



# **Investing in the future: Measuring employer ROI in early talent development**

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### **About the author**

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### **About Roundhouse Partnership Solutions**

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. Our work includes consulting on program design and implementation, partnership development, coaching and training, and publishing supporting resources. Learn more by visiting [www.RoundhousePartnerships.com](http://www.RoundhousePartnerships.com).



# Table of Contents

<b>I. Early talent: Opening the black box.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Building the early talent pipeline model.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Phase 1: Creating career and industry awareness	
Phase 2: Engaging talent	
Phase 3: Securing and recruiting talent	
The impact of an active employer role in early talent development	
<b>III. Phase 1: Creating career and industry awareness .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Career and industry awareness activities	
Measurement and value	
<b>IV. Phase 2: Engaging talent .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Talent engagement activities	
Measurement and value	
<b>V. Phase 3: Securing and recruiting talent.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Activities to secure and recruit talent	
Measurement and value	
<b>VI. Other considerations when factoring ROI .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Measurement and value	
<b>VII. Putting it all together.....</b>	<b>19</b>

# Investing in the future: Measuring employer ROI in early talent development

In today's rapidly evolving job market, the traditional approach to workforce development is no longer sufficient. Employers are facing a unique set of challenges: the retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, declining birth rates, and a mismatch between the skills young people are acquiring and the jobs that need filling. The future of our workforce depends on how effectively we can connect with young people during their formative years, guiding them towards careers that not only fulfill them personally but also meet the industry's demand for skilled talent.

This paper addresses these issues head-on by proposing a proactive strategy for employers to engage with the next generation. It offers practical methods for interacting with students from middle school through to their entry into the workforce, how to measure the impact of these efforts, and why this approach is not just beneficial but essential for the longevity and success of your organization. The strategies outlined here will help you understand how to make your company a beacon for future talent, ensuring you are not just reacting to workforce shortages but actively shaping a future where your business thrives.

## I. Early talent: Opening the black box

After World War II and for decades beyond, America's labor pool was the envy of the world due to a combination of factors. We had invested in education and skills for returning veterans with the GI Bill, brought the huge Baby Boomer generation into the world, and invested in their science and math education with the National Defense Education Act of 1958.

That's not even the entire story. Not only did we invest in skills and grow the population, we also removed some of the barriers preventing so many from participating in the labor force. The Equal Pay Act (1963), Civil Rights Act (1964), Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967), and Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), along with parallel legislation that opened up opportunities for equity within the education system, all worked together to unlock the doors for everyone to reach their potential. And for a long time, employers reaped the benefits, tapping into the largest and best-skilled labor pool in history.

But nothing lasts forever.

Because the labor pool was so deep we had the luxury of ignoring it, failing to respond to emerging trends that would alter a continued flow of talent. We started telling young people that everyone needed a four-year degree, steering many away from high-wage, high-demand middle-skills professions. We knew the Baby Boomers wouldn't be here forever but we failed to plan for their inevitable retirements. We failed to acknowledge the declining US birth rates, ensuring an ongoing throttle on the skilled labor required for our economy.

We were able to mask these issues for a while with offshoring, skilled and unskilled immigration, and automation. But the pipeline for middle-skills jobs that have to be done domestically has been in crisis mode for a while, and many more positions in other categories are beginning to feel the pressure as overall skill requirements increase and older workers move towards retirement.

So what can we do to address this chronic challenge? There's one rock left to be overturned: Intentionally working with young people to help them identify their opportunities and make informed decisions as to the kinds of careers in which they can excel (and which often align with the roles employers most need to fill).

Currently, our workforce development model largely treats the education system as a black box: People don't exist in the eyes of the workforce system until they complete their education and begin looking for work. But when it comes to addressing our systemic workforce challenges, that's too late. This is the window in which young people are exploring their options and making career decisions, and too many are doing so without an understanding of the kinds of careers that could lead to a bright and fulfilling future, or without the support to pursue them.

There are so many young people with the aptitude to naturally excel in critical fields but who, due to a lack of information or misinformation, are not pursuing these careers. As a result, employers are left to fight over the few who have self-selected into critical-need fields, when they could instead be helping a much larger group of young people into areas that would represent an ideal match for both.

The current workforce system's focus on retraining and job placement can only take us so far. To make a real impact on our pressing employment challenges, we have to open the black box of the education system and start actively engaging young people as they explore their options and make career choices. Their future – and the future of our workforce – depends on it.

## **II. Building the early talent pipeline model**

The days of waiting around for the education system to produce prepared workers are long gone: There are not enough young people entering the pipeline to replace the experienced workers leaving high-demand (particularly middle-skilled) positions. And the closer you sit to the end of the pipeline, the less control you have over the quality or quantity of talent available to your organization.

