



## Frequently Asked Questions about Next Gen Sector Partnerships

### 1. Sectors again? Really?

Sector Partnerships are not a new idea. For years, workforce development practitioners have used sector partnerships to address shared workforce needs of businesses in a targeted sector. But many of these partnerships have failed to achieve sustained business engagement over time. As funding for sector partnerships decreased across the country, many partnerships disappeared because they lacked the business leadership and commitment to sustain beyond an initial grant. Today's "next generation" sector partnerships center on strong industry leadership. The agenda is defined entirely by business leaders and focused on addressing what matters most to them: ensuring the industry has what it needs to grow and thrive. Since next generation sector partnerships tackle more than just workforce issues, the partnership has staying power, acting as a sustainable forum for business leaders to address shared priorities and work in collaboration with a cross section of public partners in workforce development, economic development, and education.

### 2. This feels like we're putting all our eggs in one basket. Aren't we choosing industry winners/losers? How do you really choose and justify a target industry sector?

Choosing a sector to target for an industry-led partnership doesn't mean that's the only sector to pay attention to. Instead, it means that the sector merits the *collective action* of you and other public partners in workforce development, economic development, and education in your region. By working together to jointly target and engage with a critical mass of business leaders from the targeted sector, you have an opportunity to better understand the needs of that sector, to target efforts to support that sector, and to coordinate across multiple programs and systems to ensure you are aligned around industry's needs. Ideally, your region will have multiple sector partnerships targeting the driving sectors of your regional economy. But take it one step at a time – there is usually a learning curve in launching their first sector partnership. Once your first partnership is up and running, your team will have the experience needed to launch additional partnerships in other industry sectors.

### 3. How do you define the scope of a target industry? Statewide vs. regional: how local is local? How big is too big?

Sector partnerships are all about addressing shared competitiveness needs of businesses in a targeted sector. And since sectors look different across regions, it's important that sector partnerships are organized regionally, reflecting the unique opportunities and needs of regional industry sectors. In defining the scope of your sector partnership, think about what common ground business leaders will have. Typically, if companies share the same labor market, they will likely face similar workforce challenges. And if they depend on the same infrastructure (roads, industrial parks, research and development facilities etc.), they will likely share an interest in strengthening that



infrastructure. The scope of sector partnerships may or may not correspond to jurisdictional boundaries. Don't worry if your sector partnership spans one or more counties, workforce areas or economic development regions. It's more important that the scope make sense to business leaders in the targeted industry sector.

**4. What about “low-road” employers and industries? If they provide the most number of jobs in our region, but their jobs pay badly, do we set up a partnership?**

The decision to launch a sector partnership is based on which sectors merit the collective action of public partners in your region. That means you're targeting sectors that are drivers of your economy both in terms of overall employment as well as wages, concentration, and anticipated growth. You're also considering some of the more intangible “readiness” factors: the industry is growing, not contracting and business champions recognize that the long-term success of their business is connected to the long-term success of their communities. That doesn't mean that the only sectors that make sense for sector partnerships are high-wage industries. Tourism and hospitality, for example, can make a good target for sector partnerships, particularly when they combine traditional restaurants and hotels with higher-value segments of the industry such as specialty products manufacturing.

**5. Isn't industry input via survey and a focus group enough? We don't want to waste their time.**

For some purposes, yes. If all you're looking for is input on specific questions (for example, what kind of equipment to invest in for a new training program), a survey or focus group will suffice. But if you're looking for sustained partnership from business leaders, not just one-time input, a focus group or survey isn't enough. In order to be committed and engaged for the long haul, it's critical that business leaders define their own agenda on their own terms. As long as public partners are only engaging business people around *their* agendas (i.e. “What are your entry-level training needs?” “What will it take for you to hire ex-offenders?”), business participation will be limited. And, public partners may miss the big opportunities to spur growth and competitiveness if they don't engage in broader, industry-driven conversations about what the industry needs to grow and thrive.

**6. Aren't we leaning too far to the industry needs side, and not enough toward the jobseekers' needs side?**

The single most important factor in ensuring jobseeker success is that businesses in the regional economy are growing, creating quality jobs for local residents. Without good jobs, no amount of jobseeker training and support services will achieve the outcomes we're aiming for. That doesn't mean that we only pay attention to industry's needs and neglect the work of ensuring that jobseekers have the support they need to access opportunities. Instead, by starting with industry's needs and working backward from there, we ensure that career pathway programs *actually lead to careers* because they are based on a highly accurate understanding of industry's needs and developed in partnership with industry.



**7. WIOA explicitly mandates a stronger focus on target populations. Doesn't this contradict with an "industry-driven" approach?**

The best way to serve target populations and ensure they succeed in jobs and careers is to stay finely attuned and responsive to the needs of the labor market. While target populations will require different kinds of training and support services, those programs can only be effective if they are based on a highly accurate understanding of the needs of the local economy. Therefore, WIOA's emphasis on serving target populations *and* in engaging more deeply with business and industry go hand in hand.

**8. Convening industry-driven partnerships is square in the wheel house of local workforce development boards. Shouldn't they be the codified, sole conveners?**

Today's sector partnerships address a wide range of issues, not just workforce development needs. And since the agenda is broad, it's critical that a broad team of support partners (workforce development as well as economic development and education) are actively engaged in implementing priorities that come out of sector partnerships. By serving as the "shared table" for multiple public programs to work together to respond to industry needs, sector partnerships achieve a level of impact that would be impossible if a single entity assumed sole responsibility for the partnership. In addition, convening sector partnerships can be a lot of work! By sharing the convening role across public partners, a region can successfully support multiple sector partnerships targeting multiple industries. For example, in a given region, the workforce development board may convene the manufacturing partnership but the Chamber of Commerce convenes the health care partnership and the economic development board convenes the transportation/logistics partnership.

