



The Ohio Workforce Initiative Association Business Resource Network Expansion

Innovating @ the Speed of Business: A Case Study

➔ Focusing on the Needs of Business: Our Imperative

The Workforce Initiative Association¹ is a local Workforce Investment Board serving two counties in Ohio. The primary goal of the Ohio Business Resource Network (BRN) Expansion project is to connect workforce development, economic development, and education in a seamless and customer-focused partnership to deliver more effective and efficient business services. The BRN model provides businesses with a single point of contact to tap into the collective resources of over 40 workforce, economic development and education partner programs. The BRN also creates an ongoing dialogue to identify and understand common industry sector challenges and trends and create shared solutions. “Our goal over the course of the three year-grant cycle is to reach out to more than 750 businesses and deliver services to more than 500 of them,” said JoAnn Breedlove, Deputy Director of the Workforce Initiative Association. As of May 2014, more than 600 businesses have been engaged by the BRN and services have been delivered to 452 businesses.²

➔ Why This Innovation Matters

The BRN Expansion model makes it easier for businesses to partner more effectively with the public workforce system to address their workforce challenges. This ultimately leads to more job openings for job seekers, shorter durations of unemployment, industry-led training and credentials, and greater opportunities for Americans to find lasting employment at family-sustaining wages.

➔ Scaling What Works: History and Evolution of Project

The BRN was established in 2008 by two Northeast Ohio Workforce Investment Areas to target businesses in the community at risk of closure. Multiple plant closures in the area led the local workforce areas to develop a new way to deliver



EYE ON THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION FUND

About this Stakeholder Engagement Series

The *Eye on the Workforce Innovation Fund Stakeholder Engagement Series, Innovating for Change*, provides a national forum for the public workforce system to discuss the power and promise of innovation. The series gives the U.S. Department of Labor an opportunity to hear from stakeholders about promising practices that can help businesses thrive and Americans get good jobs.

More information may be found at: <http://innovation.workforce3one.org/blog/view/engagement-series>

We invite you to watch the *Innovating @ the Speed of Business* video on DOL's YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWZeQzQNbc0&feature=youtu.be>, and read a recap of the event on DOL's official blog, <http://social.dol.gov/blog/promoting-innovation-in-skills-development/>, *Work in Progress*.



Business Resource Network (BRN) Web site

services to businesses facing layoffs. In 2010, the BRN concept was expanded to other workforce areas through a layoff aversion grant funded by the Ohio Department of Development. One of the areas awarded a grant to replicate the Business Resource Network model was the Workforce Initiative Association, the local Workforce Investment Area operator for Stark and Tuscarawas counties in Northeast Ohio. “This grant enabled us to formalize partnerships with an array of service providers within the state, including workforce development, economic development and education and training organizations,” says Breedlove. “During that grant period, we broadened the focus of our discussions from only layoff aversion to include consideration of business expansion needs.”

The 2010 grant laid the foundation for the three-year \$6,000,000 Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF) grant, essentially scaling and enhancing the network structure that was already in place. The WIF grant, awarded in 2012, provided funding to expand the regional BRN model from three to sixteen (16) Ohio counties: Adams, Brown, Scioto, Pike, Stark, Tuscarawas, Belmont, Carroll, Harrison, Jefferson, Columbiana, Mahoning, Trumbull, Ashtabula, Geauga and

Portage.³ The WIF grant now supports salaries for key staff positions and has enabled the BRN to continue to invest in customer relationship management software that is built upon evidence of successful business retention and expansion practices. The technology allows BRN agency partners to share data and automate processes, providing businesses with an efficient, professional interaction that meet their workforce needs.

▶ The BRN Model: Collaboration as a Key Innovation Strategy

The BRN Expansion project develops proactive, business outreach strategies. The new BRN teams created with the WIF grant have developed partnerships with the other early agency partners in their regions including chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, state and local government organizations, and colleges and universities. Now, the five local BRN teams jointly hold regular roundtable meetings that contribute to staff development and peer-to-peer learning.



Regular BRN roundtable meetings contribute to staff development and peer-to-peer learning.

“We hit the ground running,” says Breedlove. “The six local Workforce Investment Areas combined into five teams, each headed by

a BRN manager. Each network team signed partnership and confidentiality agreements affirming its commitment to the expanded BRN model.” Breedlove goes on to explain the staff training process, “We then held two training sessions to help our staff learn to work with the business community effectively. We updated our Web site (<http://www.thebrn.net/>) and enabled our staff to access critical resources. As part of our orientation session, we conducted mock employer interviews where we stressed listening to businesses with an open mind and not telling businesses what they needed.”

These meetings also provided multiple learning opportunities to help staff evolve into “account executives” focused on the business customer, including:

“The goal of the BRN over the three year-grant cycle is to reach out to 750+ businesses and deliver services to 500 or more.”

1. Cross-training staff on the region’s business services and resources;
2. Providing a platform for brainstorming on appropriate, creative solutions to meet business client needs; and
3. Discussing the alignment of job-driven training with common industry sector needs.