The reality is that young people are starting to think about their career options as early as middle school and many are taking concrete steps to pursue a field while they're in high school. Employers who want to affect their future talent pools need to engage at these early stages if they want to expand the flow of qualified talent into needed areas.

There are three overlapping phases of early talent development:

### **Phase 1: Creating career and industry awareness**

As students move through middle school into high school they start to think about their career options, laying the groundwork for their next steps. But this represents a challenge for employers.

Students can only consider those careers that they're able to see, which is why so many young people want to be teachers or doctors or policemen (or rappers, or social media influencers, or pro basketball players...). In some cases, they may know of a profession but have misconceptions, like advanced manufacturing; in others they may not be aware of a profession that would be a great fit, but it doesn't appear in the media and where they don't have any family members involved. So young people's sense of their career options is partial at best and may be distorted.

While more middle schools are hosting career exploration classes, these are still mostly academic in nature, such as reading and watching videos, if industry isn't playing an active role. If your community has industries that need talent, particularly if it involves roles that may be misunderstood or of low visibility, engaging with young people and sharing those options with classroom visits, site tours, career fairs, and other outreach can make a major difference in the size of your ultimate labor pool.

## Phase 2: Engaging talent

Absent industry support and guidance, most students moving into high school are fairly directionless: A few may have that inner drive from a sense of who they want to be, and some may benefit from guidance at home or the school. But the majority are left to figure out a path on their own.

Students who were able to explore career options in middle school have a leg up here: If they found a profession they might want to pursue they can start to do some intentional things like look for career



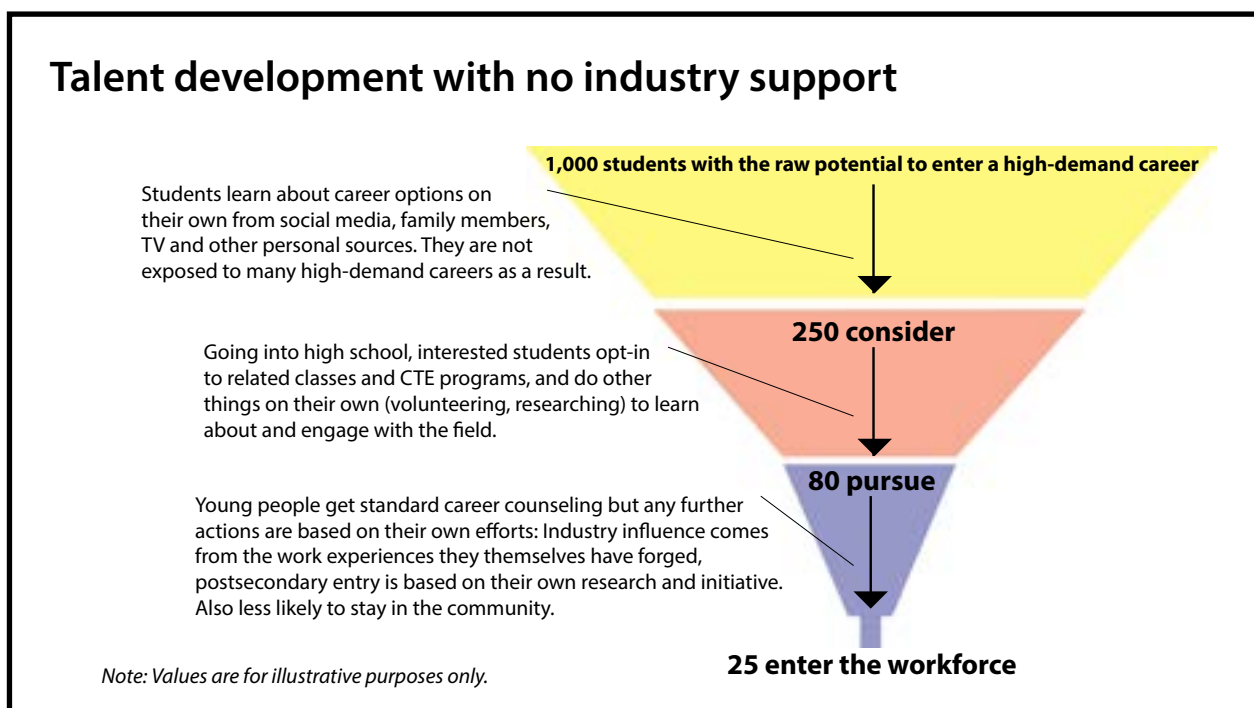
and technical education classes (assuming they're offered by the school or district), take advanced general academic classes that might relate to the career, or self-identify relevant opportunities like pursuing industry interviews or part-time jobs.

