



Roundhouse
Partnership Solutions

How to find employer partners

A guide to finding and
connecting with the
employers who can help
your CTE program succeed

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Employers play important roles within CTE programs, providing young people with invaluable work-based learning experiences and offering their expertise and support through advisory boards. Great partners are highly valued by program leaders but unfortunately can seem pretty scarce.

One of the biggest challenges in career and technical education (CTE) is finding employers to work with. Educators often feel like they don't know how to find and engage new partners, and that feeling is just as likely to be held by a new teacher as by someone who have been on the job for 20 years. They don't feel they have the kinds of connections they need to find new partners and, like the rest of us, find "cold calls" to be a very distasteful experience. As a result, partnership development continues getting pushed to the back burner, and year after year, these programs fail to see the kinds of results that a vibrant base of partners can provide.

There's good news, however: Most educators have a far larger network than they may realize. By tapping into the multiple groups they belong to, they can find connections to a large number of prospective partners. And they can further increase their reach by taking a few simple actions to make it easier for other new partners to find them.

I. Networking

Trying to build your roster of partners is very difficult when you try to do it on your own. Most people forget that they belong to several different communities, all of which can help you connect with employers that their members know. Consider reaching out to new contacts through the following groups:

Your fellow teachers and administrators

Every one of the teachers, administrators and support staff in your building, whether in CTE or not, has contacts with employers who might be interested in the work you're doing. It may be a professional contact, like another teacher's business partner who may know people in your field; it may be another teacher's wife or brother-in-law. But the first place to start would be to talk with your fellow educators about your desire to connect with employers and ask them to work through their contacts to see what kinds of introductions they can make.

For example, during staff meetings, take a minute or two to let everyone know that you could use their help. "Hi, I run a program for students who want to enter the healthcare field, and it can be hard to find opportunities for them to visit or work in a medical environment. Do any of you know people in the medical field who might be willing to come and talk to them?"

How to find employer partners

In addition to meetings, look for internal communication channels like group emails or bulletin boards. Your fellow educators should be particularly supportive of your efforts to help your students.

Vendors

You and your administrators deal with many vendors to supply your programs with needed materials. If you're buying the same kinds of materials that businesses in your field are buying, then it's likely your vendors are also selling to businesses in your industry and in your area. Tell your vendors what you're looking for and ask if they know of anyone they can introduce you to; this would give them a chance to help out two customers at once! Vendors themselves can also partner with you; they have expertise and access to materials, and look good to their customers by demonstrating their support for the workforce of the future.

Current partners, volunteers, and guest speakers

Even if you don't have all of the partners you want, you probably have at least a handful of active and committed businesspeople who have already bought into your program. Whether these are CEOs or individual businesspeople serving as mentors or volunteers, they all understand firsthand what you're doing and can act as recruiters and advocates. They can reach out to their peers across the industry or simply encourage others at their companies to work with you.



Advisory board members

Advisory boards serve as a window for your program into the community, and a window for the community into your program. One of your advisory board members' core functions is therefore to let others know what you're doing and ask them to join the effort.

There are two factors here: First, whether you've recruited the right people to your board — specifically, that at least a few of them have professional networks that you can access — and second, whether you've actually asked them to help you make those connections. Assuming these are both true, your board should be serving as a powerful source of introductions into the business community. In addition to asking for help at one of your advisory board meetings, you might also consider making the partner recruiting function a formal role for your board, making it clear that it's one of the job responsibilities of board members, or even setting up a committee devoted to partnership development.

Parents

Parents are an often-overlooked component of your network. But if you've had a chance to get to know them, you know that some may be well-connected in the community; in fact, some may even work at the companies on your target list! And of course they have a powerful motivation to see your program succeed. There could be several opportunities throughout the year to connect with them, such as parents' night events and site tours; you can also send information home with students.

Postsecondary partners

In many communities, particularly in rural areas, secondary-level CTE programs often have active relationships with educators at their local two-year and four-year colleges, including not only articulation agreements or dual credit arrangements but also sometimes sharing advisory boards. These educators have their own networks of businesses within your shared industry sector and will likely see the value in helping their partners connect with students at the secondary level.

Former students

Have you kept in touch with any students after they've graduated? You'll likely find that at least some of them have pursued a career in your field, possibly even working at some of your target companies. These students can become partners almost immediately, returning as guest speakers and as mentors. And who would be in a better position to represent the value of your program to a prospective partner, than a valued employee who you introduced to the industry? If you don't currently have relationships with former students, start working now to stay in touch with current students as they graduate from your program; it will be rewarding for you both. With tools like Facebook and LinkedIn it can be pretty easy to keep in touch with these students.

