

Executive Summary

In 2012, the Workforce Initiative Association, the administrative entity for Local Workforce Investment Area (LWIA) #6, in Canton, Ohio, was awarded a Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF) Round One grant to expand the Business Resource Network (BRN) into three additional LWIAs in Ohio. This report chronicles the implementation of the BRN in those areas, and highlights accomplishments and lessons learned through the process. Insights on the benefits that accrued to the workforce system, partner organizations, and employers are also discussed.

Program Overview

The Workforce Initiative Association created the Ohio BRN Expansion project to apply in three additional LWIAs an innovative approach to business outreach that had been developed and successfully implemented in two LWIAs previously. Through a structured interview and proposal process, employers are provided with information about services and resources available to help them to address the challenges and opportunities that they are or may be facing.

The BRN builds on a history of efforts to position Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) as central actors in building and facilitating greater connectivity between workforce, economic development, and education agencies in support of the mission of helping low-income and other workers find and retain jobs and advance in their careers. It expands on these efforts through inclusion of additional organizations providing services to businesses, allowing the BRN to respond to business needs outside what is typically seen in the workforce system. The BRN focuses on engaging employers to better understand workforce demand and help cultivate conditions that support employment demand. The approach is designed to further the goals of each partner participating in the Network as well as the goals of the partnership as a whole.

BRN Five-Step Process

The primary goal of the BRN is to provide knowledge of and access to critical business services while reducing bureaucracy and red tape, using the following five-step process:

1. Target and prioritize businesses for outreach.

2. Collect and review critical data using a customer relations management (CRM) system and tools to help identify and prioritize employer outreach, and a structured interview process to obtain supplementary information directly from the employer.
3. Develop a responsive comprehensive proposal with all partners' input.
4. Create a work plan for and build a relationship between the business and network partners.
5. Continually seek ways to assist the business as it deals with changing conditions over time.

Theory of Change: A Collective Impact Approach

Recent research suggested that in order to understand the impact of innovation on the workforce development system, it is important to examine the interplay of the workforce development, economic development, and education systems. These systems are critical to maintaining the stability and fostering growth in companies and sectors that are vital to an area's economic health. Collective-impact theory provided an interesting lens through which to explore how the various organizations involved in the BRN initiative attempted to achieve large-scale social (and economic) change. The theory gained attention in 2011 when several journal articles, published in the *Stanford Journal of Social Innovation*, proposed it as a way of leveraging the combined resources of many different kinds of organizations to address shared goals.

This theoretical construct seemed very well suited to the evaluation of the BRN as a network of organizations and agencies (public, private, and nonprofit) whose combined efforts benefit employers, employees, and ultimately entire communities.

The BRN approach challenged the traditional compartmentalized ways of thinking about how public, private, and nonprofit organizations relate to one another and how their contributions to community economic stability and vitality are understood and fostered. Each BRN partner may have had different short-term goals, but they also shared important goals such as the continued stability and growth of area firms, the continued employment of area residents, and the development of a strong and responsive education system that is vital to maintaining a skilled workforce. Together these partners had the ability to achieve far more than any single organization was able to do working independently; that is, they could achieve a collective impact.

Collective impact is used to describe the complex and dynamic elements that enable individual organizations to come together around a common goal in pursuit of a larger-scale impact than would otherwise be achieved if they had continued to work

independently. Collective impact is not just a new name for collaboration. Instead, it represents a fundamentally different and highly dynamic effort to align and leverage the combined resources of public-, private-, and nonprofit- sector partners to address complex workforce and economic development problems in a time of fiscal constraint.

Overview of the Evaluation

WIF grantees were required to fund an independent third-party evaluation of their grant-funded project that was both formative and summative, and some included cost study components. In this way, data gathered through evaluation activities could both inform ongoing program improvement and contribute to an emergent evidence base of proven practices inside the public workforce system.

Purpose

The goal of the BRN Expansion evaluation was fourfold: (1) to describe an innovative, proactive, cross-system employer-engagement model; (2) to learn about the opportunities and challenges associated with expanding the model to new locations; (3) to assess the effectiveness of the model in engaging employers and linking them with community service providers; and (4) to assess the impact of the model on participating companies.

The evaluation design included an implementation study and an outcome study. Evaluation activities included reviews of administrative documents, using a fidelity scale to assess implementation of the BRN model, a regression analysis of extant data, site visits to conduct interviews and discussions with key stakeholders and BRN project staff, surveys of employers and partners, and case studies of expansion areas.

Over the course of the evaluation, the Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA) evaluation team maintained ongoing communication with the BRN project leaders to share and discuss data-collection tools and timelines in advance of fielding them.

The overarching purpose of the evaluation was to contribute to a growing body of evidence pertaining to a transformation of the public workforce investment system from basic labor preparation and exchange to a demand-driven system with a robust, business services component. It examined indicators of effectiveness that were in use by the BRN, developed additional indicators, and analyzed the evidence to identify factors that support or inhibit the continued expansion of the model in Ohio and elsewhere.

Key Findings of the Evaluation

The Ohio Business Resource Network Expansion project generated an accumulation of data that offers much to be considered by workforce areas interested in developing ways to more effectively engage employers. Following are key findings that resulted from the evaluation of this project.

Finding #1: The procedures employed by the Ohio Business Resource Network Expansion were effective in meeting and exceeding project performance goals.

All Local Workforce Investment Areas where the BRN existed or was introduced exceeded each of their performance targets for number of businesses interviewed, number of proposals submitted to businesses, average number of partners whose offers of assistance were included in proposals, number of at-risk businesses interviewed, and amount of leveraged assets.

Finding #2: The BRN business assistance model is an effective strategy for identifying businesses' current and potential needs.

The structured interview employed by BRN staff generated a volume of information about the business that was used to hone in the business current and potential needs.

Finding #3: The BRN proposals help to build awareness among businesses of the wide array of services and resources available to address their needs.

Most employers reported not being aware of the wide array of services to assist them or of how access to those services could be obtained.

Finding #4: The formal structure of the Business Resource Network holds promise for strengthening partner collaboration around strategic issues facing businesses.

The BRN Partner Roundtable meetings provide a significant opportunity to harness the knowledge and experience of the wide range of organizations included in partner networks to address strategic issues facing businesses in their respective regions.

Finding #5: The BRN enhances business and partner perceptions of the workforce system as a key component of regional business and economic development efforts.

Both employers and partners gave strong support to the notion that workforce agencies and staff were key partners in economic development activities.

Finding #6: The BRN approach does not require one-size-fits-all organizational structure to be effective.

The experience of the BRN expansion areas demonstrated that the approach can be applied with some variation as long as core elements continue to be present.

Finding #7: Data generated by BRN activity offers great opportunity to fine tune the employer outreach and assistance process.

Efforts of BRN account executives generated quantities of data about challenges and opportunities that employers face and in the choices they make in how and when to address them. Reviewing and reflecting on this data may be particularly useful when or if confronted with limited funds to apply or adapt elements of the BRN approach.

Finding # 8: Aspects of the BRN model lend themselves to being integrated into existing workforce system practices.

Most BRN staff operated out of OhioMeansJobs (OMJ) centers and often worked in conjunction with OMJ staff. Prior to the WIF grant, outreach to businesses was provided by workforce staff, though that outreach was amplified by the acquisition of WIF funds.

The narrative that follows in this report attempts to provide the reader with additional detail pertaining to these key findings as well as various facets of BRN operations and its approach to engaging and assisting employers.