But in this phase, direct engagement with industry is invaluable in helping students continue to explore, and start to prepare for, a career. Industry representatives can nurture the interests students found in the previous phase, helping them learn more about a field, connect with and learn from people who do that work, and talk with them about what they need to do in order to prepare for entry into that role. Common activities include site visits, job shadows, mock interviews, mentoring, and work-based experiences like part-time or seasonal work or internships. It often also includes encouragement to enter a CTE program (which industry then supports) and offering connections to postsecondary programs that will further their education and preparation.

### Phase 3: Securing and recruiting talent

Without employer support, even those students who have found a promising career path get little support in finding their way: Career counseling is a sparse resource in schools so they often need to do their own work to identify industry expectations and find a path (usually but not always involving postsecondary participation) to that role. They are further hamstrung by a lack of contacts within the field.

With employer support, on the other hand, students are regularly developing a network of contacts and pursuing concrete steps toward employment. As a result, all of the intentional work in this and prior stages will result in a cost-effective solution to employer hiring needs that will finally address challenges that have previously been considered to be unsolvable.



## The impact of an active employer role in early talent development

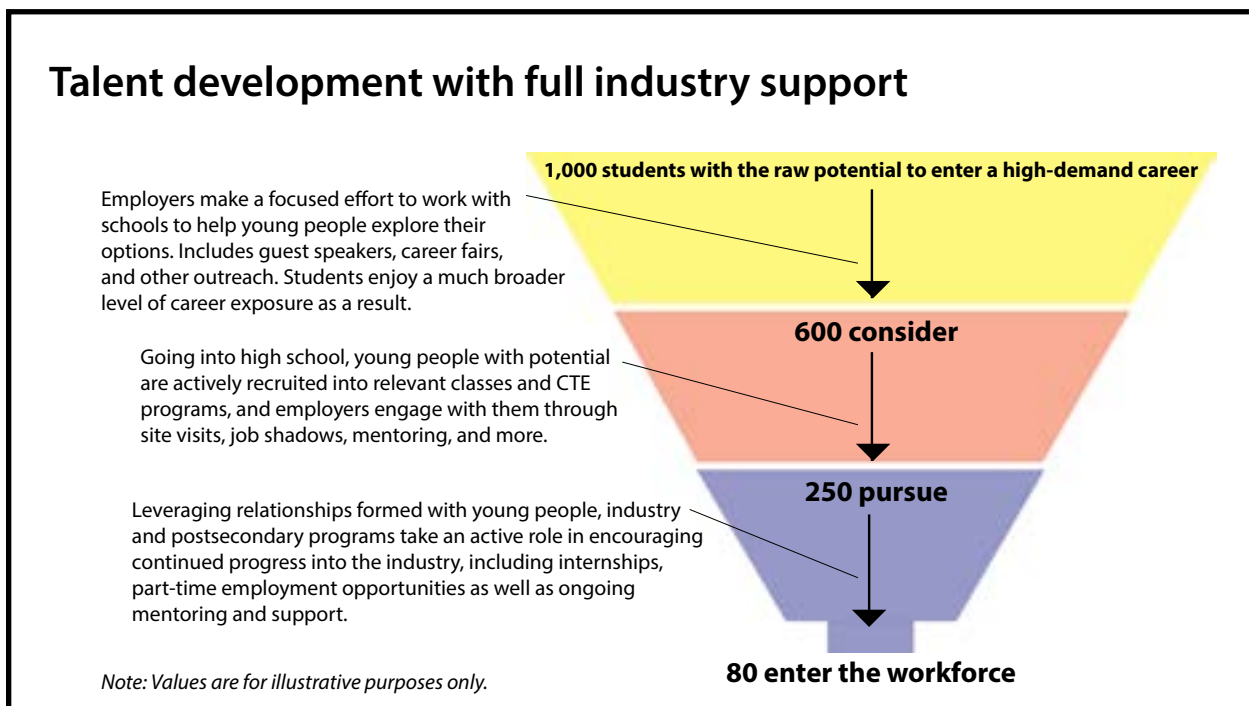
The two funnels on this page and the one prior show the transformative potential of employers engaging with young people throughout the talent development process. (Numbers are included for illustrative purposes only.)

In the first example, students are largely left on their own to find and pursue a pathway: There is limited support at most schools (though this is improving with an increase in career exploration classes) and often at home, so guidance is sparse and young people need to figure out their direction for themselves. As a result, students who might otherwise excel in a high-demand field never get the guidance and support they need, resulting in a low number of young people pursuing that career.

In the second example, students receive strong support from employers throughout the career development process, often through investments that require a minimal financial commitment (the biggest investment is staff time). Connections to the world of work are real and direct, not academic, so students can experience it firsthand through direct conversations and experiences with professionals already in the field. They are engaged and encouraged on a regular basis, and offered guidance and support through each step of the career selection and preparation process. As a result, far more students become aware of and start to pursue some of the highest-demand careers in the market.

