



Expert Dialog

Employer Engagement Strategies

Introduction

This Expert Dialog tackles the topic of engaging employers in apprenticeships. Scaling Apprenticeship coaches have been engaging in frequent discussions with grantees on the challenges and successes of communicating, engaging, and working with employers to adopt and expand apprenticeships – both registered and unregistered – with special attention to working in the COVID-affected economy. This dialog leverages the expertise of people who have been longtime proponents of apprenticeships, and who have been in the trenches using apprenticeships as a tool to help shore up employer workforce. TransAm Apprenticeship Services, Paul Champion, and Dina Iggoe, Associate Director of Business Development at NIMS, the National Institute of Metal Working Skills. Interviews have been edited for clarity and brevity.

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Meet the Experts

Chris Spence

Chris Spence provides technical assistance (TA) and program evaluation on workforce and work-and-learn programs in over 50 community colleges. His experience includes implementation of sector strategies in various industries, including H-1B industries. He provided TA for a regional initiative seeking to connect low-income job seekers to jobs using WorkKeys scores. Chris has served 100+ public agencies, colleges and schools, philanthropies, and not-for-profit organizations in 21 states and D.C.

Paul Champion

Paul has worked in apprenticeships for the past 30 years. Paul is an advocate for the global "Apprenticeship and Skills Revolution." He is totally focused on supporting employers, workforce agencies, States and the Federal Government Develop, and implementing and delivering World Class Registered Apprenticeships across America. Paul has advised several multi-national corporations and overseas governments on global workforce development issues, and written publications and blogs. Outside of being CEO of TranZed Apprenticeships, he is Executive Director of Apprenticeships at Woz Enterprises and is a subject matter expert for various consulting organizations.

Dina Iggoe

Dina Iggoe is the Associate Director of Business Development for [NIMS](#). Dina is also deeply involved in the development and execution of four large-scale NIMS' DOL Scaling Apprenticeship Grants. She has worked in the field of manufacturing and logistics credentialing for several years and has extensive grant writing and project management experience. She provides apprenticeship, credentialing, structured job training and employer engagement TA to large and small businesses and other stakeholders.

DEFINING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

What do we mean by employer engagement?

Paul Champion (PC): For me, it is all in the word “engagement.” A lot of times you hear people say “how do we sell apprenticeships?” Employer engagement is all about doing more listening than talking, especially in this day and age. Things have changed, what defines an apprenticeship that an employer will engage with is different now than it was even three months ago. Engagement is all about relationships rather than just going to an employer and saying “I see you have some vacancies, can an apprenticeship fill this?”

Employer Engagement Methodology:

1. Listen to employers' needs
2. Identify employers with pain points that match the apprenticeship solution
3. Educate Employers on Apprenticeship
4. Build employer anticipation (benefits)
5. Build employer confidence
6. Deliver apprenticeship benefits promised

There is no engagement without relationship. Engagement is not just walking in and saying “apprenticeships are great, your return on investment is going to be \$1.50 for every \$1 you put in.” Instead, it’s all about building a relationship around what the employer needs, and then building an apprenticeship solution around those pain points.

Dina Igoe (DI): We completely agree that it is a relationship. One must understand that employer engagement doesn’t just happen. All the stakeholders have to be on board, have to be involved, and have to have the same end goal in mind. Employer engagement happens when all of those things are in place. For that to happen, it’s all about educating employers and partner stakeholders, and then also understanding their pain points.

GETTING STARTED

How do you organize and implement the work of employer engagement around apprenticeships?

DI: A huge part of it is a pre-evaluation. A company, or a division of a company, has to self-evaluate for certain outcomes. Having a pre-evaluation survey or some kind of measuring tool for training providers like ourselves to use with companies is so important. You want to help them self-evaluate before you can go on and help and assist. To evaluate a program, you need to consider a number of things. First, the company needs to identify inputs and outputs of existing training programs. After they have done that, they need to identify current training behaviors and principles and then figure out what program principles they would like to practice that they are not yet practicing. They can then move to identifying training projections. After all this is done, they can begin building a custom apprenticeship program that meets the business needs of the company.

Employer Engagement Example:

Raytheon missile systems used pre-evaluation as a part of their apprenticeship program development process. Because they used pre-evaluation, their apprenticeship TA provider had details concerning the company’s specific outcome desire, and the roles they needed to fill. Part of the process included a SWOT analysis, looking at internal and external impacts on the company. All the information was used to design a flexible custom industry recognized apprenticeship program for them. This process ultimately helped the program meet the needs of the employers.

How do you go about finding employers to engage, around apprenticeships specifically?

