has not been a serious review of industry needs for several years. In other cases, industry needs may have shifted so much that the current program is aligned in name only, and the program needs a top-to-bottom makeover. In either case, you may need to graciously talk with numerous stakeholders, including the school district's CTE coordinator, the district superintendent, and members of the school board, to build understanding of, and support for, launching a new program. You may also need to rally other companies that operate in your same industry space. Be aware that launching or substantially changing programs may require a re-allocation of district resources, so you may encounter some resistance.

How Do You Find CTE Partners?

While schools are easy enough to find, it may not always be clear which schools are hosting programs that are relevant to your interests. There are a couple of options available to you. First, contact the

central office for school districts in your area, ask for the Career and Technical Education office, and let them know what you're looking for: They'll have a handle on which programs are found at each campus and can put you in touch with programs as appropriate. You may also consider talking with others in your industry to see whether they have any existing relationships. You can talk with competitors (the labor pool is a shared concern, so there shouldn't be any competitive or proprietary concerns); a business or professional association, such as the chamber of commerce, a trade association, workforce development organization, or union; or with the postsecondary institutions who issue certifications in your field. One or more of these contacts are likely to have a relationship at the K-12 level, and can share their experiences with you so you have a better sense of what to expect and how to move forward.

Other Tips

A few other things to consider when working with CTE programs:

Remember that a partnership reflects your shared interests; you should both play a part in identifying the purpose of the relationship and how it will be structured. For a partnership to be strong and sustainable, everyone needs to realize some benefits for their contribution.

Know your needs, but don't be bound by them. You probably have a few key ways in which you'd like to work with schools, but if those models don't fit with your partner's interests and structure, stay flexible enough to find a model that works for everyone.

Find ways to measure the success of your program and your partnerships. You and your school partner both need to know that your contribution is having an impact, so it makes sense to document your outcomes.