Note that in addition to significantly increasing the number of young people entering a field, the employers that engage in the process can ensure that they have first pick of the most capable entrants, preparing and hiring them before they ever enter the public labor pool.

In the sections that follow we will explore each of these phases, including how employers can engage promising talent, how employers can measure impact, and the costs and returns (ROI) of their efforts.





# III. Phase 1: Creating career and industry awareness

Young people are ready to start exploring their career futures in middle school and continue for years. But with our current workforce development system we ignore that critical phase, preferring to wait until they're just about to enter the workforce before we start to engage. That strategy prevents you from introducing them to the high-demand careers they may be ideal for simply because they weren't aware or because they had misconceptions. Engaging at this stage can be transformative for your workforce development efforts.

This represents a real challenge for employers since investments made here will not pay dividends for at least five years or more. But with the need to replace the skilled labor moving into retirement, there is no other choice but to rethink your involvement here if you want to truly reshape your future workforce. Fortunately the investments you make here are largely inexpensive, and you can share the cost with other employers if you use a coalition-based approach. Following are some conventional models for creating career and industry awareness along with some strategies for tracking it and measuring your return.

## Career and industry awareness activities

### Support for school programs

Schools are putting more resources into career awareness and exploration for middle schools, fueled by changes added to the Perkins Act in 2018, which provides federal funding and guidance for CTE programs. As schools add and expand career exploration courses they need industry support, including both an industry presence in the form of guest speakers and site tours as well as sponsorships of career exploration tools offering aptitude and interest assessments. Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) like Future Farmers of America (FFA) and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) also engage middle school students and welcome an industry presence in their work.

### Publishing career information

Several trade and industry associations invest in career exploration websites and other resources, such as the direct-to-student information and classroom educator support for the construction trades offered by Build Your Future ([byf.org](http://byf.org)), a campaign from the National Center for Construction Education and Research. Many trades and industries have similar youth outreach strategies. Driving career awareness inside and outside the classroom is an ideal role for these coalitions, many of whom also provide resources that individual employers can share through their local outreach efforts.

### Guest speakers

Guest speaking opportunities come in all shapes and sizes, such as talking with students in a career exploration class, participating in a panel discussion during a general assembly, or supporting a CTSO with career information relevant to their interests. One of the most powerful guest speaking engagements is to help CTE program leaders visit middle schools to recruit for their programs,

helping young people see the excitement and opportunity available through the program. These opportunities also entail no cost beyond an employer's time and can be coordinated through a chamber's speakers bureau or other mechanism.

### **Career fairs**

Career fairs are a great way to help young people explore lots of local businesses and the kinds of career opportunities they offer. While these are often focused on high school and college students, younger students benefit from this kind of exposure as well. These are usually set up by a school, school district, or employer coalition so the burden on employers is low, though there may be a fee to participate. Parties should explore ways to increase the impact, such as guiding students to particular tables based on interests or aptitudes or by offering workshops on key career development topics.

### **Open houses/site visits**

If you're one of the larger employers in the community, such as a hospital or major manufacturing facility, it could be worthwhile to offer one or more open houses to introduce parents and their students to your operation and the kinds of occupations available there. Consider collecting contact information to help start a conversation or encourage local schools to participate so they can direct students to concrete next steps (like a CTE program) to help them explore the fields that interest them.

### **Teacher training**

Few employers think about reaching out to teachers, particularly outside of CTE. But providing professional development, through training or a summer externship, is a great way to help them



connect their academic subjects to real-world careers and industries. Many of these programs will pair a teacher with an industry professional after their on-site experience to help prepare lesson plans and connect with students, making this approach a great way to reach large numbers of students with relevant career information year after year.

## Measurement and value

One of the most important areas in which you can partner with schools is capturing and tracking data. As you look for an impact on the early talent pipeline much of that impact will be seen within schools, and it will be seen in data not generally available to the public, like enrollment numbers for CTE programs. A data partnership is a game-changer in tracking your impact on career awareness.

### **Taking ownership of the pipeline: Working with schools**

There's a natural tendency among employers to think that it is the job of our public education system to prepare the workforce. It's not. Schools are not your vendors, and if they fail to meet your expectations they will not suffer in any way. If you're relying on schools to get your future workers ready, you are going to be disappointed.

This is in no way a slight on our education systems. We pay for schools through our taxes, and because 99% of school funding comes from the government, our elected representatives have the responsibility on our behalf to determine how their success is measured.

If you review the graduation standards for your state, you'll see that the focus is on a broad-based core literacy in reading, math, and science, measured by testing in core curriculum classes. With some exceptions, primarily within career and technical education electives, workforce preparedness is completely missing from the outcomes by which schools are being judged.