PC: We have many ways. We constantly look for businesses in the area where we work, and the occupations that they have. Someone might be announcing that they are opening up a business in a particular state where we work, so we contact them. We say, “We see you have some vacancies, have you ever thought about apprenticeships, have you got some time to talk about what apprenticeship is, to see if that would fit in your strategy?” We find vacancies, directly target those employers, and educate them on the different apprenticeship routes available. We also have links with trade associations, tech councils. For instance, we go and look at the tech council and build the apprenticeship system as part of their memberships benefits, so they can learn about apprenticeships as part of their membership. We also work with local workforce boards who come across employers who are looking to fill certain vacancies. Also, American Job Centers, which are run by workforce boards, have already identified people who maybe don’t have the skills right now but can see how an apprenticeship can provide the skills they need. We try to work on a more strategic level with chambers of commerce and commerce departments. If they are encouraging businesses to build up in different cities, we encourage them to build in apprenticeships as a methodology for building the skills in that city. We encourage them to talk to employers in other cities to help them pitch apprenticeships. Then they have great facilities, great economic conditions to offer the city, and also, a great methodology for building the skills (apprenticeship). We help them with the steps from picking the phone up and phoning someone who has a vacancy, to the strategic level of being a part of the strategy for attracting new businesses to the area. The biggest thing we encourage around business development is delivering world-class apprenticeships every time, high retention, high success. Most of our process has been built on the quality of apprenticeship, that’s where we get repeat business and new employers coming in. This is critical to sustainability.

OVERCOMING HESITANCY

Why do some employers hesitate, and how do you best communicate the added value that can come from apprenticeships, including unregistered apprenticeships?

Addressing Employer Hesitancy:

1. Build a relationship with the employer
2. Identify the needs of the employer
3. Customize the apprenticeship based on employer needs

DI: Hesitancy is common, especially in small to medium companies that don’t have large training programs set up or apprenticeship models. To really minimize the hesitancy, part of it is building that relationship from the beginning, doing the pre-evaluation of what their needs are, having the perspective of “let’s find out what you need and let’s build an apprenticeship that’s right for you” versus

shoving an apprenticeship or program down their throat that they may not need. So, understanding their needs first and customizing the program to a certain organization.

PC: What hesitancy is built on is employers want someone with experience to be paid really low. That’s the world over. Dina’s been emphasizing relationship with the employer; I agree that this is important. We have to help employers, but they’ve also got to get over themselves a little bit. They’ve got to realize that some of the practices that they’ve had haven’t worked and are never going to work, and that apprenticeships can actually help them realize some of their business goals. It’s a big change, it’s about holding their hand, and sometimes these things take a while. You don’t just have to understand apprenticeships, you have to put yourself in the businesses’ shoes and be a lot of things to a lot of people.

DI: I agree with that. Apprenticeship used to be a big word for people, they think “thousands of hours spent training, and that means not producing.” It means such a different thing now. They can be flexible. They don’t necessarily have to be time based. They’re competency based. If you have a person who has

been working for a company for five years, they can also do an apprenticeship, they would just start at a different point in the program. Those with more experience can test out of all the stuff they already know and focus more on the areas where they need more help. I think just changing that idea of what an apprenticeship means, and making employers understand it doesn't have to be this five-year process.

Employer Engagement Example:

KMB Industries has a very niche product that they make. It was challenging to identify what manufacturing roles the company was going to need to upskill. The apprenticeship TA providers met with the leadership and the people on the front line and began working on forging a good relationship. The TA team worked hand-in-hand with the company to customize an apprenticeship program, identifying and defining apprenticeship program goals and providing assistance in identifying new apprenticeship candidates and current employees for upskilling. This was all done to meet the specific needs of the business. Though the initial apprenticeship program started out small scale, due to the strong relationship and quality program designed the program grew

APPRENTICESHIP MODELS

As employers are weighing registered and unregistered, what's the thought process they might go through in choosing a platform that works for them?

PC: It's a bit of a loaded question for me, because I used to think that if it's not registered, it's not an apprenticeship. Just to give you the background on that, all around the world where I've worked, there's been this dash for growth, the government has reduced what's the gold ticket for apprenticeship. At the same time there's been a dash for growth, the quality has fallen off the end of the cliff. Because of this, apprenticeship has gotten a bad name. But things have been changing for me over the past three months. I have been working with a national employer, who wants apprenticeships in 21 states. Working with them has given me more insight into why people say that apprenticeships have become burdensome. I am shifting to the thought process that if it is a registered apprenticeship, great. If it's an unregistered apprenticeship and that's easier for them, then great. If it is an IRAP, then I have to see that that's what the employer wants. Normally I would have gone to an employer and only talked about registered apprenticeship, because that's what I think is the golden ticket of apprenticeship and the gold standard, but I now have to swallow my pride and say let's see what the employer wants and look back and see what fits best. Does it stick in my throat? Yes, because I'm a purist. But sometimes old dogs have to learn new tricks. We have to respond to what the employer wants when given the option. I think it's all about taking what they want and giving them suggestions based on their needs.

DI: Apprenticeships provide structure to training policies, define the delivery of training, define the tolerance or the time constraints, provide structure, and narratively define performance requirements. If they don't validate training and performance for maximum return on investment, they are not worth it. So as long as the end result is validated performance, that's all that really matters, call it registered, call it unregistered. Whatever you call it, we are here to make sure they validate that end performance.