Partners use a variety of information sources to strategically and proactively target the businesses where they can add the most value: those companies that are at risk or those poised for growth within prioritized industry sectors. The BRN teams also target businesses by size, monitor early warning signs for layoffs, track market and industry trends and identify declining industries in order to provide effective assistance.

Building Evidence for the Workforce System

As a requirement of the WIF solicitation, the BRN Expansion project is engaging in a rigorous, third-party implementation and outcome evaluation. The evaluation will determine the level of change in the relationship between the workforce development and economic development entities and the employer community in the areas that it serves. The BRN model was created based on a set of principles from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce that included:

- Make business services a clear priority with dedicated staff time and resources
- Manage employer services as a single function using account representative model
- Empower business services staff to focus on and be knowledgeable about industry sectors and employers in the local economy
- Track and share data reflecting contacts, business service delivery and outcomes and to use this data to improve results

Projected Outputs of the BRN WIF Grant	Grant Projected Output	Through 5/31/14 ²
Number of business interviews	787	608
Number of customized, comprehensive proposals to business	515	452
Number of partnerships included in proposals		3,230
Average # of relevant partners included in proposals per area	5	7.15
Number of at-risk businesses targeted	142	68
Number of growing businesses targeted	633	495
Identified service gaps not met by collective partners	Identified as gaps arise	7
Number of professional development opportunities offered to staff	111	218

Early evaluation work seemed to indicate that the BRN model has changed the dynamic between businesses and the public workforce system, according to Matt Falter, the BRN’s Project Director. Since 2012, BRN partners across Ohio have interviewed over 600 businesses.

Early Wins:

- In Workforce Investment Area 19, serving Geauga, Ashtabula, and Portage Counties, the BRN local team hired contract workers from existing economic development agencies to serve as business account executives. Since these individuals already had established relationships with the business community, they achieved significant success in their business outreach efforts.
- The collaborative efforts of the partnership have provided the BRN with access to a range of in-kind and actual financial resources from the agency partners, extending the reach of the initiative. The BRN

Leadership Team has established metrics that monetize leveraged resources for businesses such as *OhioMeansJobs* centers business services, as well as access to tax incentives, grants and loans available through the 40 plus network partner agencies. Since its inception in 2012, the project has accessed more than \$2.3 million in leveraged resources as illustrated in the accompanying table.

Leveraged Resources to Help Businesses	All Areas
Meeting Room Rental for Interviews, Job Fairs	\$8,935
On-the-Job Training Opportunities	\$116,475
Job Postings	\$99,000
Assessments Conducted for Potential Job Seekers	\$1,500
Labor Market Information Searches	\$180
Total American Job Center Services	\$219,143
Other Resources	\$7,610
Grants to Businesses through other agency partners	\$463,869
Loans to Businesses through other agency partners	\$1,657,000
Total Grants/Loans/Other Resources	\$2,128,479
TOTAL	\$2,356,557

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Listening at the Speed of Business: Employer Engagement

The BRN Expansion project has developed a detailed, step-by-step process for working with the business community. The process, which is supported by field-tested templates and procedures, has strong potential for replication in the broader workforce development community.

Driven by data derived from its partners and processed using customer relationship management (CRM) software, the BRN identifies, prioritizes and targets regional businesses for their support using this process:

- A single-point-of-contact account executive (similar to a business services representative) communicates and works with the employer throughout the process.
- The account executive contacts the employer, determines his/her level of interest and, if successful, transmits an interview/survey template through the CRM system to the employer prior to the actual face-to-face interview.

“We take the lead from the employer,” says Breedlove. “What are the challenges that you have? Are you facing possible layoffs? Do you need access to low interest loans to sustain or expand your business? Do your incumbent workers need retraining to keep up with new technologies? Are you interested in state and federal grant opportunities? Do you want to learn about tax incentives that would support the expansion or relocation of your business? We ask the employer to prioritize their challenges. The entire process is employer-driven. Our strategic advantage is that we truly are a collaboration. As we listen, we’ve become successful in reducing the red tape that has often hindered the public workforce system in employer engagement activities in the past.”

- The account executive conducts the interview and enters all of the resulting information into the CRM system for data analysis.
- The analyzed data is then shared with a BRN manager who develops a customized Challenges and Opportunities form that is tailored to the employer’s needs.
- This form is then transmitted to the partnership network for their review, comment and input relative to potential solutions that can be offered to the employer, e.g., identification of local training and recruitment resources, access to loans, grants and tax incentives, and new market development.
- The BRN team summarizes the responses from the partnership network in a customized, comprehensive proposal that is tailored to the employer’s specific challenges and opportunities.
- The account executive transmits the vetted Challenges and Opportunities form to the employer for consideration with no obligation and at no cost.
- If the employer opts to utilize the resources identified by the BRN team, the account executive will remain as the employer’s liaison to the initiative’s partners and their resources.



BRN Employer Engagement and Outreach



“The BRN has helped us immensely,” says Mr. Timmings. “Their umbrella organization is the key point of contact for the 40 to 50 organizations that exist in our area that can be of assistance to KTSDI in growing our business.”