Personal interests

You have a life outside of school, whether it's involvement in your church, a civic group, charitable work, an athletic league, or all of the above. Each of these activities puts you in touch with people you would not have otherwise met, and who have personal and professional networks of their own. As you talk casually with others in your groups, you may find some new inroads into your field or learn about other companies that might be a good fit for your program.

II. Leveraging professional memberships

Up to this point we've looked at maximizing your own personal and professional networks to make industry contacts. But there are also organizations that exist in large part to help you make these kinds of connections, and educators who get involved in these groups can see significant benefits.

You've already looked to your chamber of commerce, economic development organizations, and other groups as a source of information in learning about the industry landscape. But information is just one of the values that these groups offer. Another lies in connecting their members to one another. Go back and look at that list of connector organizations again. Do they accept memberships? Do they have committees that would be relevant to you, such as an industry-specific committee, or one focused on education or workforce issues? Do they have general gatherings or special events that you can attend? Be sure to fully explore the opportunities they have available and get involved so you can meet your business counterparts in a professional forum.



How to find employer partners

Many business organizations have specific initiatives to support education in general, to connect their members to schools, and even to advance their stated workforce efforts. The Detroit Chamber of Commerce, for example, has organized bus tours that take business leaders to multiple schools in a day to tour the facilities and meet their teachers and administrators. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce actually serves as the district's partnership office. Others run innovative programs like matching up business leaders as mentors to new school administrators, organizing site tours for local students, or underwriting materials that provide career information to schools in their area. So look to these networking organizations not only for introductions to their members, but also as prospective partners in their own right.

Some tips for getting the most out of these organizations:

- ◇ It's not enough to pay your membership dues: You've got to be active in the organization, attending meetings and serving on committees. If you don't get involved, you'll get very little benefit.
- ◇ Be a constructive member of the organization. Members may have had bad experiences with the education system or have an unfounded bias against it. Rather



than act as an apologist, acknowledge their concerns and redirect the conversation in a more positive direction, looking at what can be done to address issues going forward rather than defending things you likely had no connection with.

- ◇ Ask one of the organization's staff members for help. Let them know that you're there to learn what issues the business community is facing, but also that you're interested in finding new partners to support your work. If the organization is interested in workforce issues, they'll likely be very interested in helping you.
- ◇ Ask if you can host a general meeting, or at least a committee meeting, at your school. Be prepared to give attendees a tour of your programs, highlighting your successes and the value your program provides to local workforce preparedness efforts.

III. Public engagement

So far we've looked at actions that you can personally take to reach out to employers. But there are things you can do to make it easy for them to find you as well. Consider the following:

Boost your online presence

If an employer went online to find local CTE programs, how easy would it be for them to find you? Start by looking at your school and district websites through the eyes of an employer. How hard is it to find information about your program? Is there a call for employer partners on the home page or at least on a page dedicated to your program? Is your contact information, including your phone number and email address, easily available?

Going beyond your own piece of online real estate, consider other places you might post information to raise awareness among local employers. Many schools and CTE programs have a presence on platforms like Facebook for example. Make sure your LinkedIn profile has information on your program and consider posting regularly on these and other sites to keep your name in circulation.

Look for publicity

With all the talk about workforce challenges in the news, the work you're doing to prepare young people for in-demand careers is naturally newsworthy. Contact reporters at your local TV, radio, news and online platforms to let them know what you're doing and if there are any timely "hooks" that would make a story particularly timely, such as a signing day, awards ceremony or competition victory.

How to find employer partners

Not only will the resulting media exposure help you get in front of area employers, you'll also be able to compile clippings to share with prospective partners for years to come.

Career fairs

Whether you look at career fairs for students or adults, these events bring a lot of employers interested in finding qualified workers to a single location for the day. Walk through and look for employers who hire in your occupational area, let them know about your program, and ask who you could talk to about engaging with your students.

Recognition programs

Recognizing your existing partners for their support is always a good idea: Partners who feel appreciated are more likely to continue working with you and your students. But did you know that recognizing your partners can also help you find new employers? Recognition ceremonies are newsworthy events: Invite the media and send a press release listing your partners. In addition, if you offer some sort of certificate or plaque, your partners can display these in their places of business, making your relationship visible to all their customers and other visitors.

Finding new partners is one of the most important things you can do for your program and your students and, as this paper shows, it doesn't have to be difficult. Leverage your existing networks and increase your visibility and you'll start to build a roster of partners very quickly.



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Roundhouse Partnership Solutions helps K-12 education, postsecondary education, and industry connect and build partnerships that create an outsized impact on student and workforce outcomes. Learn more about our mission and our work by visiting:

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