PC: My only concern is, you guys obviously do some great stuff, but there are a lot of people out there that don't do a great job, but still call what they are doing apprenticeship. I think we face a different point of view where what is described to me is just work-based learning, why are you calling it apprenticeship? People are blurring the boundaries of an apprenticeship and OJT. Dina, I completely agree; if you're coming in with the measurement training, and the performance is good and high class, call it what you want, but if it's workplace learning call it workplace learning, because that defeats the purpose of having an apprenticeship brand, in my mind.

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS IN AN UNCERTAIN ECONOMY

What adjustments are you making in your work to respond to the evolving landscape? Are there opportunities coming out of this that are uniquely suited for apprenticeships?

PC: In a previous role, I used to run a large post-secondary institution in the UK, and I always thought post-secondary institutions needed to be cultures for change, not just the privy of learning.... Flexibility is important. Because of how they are structured, post-secondary institutions can work with employers to build models of learning. Also, having curriculums that flex with the skills apprentices develop is key. Post-secondary educators have to get out of that frame of mind that one size fits all for both apprentices and employers. Curricula and programs must be customized to meet both the skills of the apprentice and the business needs of the employers. This could mean that a program may need to be flexible around when the program starts and what things are covered in a curriculum. To ensure you have the right fit, employers should do a solid review of curriculum. There is a Harvard Business Review Article that had a great impact on me when considering the attainability of customization. It was entitled, "[Your Workforce is More Adaptable than You Think](#)." It talks a lot about helping organizations to create learning as a culture. It's not just something you do as a knee jerk reaction because you have an issue. It also talks about engaging employers to transitioning from being a hiring function to skills development function and implementing skills-led recovery strategies. Most secondary institutions have access to a wide variety of people they can introduce to employers. After introductions are made, the team can collaborate to deepen the talent pool from those post-secondary institutions. And post-secondary institutions can work with employers to help employers manage that uncertainty and change, so they can be involved in training and support.

Make your curriculum
start, duration, and
content
Flexible.

DEEPENING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS

Are there stages to cultivating employers over time? How would you describe the ways that employer engagements can mature or expand around apprenticeships?

PC: I think there are many stages. When you are working with an employer on building an apprenticeship program, what you are asking them to do is to change the thing that's at the heart of their business. Because of this, right from the start that relationship needs to be cherished and both parties need to feel understood. If done well, as you build that relationship with employers, you become part of their team. Once you are a part of the team, you work with the business to not just develop that program. You can't just go to deliver the initial apprenticeship and leave, unless they ask you to leave of course. We work to really understand their needs and ultimate vision for their business. You become a friend, you become a partner, and you become a colleague and a part of their infrastructure. Treating any sort of partnership in a way that you teach the skills, you deliver the skills, and you go on, it is not a relationship, it's just a sale.

DI: I agree. To scale them you have to build lifelong relationships between that educational institution and the company because you are pipelining students. Perhaps it starts in elementary and middle school, in your school system where you bring kids in and show them the plant and how cool it is, what they do.

Standardizing Programs Processes and Resources for Sustainability:

1. Policies and Procedures
2. Instructions and Checklists
3. Curricula and Training Aids

Eventually those kids are going to be in high school and perhaps doing an internship. They may eventually become your apprentices. So, the goal is to build the whole pipeline system of stakeholders around this employer, starting exposure of students when they are young. By the time they are in high school and college students will have already made other choices.

They may not see the value of industries that have apprenticeship options because they don't have exposure. For Scaling Apprenticeship grants that are emphasizing emerging industries, it is really important to build the programs from the ground up. Something I really want to share is that standardizing resources is really important. Make sure that all procedures, all instructions, all the checklists, any type of training aids, the curriculum and the policies are really consistent and they are agreed to by everyone. This is really important so that once you're gone they can go ahead and scale their own programs, so they can replicate and scale it themselves. And that is what makes for a really successful apprenticeship.

FINAL WORD

What final words of advice would you provide to Scaling Apprenticeship grantees on the topic of employer engagement?

PC: What apprenticeship does is it allows for multiple partnership opportunities in the community. Employers can link to the workforce boards, and local community groups and other partners. Apprenticeships allow the business to position itself in the community. It allows the business to become more than just a business and it generates more business for the employer. People then see employers as part of the community, not just an industrial building that sits outside of town. Further, the business is elevated by doing apprenticeship and doing skills training. Cultivating these partnerships and designing programs help them realize their potential position in community.

Paul Champion's Recommendations:

1. Build genuine business relationships with employers
2. Understand community employer needs and pain points
3. Good employer engagement includes delivery of quality apprenticeship programs
4. Be flexible
5. Think like a community partner, not a business

DI: It is really important to make sure apprenticeship programs have evaluation components including post-evaluation and self-evaluation. After it's said and done, with support of the outside apprenticeship TA provider, they rate their satisfaction, they rate the employee satisfaction, and they rate their overall return on investment. This ensures the availability of sufficient data to make more informed decisions, because an apprenticeship program is a flexible moving, living organism that is going to keep evolving and getting better and better.

Dina Igoe's Recommendations:

1. Take advantage of government provided technical assistance and resources
2. Know the employer
3. Customize the apprenticeship to the employer
4. Provide train-the-trainer models for sustainability
5. Conduct apprenticeship program experience
6. Be flexible