An example of the success the BRN has had in enhancing employer engagement with the public workforce system is KTSDI, the North American representative of four German OEM manufacturers of components for special-design, rubber-tire, and heavy-duty truck components. “We’re a young dynamic company,” says Ken Timmings, manager of KTSDI. “I’m a firm believer in embracing all the available resources possible and the BRN has made that happen.”

“In the past, we’ve been challenged to find employees in this area who meet our skills needs to work with sophisticated mechanical systems,” says Timmings. “We were looking for people to grow our business. The BRN helped us to work with our local OhioMeansJobs (OMJ) Center to recruit new employees. The OMJ Center conducted assessments specifically tailored to meet our needs. Before the BRN, we spent up to \$3,000 on print advertising with very little return on investment. We’ve experienced much more success working with the BRN

on the recruitment of new employees.” KTSDI also worked with the BRN to implement a “Learn to Earn” program for long-term unemployed workers. The participants work with the company for 24 hours a week for six weeks. They begin while still receiving unemployment insurance benefits and receive intensive on-the job training (OJT). At the end of the six week period, KTSDI could make an informed decision on whether to make a hiring offer.

Another BRN business engagement success story is Barclay Rolls, a 114-year old company that manufactures and refurbishes production rolls for steel, aluminum and food industries. The company has had a long standing relationship with the BRN, starting in 2010 and continuing into 2014. Since 2010, the BRN has provided Barclay Rolls with numerous opportunities afforded by the network partners including:

- On-the-job training;
- Recruitment of new employees; and
- Counsel on workplace safety requirements.

In 2013, the company started to explore the potential to expand its markets geographically. The International Trade Assistance Center, a local BRN partner agency, provided a significant amount of assistance including an introduction to the Export-Import Bank of the United States. According to John Dance, Barclay Rolls’ compliance officer, the Export-Import Small Business Express⁴ can provide a company with inexpensive insurance to mitigate the risk of exporting.



In addition to its established track records with KTSDI and Barclay Rolls, the BRN has documented other examples of its successes in helping Ohio employers address new job creation, job retention and on-shoring. Success stories for the regional BRN team serving Columbiana, Trumbull and Mahoning counties are featured in a video entitled “Measurable Success” on the BRN Web site: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gp4NLCoJcQM&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL.

- One story focuses on the team’s assistance in moving a local company’s production from overseas back to Ohio, thereby creating jobs for American workers.
- Another relates how the team helped a local small business owner, facing potential layoffs, to find resources to train his incumbent workforce in new technologies.
- A third describes how the team provided guidance on tax incentives to encourage a company to relocate its technical operations from India to Youngstown.

▶ Lessons Learned

The Workforce Innovation Association is taking the BRN to scale with plans to extend these services across the state. Along the way, there have been a few key lessons learned.

- **Making business services and engagement clear priorities within the workforce system.** In an environment of shrinking resources, it is critical that serving the needs of businesses as well as jobseekers remains a clear priority. State and local workforce systems should work to allocate funding that supports dedicated staff time and resources to this function. There are simply too many lost opportunities to work with business and industry. The system must move from a reactive “business as hiring source” focus to a proactive “business as partner” focus.
- **Using a single point of contact to provide business services.** One of the most successful aspects of this model is using a single business account executive to represent over 40 different public services and/or resources at once. Businesses seem to have grown weary of being approached by

multiple agencies to hire their participant pool. By offering a menu of value-added services to businesses and using state-of-the-art customer relationship management software, the BRN has been able to identify exactly what its businesses need and respond quickly in an efficient manner.

- **Building on a proven business services model allowed for quick expansion and replication.** The early 2008 initiative created a solid model based on sector strategy principles by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. Examples of templates and training modules were available to modify and retool for the next set of BRN teams to use. Team members were able to benefit from joint training and learning opportunities that contributed to an accelerated start up and implementation time. The project has created a comprehensive guide to help state and local workforce areas develop Business Resource Networks. This tool is currently available on the Workforce Innovation Web site: <http://innovation.workforce3one.org>.

Conclusion

Effective employer engagement requires placing a priority on and demonstrating an ability to meet employer needs. Workforce investment boards, like the Workforce Initiative Association in Ohio, have found that focusing their services and resources toward meeting business needs help build trust and cultivate productive relationships. The BRN Expansion project is a promising example of how the public workforce system can meet the demand to provide timely, flexible, and high-quality assistance to businesses. This, in turn, can result in more Americans being employed with family-sustaining wages and taking the next step into the middle class.

For more information, visit the BRN website, <http://www.thebrn.net>; or contact JoAnn Breedlove at: JBreedlove@omjwork.com or Matt Falter, BRN Project Director, at: MFalter@omjwork.com.

¹ *The Workforce Initiative Association is structured as a regional council of governments and is the local operator of the Ohio Means Jobs Centers in Stark and Tuscarawas Counties. It also serves as the local Workforce Investment Board administrator.*

² *Workforce Initiative Association Grant Performance Tracking, May 31, 2014*

³ *Abstract, Workforce Initiative Association, Business Resource Expansion Network, Workforce Innovation Grant Application 2012*

⁴ <http://www.exim.gov/smallbusiness/>