That doesn't mean that schools are not your allies; it also doesn't mean that you shouldn't take every opportunity to work with them. Schools can be wonderful partners, and even if your goals aren't identical, they overlap quite a bit (especially

within CTE) and you can help each other – and students – a tremendous amount.

What it does mean, however, is that you cannot just leave workforce preparedness to the schools. And if you do work with schools, you cannot defer your role by saying "You guys are the education experts, just tell me what you need." They are the education experts of course; but you are the workforce expert, and what you need and what they need may not be the same.

So go into these discussions as an equal partner, and limit your focus to those areas where you can both define outcomes you care about. Build a clear picture of what a qualified entry-level candidate should look like and help young people move towards that ideal.

And while schools are an important partner in this work, they are not your only one. There are workforce boards serving young people with funds from WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act). There are nonprofits and after-school groups that work with youth. You can partner with your chamber of commerce and state and national trade and industry associations. And you can reach out directly through your own employees, public promotions and other means.

While your work will be better with school-sourced data, you can still set up a measurement and ROI model without it. Remember that this is a long-term proposition: You may not see changes in hiring conditions for a few years but you can certainly set the stage to track coming market changes as that time approaches. For example, two years into a campaign will not show a flood of new entry-level applicants entering the market, but you would be able to see a dramatic increase in the number of students taking CTE courses and participating in work-based learning activities.

For tracking at the awareness phase, rely on your coalition partners as much as possible: It makes sense to have a representative group tracking activities for all employers across your market rather than several individual businesses all trying to do it for themselves. It will save time and effort and allow you to see market-wide changes more easily. Because you're operating at an early stage there shouldn't be any concerns about propriety data, this is foundational work that you'll all be able to build on in the future.

Some measures to help you gauge the impact of awareness-building:

### **Activity numbers**

While it cannot point to outcomes, the raw number of students reached with awareness-based activities is a helpful measure to track the intensity of your efforts over time. Track activity by students reached: Look at "500 students participated in guest speaking sessions" as opposed to "Led 15 guest speaking sessions." The focus should be on youth impact, not your effort. In addition, the more information you can get on student characteristics, such as "500 8<sup>th</sup> grade students" versus "500 12<sup>th</sup> grade students," the better for your pipeline planning.

### **Changes in career and technical education enrollment**

You'll need some help from your education counterparts, but tracking the number of CTE programs in your community, and year-over-year changes in enrollment, is an incredibly useful early indicator of future changes in the workforce. If you see enrollment in a healthcare program double in three years, for example, you'll know that your early engagement efforts are working, and you can expect – assuming you continue to engage through the rest of the pipe – to see many more qualified entry-level workers to enter the market in a few years.

### **Changes in student perception**

One of the most valuable data sets – and often most difficult to get – is information on student's career interests, especially if that can be tracked over time. Watching students go from having little to no sense of their options to seeing them start to identify preferences and building a plan is invaluable at the early stages. This information may be obtainable by partnering on student surveys during career exploration classes, leveraging the software tools they may be using, or working outside the system with independent surveys of teens.

### **Retention rate**

Retention rate is primarily used as an economic development measure, tracking the percentage of residents that remain in a specific area over a given period. This is historically a significant concern when thinking about the youth population: People who fail to see opportunities in their communities will leave after high school, going to college or not, and never come back. An increase in the retention

rate over time would indicate that awareness efforts to help young people see all the opportunities within their communities would be a significant positive measure.

### **Applicants per opening**

Applicants per opening, a workforce development measure, indicates how “deep” the local labor pool is for particular kinds of positions. Fully engaging youth and helping them find their way to high-demand jobs will ultimately cause local talent numbers to grow, giving employers greater choice and easing some workforce shortages. While it will take time for early talent efforts to affect this number it should be tracked from the very beginning.

## **IV. Phase 2: Engaging talent**

The bridge between forging initial interest and recruiting talent involves nurturing that talent, engaging and guiding young people as they learn and experience more and continue to invest more in the idea of pursuing a particular career. Left on their own, young people can find the internal drive to progress towards a desired occupation, but the regular support of employers makes the process so much easier, increasing retention and helping better prepare young people for their futures.

The actions below are just a sampling of the many ways in which employers can support the ongoing development of early talent as they move from interest to preparation. While many of these actions require more of a direct role, you can still find support from business coalitions that offer expertise, logistical support and coordination with others to ensure the best and most qualified use of resources.

