

Employer Focus Group Guidelines

Use this resource to:

- Help convene local employers (e.g., subject matter experts) and use employer-provided information on skills developed in career ladder occupations to validate secondary information sources.
- Conduct employer surveys, interviews, or focus groups.
- Convene small business owners and human resources directors to provide information on human resources practices related to career ladder occupations.
- Plan based on existing knowledge of career ladder occupations and related subjects.

Focus groups are opportunities to begin gathering important data on worker retention, vacancy rates, and worker-productivity issues.

As a stand-alone activity, or as a supplement to an employer survey, employer focus groups are an excellent method of soliciting additional employer input on skill requirements, human resources needs, and directions for a local career ladder. Some workforce intermediaries, particularly employer organizations, are well-positioned to facilitate open discussions of employer needs. This resource provides guidelines for maximizing the outcomes of employer focus groups.

Effective efforts to survey employers, interview them, and conduct focus groups are all based on good relationships and a reputation for protecting proprietary information. Target occupations requiring an Associate's degree or less and gather information about problems related to vacancies, turnover, and low productivity based on lack of skills. Involve employers (especially smaller firms) with high-demand occupations and those who employ large concentrations of low-skill, limited work-experience workers.

Elements of a Productive Focus Group

Clear definitions of career ladders and the specific objectives of a workforce intermediary's involvement: Employers attending a focus group need to be well-grounded in the definition of a career ladder before any substantive discussion of their participation can occur. Background material and explanations as to your organization's involvement as intermediary will help to define the purpose of the focus group for employers.

Informed discussions of the benefits of employer participation in career ladders: Focus group facilitators should arrive well prepared to promote the potential benefits of employer participation in career ladders.

Informed discussions of potential barriers to developing a career ladder: Equally as important as discussing the benefits of career ladders is highlighting potential barriers to employer involvement and working through these barriers in the focus group discussion.

Time for employer reaction and suggestions: Allocate ample time to address the multiple questions that may arise as employers are introduced to a potentially new way of sourcing workers and interacting with one another.

Discussion of potential benefits and consequences to their own firms: Focus group facilitators should prompt employers to consider the benefits and consequences of participation in a career ladder initiative.

Discussion of types of agreements that will manage the project as it develops: It is important to gauge as closely as possible sentiment around the types of agreements to which employers would be willing to adhere as the project develops.

Discussion of employer involvement going forward: Determine the level of employer involvement with the career ladder, as well as anticipated roles, responsibilities, expectations, etc.

Questions to Generate Discussion

What three or four occupational shortages do you face? How many employees are in those positions? What is your current need in those positions? What do you expect the demand to be in three years?

Are there any positions for which you feel that preparation (training) is inadequate or inappropriate? What would you like to see changed in those areas?

Overall, given the direction in which you see your industry moving during the next three years, what are your biggest concerns about external training systems?

Where are your biggest retention problems? Has your organization developed programs that have helped solve those problems?

What is your current training system for incumbent workers? What is the most significant gap in that training system?

How should membership of the partnership be defined?

How will we secure the necessary resources for operating the partnership?

How will we make decisions as a group?

Adapted from High Performance Partnerships: Winning Solutions for Employers and Workers, by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 1999.