**9. How do colleges fit in? What's the connection to career pathways?**

Although sector partnerships do not explicitly center on education or workforce needs, talent development almost always comes up as a top priority. And sector partnerships are ideal vehicles for career pathway systems-building for two reasons: 1) they achieve a level of business engagement that is difficult to sustain in program-based advisory boards, and 2) they act as a coordinating body across multiple education and workforce development organizations, providing a forum for developing true industry-driven career pathway systems that span multiple programs and institutions. For those reasons, it's critical that colleges and other education partners (K-12, CTE, Adult Basic Education) are actively engaged in sector partnership development.

**10. Why economic development partners? Isn't this about workforce issues?**

Sector partnerships are all about ensuring that that industry has what it needs to grow and thrive. That might mean infrastructure needs or supply chain coordination or regulatory issues or workforce development. It all depends on what business leaders agree is most critical. But most of the time, it's all of the above! That's why it's so important to have a broad base of public partners actively support sector partnerships and respond to the wide range of priorities that emerge.



**11. What are the top 3 things to consider for a rural industry partnership?**

First, you will need to be creative about how to convene industry leaders who are widely dispersed geographically. Second, you will need to be purposeful about building a broad-based community team to support the industry partnership to avoid burnout. And, third, don't assume that there are insurmountable barriers to launching and sustaining a rural industry partnership: there are successful examples across the country in several different industries.

**12. What are the top 3 things to consider for an urban industry partnership?**

First, you will need to be selective about where you start—an urban area with several industries can seem overwhelming. Carefully assess the strength and readiness of your industries, and choose one that gives you the best likelihood of an “early win,” a prototype that can set the standard for subsequent industry partnerships. Second, you will need to sort through a large and complex array of community partners to assemble a team of individuals who are committed to the shared goal of supporting the industry partnership more than the individual goals of their institutions or agencies. Third, companies are likely getting asked to help by many different community institutions and programs, and could be suffering from fatigue. You will need to create an alternative—the opportunity for them to set their own agenda.

**13. How many industry partnerships should one area have?**

Eventually, every major industry driver of the regional economy would benefit from having an industry partnership. However, it is important not to try to do too much too quickly. Study your local industries, assess them for readiness, build your support team, and start with one partnership. Do it well, learn a lot along the way, get some early wins, and leverage your successes and lessons learned to launch additional partnerships over time.

**14. Industry partnerships take time and coordination. What about staff capacity to do this work?**

First, share the load. Take the building of a community support team seriously, and make sure concrete commitments are made and kept. Over time, rethink staffing priorities and capacity-building choices. Help existing staff shift their duties and learn to support industry partnerships. As staff positions open up, hire people with skills and experience that can help with industry partnership building. And, ask peers how they creatively manage with capacity constraints.

**15. What are the top 5 myths about engaging employers?**

- They are too busy so don't ask them for too much time. Everyone is busy, including you, but most people including employers will prioritize their time and resources for things that really make a difference. Employers should develop and drive the agenda for action—and determine how much time they need to spend on implementation.



- Make sure you have something to give them first. Actually, this is counterproductive. Industry partnerships are not about employers getting things from community partners, like customer-and-vendor relationship. It is about employers driving the conversation and working as partners with the community to get things done.
- They know their skill needs. The marketplace and thus the workplace are in constant flux, and employers often don't have a clear idea of their talent needs. Working together, employers and community partners can create a focused process for understanding those needs and, as importantly, developing collaborative approaches for meeting them.
- They just complain. If employers are treated like customers rather than partners, they are more likely to complain that they are not getting good "customer service." If employers are given the opportunity to develop and drive their collective agenda for action, then they are much more likely to take responsibility for their part of the solution.
- You have to speak their language (and bribe them with lunch). At first, you have to keep quiet while they talk. Listen carefully and you will hear how they talk about their priorities. Then, you can work with them to on their terms, using their language, to address those priorities. Lunch is okay—and may send an important message that you care about their industry.
- If industry partnerships are supposed to be a collaboration between employers and community partners, why don't we all sit at the same table?
- It is important for employers to have an opportunity to talk to each other and decide on a set of collective priorities before working with community partners. This ensures that they "own" their priorities and be prepared to be proactive partners rather than reactive customers. If everyone sits at the same table to begin, community partners, with the best of intentions, will likely offer solutions and employers will take a more passive role.

**16. What if employers identify priorities with which we as community partners disagree?**

If employers are asked to identify the biggest opportunities to grow their industry and the most important requirements to capitalize on those opportunities, this problem will almost certainly not arise. Employers typically identify talent as one of their top priorities (i.e., if you are going to grow, you are going to need skilled talent), and would prefer to get that talent locally rather than have to pay to recruit from outside the region or steal from one another. If there is a priority with which community partners disagree, they do not have to work on that priority—it may turn out that employers work on it themselves or with other willing community partners.

**17. If we don't have strong employer relationships, how do we get them to table?**



An invitation to join an industry partnership should be a business-to-business ask, even if you have strong employer relationships. Leverage the collective relationships of your community support team to identify and secure business co-chairs or co-conveners. Then, work with them to identify other business leaders to invite to a launch meeting. And, keep leveraging business-to-business relationships as you grow the industry partnership.

**18. What's wrong if we are experiencing waning interest among employers after we have launched an industry partnership?**

It could be that community partners jumped in too early with solutions and employers fell back into reactive mode. It could be that employers were more conditioned to be customers from previous experience than you thought, and figured that community partners could take over if they stepped back. It could be that just a few employers are doing all the work. In any of these cases, the situation is correctable. Don't try to address the issue on your own, but engage your business co-chairs in problem-solving.



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