But in this phase, direct engagement with industry is invaluable in helping students continue to explore, and start to prepare for, a career. Industry representatives can nurture the interests students found in the previous phase, helping them learn more about a field, connect with and learn from people who do that work, and talk with them about what they need to do in order to prepare for entry into that role. Common activities include site visits, job shadows, mock interviews, mentoring, and work-based experiences like part-time or seasonal work or internships. It often also includes encouragement to enter a CTE program (which industry then supports) and offering connections to postsecondary programs that will further their education and preparation.

### **Talent engagement activities**

#### **Job shadows**

Job shadows involve a young person joining an industry professional as they go through their day; a well-planned experience can provide valuable insight as to an employee’s work environment, the tasks they are assigned and the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their field, and should include opportunities to talk with the employee to get their perspective firsthand on their thoughts on the job. It is a fairly low commitment, involving a day or even just a few hours, but offers invaluable insights into the role a student wants to pursue.

## **Mentoring**

Mentoring CTE students can take different forms, but at its core it involves industry professionals sharing their expertise and guiding students as they progress towards a career. This can involve career mentoring, in which people working within an industry or profession help guide students on their career pathway. Or it can involve project mentoring, in which industry professionals work with students on school-sponsored projects, ranging from a CTE construction class building and selling a house to a team competing in a project such as a FIRST robotics competition. In any case you have people with experience in a field mentoring young people to guide them on their progression within a field.

## **Interview preparation**

This is another concrete step employers can take to help young people enter high-demand fields whether they are pursuing an internship, part-time employment, or a full-time role. Interview preparation can include resume reviews, networking support, and mock interviews, all of which will help young people more easily move into the workforce.

## **CTSO engagement**

Career and technical student organizations, or CTSOs, offer students numerous opportunities to engage in their field of choice, from assuming leadership roles within a local chapter to participating in state or national conferences, including competitions. Employers can play an advisory and support role with these local chapters, making sure students have an opportunity to travel to events and helping them prepare for competitions. Visit [ctsos.org](https://www.ctsos.org) to learn more and connect with CTSOs.



### **School-based enterprises**

School-based enterprises provide a tremendous opportunity for learning and skills development. Consider students running a catering operation, offering tech support services, or managing a farm offering fresh herbs to local restaurants. In each of these cases, students not only gain skills in their core areas of interest but also get a sense of entrepreneurship and the business skills involved. But they gain particular benefit by working with an industry partner who can guide their management of the operation.

### **School or program support**

While not a student-facing activity, supporting CTE programs is important if you want your future employees to have access to relevant programming and ensure they have a high-quality experience. Employers can work with school and district CTE leaders to create new industry-relevant programs where they can demonstrate demand and they can serve on advisory boards to make sure that curriculum is relevant to industry needs and that programs have the equipment, resources, and work-based learning opportunities that students need to thrive. Finally, in places that might have a shortage of qualified teachers in industry-specific subject areas, employers can step up and provide instructors to ensure that all students have access to the field.

## **Measurement and value**

Because you're helping young people move from awareness to engagement, the metrics introduced in the Awareness phase will also be impacted by the work done here, including activity numbers, changes in student perception, retention rate and applicants per opening. Some additional areas to track include:

### **CTE completer rates**

A CTE completer is someone who completes a CTE program of study in a particular career area, known within education as career clusters; requirements vary by state and pathway, but it generally includes passing from two to four classes in a concentration. Completion rates also vary: In California for example the completion rate is close to 20%. Increasing the number of students completing a program of study increases graduation rates and serves as a strong signal for a future in the field.

### **Student achievements**

As students become more active in their chosen future career fields they will start to build a list of accomplishments that can be used as a benchmark for their progression in the field. For example, students participating in a CTSO can note their membership, any leadership positions they may hold, any conferences or competitions they attend and any competition awards they earn. Students may achieve things while in a CTE class like building a trophy case or in a student-run enterprise like catering a large school event. All of these are important steps and reinforce their intention to enter their field of choice.

### **Graduation plans**

Like the "Changes in student perceptions" measurement model in the previous phase, information on graduation plans is difficult to get: There is no coordinated state or national effort to get this



information from high school students and few schools and districts are conducting surveys like this. Work with your school and district contents to fund and analyze this data if possible; it can help both of you develop a sense of the impact of your efforts.

## V. Phase 3: Securing and recruiting talent

Once young people move from exploring a career pathway to actively pursuing, employers have an opportunity to engage with them on preparatory activities like earning certifications and participating in real-world work opportunities. This is where employers' investment in early talent pays off: Here they are able to actively guide young people to the kinds of things that will qualify them for a role with their firms and benefit from an opportunity to evaluate them in a low-risk environment. It is also where their measurement efforts align more directly with conventional workforce development metrics, allowing them to clearly see their return on investment in familiar terms.

### Activities to secure and recruit talent

#### **Certification attainment**

Certifications are critical for young people who want to demonstrate their proficiency to prospective employers, and many can be earned while still in school – in fact if a CTE program is aligned to industry standards, earning a credential may be one of the objectives of one or more classes.



Employers can help in this process by helping students prepare for their certification assessment, serving as a proctor during the exam process, or underwriting the cost of taking the assessment.

### **Postsecondary recruitment**

Most occupations require some kind of postsecondary education, whether that's a certification program or a two- or four-year degree. Helping young talent identify and commit to a postsecondary path is an excellent step in preparing them for specific roles, and employers can take a strong hand in helping them explore their options and successfully apply. This is especially powerful if the employer already has relationships at the postsecondary level and can make connections on that basis.

### **Internships**

Typically lasting from a semester to a full school year, internships are a fantastic way to provide students with a guided first-hand experience in a real-world setting. Note that, unlike part-time employment, an internship has oversight from an educator and is intended to achieve some educational objectives in addition to work objectives. Internships may be paid or unpaid and are an excellent way for an employer to evaluate and build a relationship with a prospective future employee. In fact, a 2022 poll by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 80% of employers in their survey considered internships to provide the highest ROI in securing entry level hires.

### **Part-time employment**

Unlike an internship, a school typically has no involvement in a seasonal or part-time job, and there are no educational objectives involved. These paid experiences may give a student a hands-on role in a desired career area or they may simply be lower-level work but within a field of interest, such as a student being a busboy in a restaurant when they have aspirations of being a chef or manager. Part-time employment is still a valuable experience that helps a young person prepare for their future.

### **Apprenticeships**

While apprenticeships can be designed for careers in a multitude of fields, they are especially prevalent in industries like construction that rely on middle-skilled professionals who require extensive training. They can be cost-effective in securing highly desired talent and there are now supports in place to make them easier to set up and manage, including program designs available from some trade associations and management support from local workforce organizations.

## **Measurement and value**

### **Matriculation and graduation rates**

If you're helping shepherd someone from the K-12 environment into a career pathway, most likely they will need to participate in postsecondary education at some level. Track the rates at which these young people enter and graduate from their postsecondary programs to make sure they're continuing to move along the path to employment.

### **Cost per hire**

Cost per hire is an important recruiting metric that measures the average expenditure incurred in acquiring new talent. Focusing on this early talent development model, the financial costs will be

minimal but the manpower costs will be higher than most other hiring strategies. Still, one would expect the overall cost to be lower than other sources.

### **Applicants per opening**

One of the promises of this approach is that it will bring a larger number of young people into the targeted career pathways, reducing or eliminating the issue of not being able to fill needed roles, and actually providing them with greater choice due to the expanded numbers of qualified people. Applicants per job opening or applicants per hire will help validate that assumption.

### **Sourcing channel effectiveness**

Sourcing channel effectiveness measures how much each of your sources of candidates, such as job boards, social media or employee referrals are contributing to your pool of candidates. If you get involved in the kind of early talent outreach described here you should find that it eventually becomes one of your major sources of entry-level talent.

### **Training cost per employee**

New employees usually require some kind of training before they can make a full contribution; examples include learning company policies or receiving technical training on certain equipment or processes. If you have previously engaged early talent in your organization through internships, part-time work or apprenticeships, you should expect that their experience with your organization cuts down their training requirements significantly.

## **The role of business coalitions**

Investing in early talent development can seem daunting, particularly for smaller organizations with limited resources. But business coalitions can play a critical role in supporting this work, particularly in earlier-stage activities like building career and industry awareness.

Business coalitions exist because there are many functions, such as legislative advocacy, that are very difficult (and expensive) for individual employers to take on, but which become much more feasible, affordable, and effective when businesses join together and work as a unified voice. Workforce development is one of these functions, and it's one that many chambers of commerce and trade and industry associations are already tackling.

Many chambers of commerce already play some kind of role in education. That can include policy

and legislative advocacy from an education and workforce development committee; hosting of certain kinds of awareness activities like career fairs; managing a guest speaking bureau; or even taking a lead on recruiting employers to support work-based learning. You'll find additional support through your state and national trade and industry associations including gathering and publishing relevant career information, sponsoring awareness campaigns, and providing expertise and support to members interested in engaging with schools themselves.

Look into and take advantage of all of these resources: You'll lower your individual investment by leveraging the work done elsewhere, and collaborating with others will allow you to further strengthen your future workforce pipeline and to do so in a more effective way.

### **Time to productivity**

Time to productivity measures how long it takes to become fully productive from the date you're hired. No one hits the ground running at total proficiency in their first week, but some get up to speed more quickly than others. Even though they may be coming into their first full-time job, young people who have experience with your organization through an internship or other engagement should have a much lower time to productivity than others.

## **VI. Other considerations when factoring ROI**

Employers interested in getting a complete sense of the return on their investment should look beyond the direct effects on the workforce pipeline and consider the impact their work with students has on their current staff. Because not only are you working in your organization's self-interest on workforce issues, you're also providing employees with opportunities to volunteer and lead, which can improve the behavior of both current and prospective employees.

While it may take years to guide young people into the workforce, the benefits to your current talent pool is felt immediately. These benefits include:

- ◇ **Increased employee retention and morale.** Employees who have an opportunity to volunteer are more engaged in their work and stay with their organizations longer. When companies invested in corporate responsibility and company culture, their turnover reduced 50%, employee productivity increased by up to 13%, and engagement increased by up to 7.5% [according to Project ROI](#).



- ◇ **Skill development.** Giving employees an opportunity to work with schools can lead to interpersonal, managerial, and leadership development opportunities, especially from roles such as advocacy and advisory board service. [Deloitte](#) notes that 92% of human resource executives agree that contributing to a nonprofit can improve an employee's leadership skills.
- ◇ **Current-day recruiting.** Current workers, particularly younger ones, prefer to go to work for companies involved in their communities, and are even willing to sacrifice in order to do so. [Deloitte discovered in a survey](#) that 78 percent of employees would choose to work for an ethical and reputable company rather than receive a higher salary. And according to the [Millennial Impact Report](#), professionals between the ages of 25 and 30 would also be more likely to take a job if corporate volunteerism is discussed in the interview.

Depending on how you position your campaign, you may find additional benefits with other stakeholder groups. If you present it as a campaign to support schools for example, there are benefits that have been proven within a corporate social responsibility context that could apply here as well: Customers may rate your brand more highly and become less price sensitive; the media may report on you more favorably; regulators may take a less restrictive view of your operation. These benefits are outside the scope of this paper since it does not assume a CSR focus but they can be explored if it works as part of your strategy.

## Measurement and value

### Employee engagement

Employee engagement measures an employee's commitment to their work and achieving company goals and is typically measured by regular, often annual, employee surveys. While employee anonymity is important, you can ask questions that will allow you to isolate the responses of those who volunteer and compare their answers to the rest of the organization to see whether morale is affected and what other behaviors may be affected.

### Turnover rate

It can be difficult to isolate the reason for employee turnover to any one issue. But if one group of employees is involved in working with young people on behalf of the organization and you see significantly lower turnover numbers, that could be an indication that volunteering is influencing peoples' decision to stay with the organization.

## VII. Putting it all together

As this paper has outlined, it is possible to not only set up an intentional early talent pipeline model to identify and nurture the next generation into in-demand careers, but to also put tracking mechanisms into place to demonstrate impact and value at each phase of the process. But it should also be clear that this paper represents a proposal for a new model: It is not a case study and it does not offer historical evidence because this work is not yet being done on a widespread basis. The next steps involve refining and proving the model, which is something everyone in the field can contribute to.

A few final thoughts for those in industry (employers or chambers) who wish to pursue this strategy:

### **Build a big tent**

Early talent development is a community-wide challenge and ideally merits a community-wide response, even for larger employers who have ample resources to invest. Coordinate with your chamber and other major employers. Reach out to your K-12 and postsecondary partners. Engage your local workforce board. Include any other partners who could support your work, build a coalition and collaborate where you have shared objectives.

### **Create a data collection plan**

Building a plan to track and evaluate data on early talent development is challenging: Much of the data you could use may not currently be available, and the data that is available may not be accessible to you. Build a plan that addresses the following:

- ◇ An early talent development strategy needs data from education partners such as the number of students in CTE programs. But most of this data isn't publicly available. How do you plan to get it, or how will you operate without it?
- ◇ While your financial investment will be low, the time you and your employees put into working with young people will represent a material investment. How will you track employee volunteer hours and measure the value of that investment?
- ◇ How will you track young people as they move from middle school to high school to college? Longitudinal data can be difficult to manage: Even the school systems themselves find it to be challenging, though there are some resources available like the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) that can at least identify postsecondary paths.

### **Look for, and celebrate, early wins**

Putting a long-term strategy into place can be risky: It can take so long to produce outcomes from a multi-year engagement that people lose interest and it all falls apart. Counter this by intentionally building elements that can show short-term results to retain momentum. Examples include starting a postsecondary internship program that can result in hires within the first year, or quickly showing a growth in CTE enrollment tied to your career awareness work.

### **Innovate**

For most of us, early talent development is a new world: While there is some strong infrastructure available to build on, like the success of career and technical education programs, much of this strategy is new. Revisit your assumptions, methods, and data methodology on a regular basis with your partners to make sure that things are progressing as you intended and to see if there are new or different ways you can work to boost your successes.



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