

How to Find Partners

There are potential business partners all around – if you know where to look

One of the most common feelings among Career and Technical Education (CTE) educators is that they don't have the contacts they need to build a strong team of business partners. Whether they're veterans or first-year teachers, in rural, suburban, or urban settings, the feeling that "I don't know anybody" seems to be widely shared.

And in fairness, for most it's probably true: If you're looking solely at your own list of contacts, you probably don't know all the people you need in order to build a strong partnership strategy. The good news is that you don't need to. If you rethink this and shift to a "friend of a friend" mentality, your network of contacts expands exponentially. In reality, you do know everyone you need to know – you just have to leverage the various networks at your disposal.

Think through each of the categories below and make notes in the "Action Item" sections; by the end of this guide you should have a long list of things you can do in order to quickly build up a list of prospective partners with direct connections to them all.

ESTABLISHED INDUSTRY NETWORKS

Most of us are familiar with the professional coalitions in our areas: The chambers of commerce, sector partnerships, industry and trade associations, workforce investment boards, economic development offices, unions, and other entities that bring together businesses with shared interests. But how many of us have joined those organizations? How many attend meetings?

Don't hesitate to get involved in these groups and start networking; that's what they're there for! Attend meetings. Join committees dealing with education and workforce issues. Attend a regional or statewide conference. Offer to host a meeting at your school so you can provide a tour; ask staff who they think you should talk to, and ask them for an introduction. You'll find a great deal of support if you're able to talk about the role your program plays in preparing the next generation of their employees.

Action Item

List three established industry networks in which you can get involved, and how you can connect with prospective partners through them:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

No one teaches alone: You're surrounded by other educators, administrators, and support staff, whether at the school, district, or college levels, who want you and your students to succeed. You come together frequently, either at staff meetings, school- or college-wide meetings, or even at citywide or regional sessions, sometimes even within the same industry cluster. Each one of these professionals has his or her own set of contacts, including business partners, spouses, family, friends, and neighbors, at least some of whom will be employed at the businesses you want to reach.

Ask for help. Go to your administrators, let them know about your needs, and ask if they have any contacts. During department or school-wide staff meetings, ask for a couple of minutes and let your fellow educators know that you're looking for contacts in certain industries or with certain companies.

Action Item

List three upcoming opportunities during which you can share your partnership needs with your fellow educators:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

VENDORS

Most CTE programs order supplies on a regular basis. Culinary programs buy food and equipment. Auto tech programs buy oil and tools. Nursing programs buy mannequins and hospital beds. And chances are, if you're buying industry-relevant materials, you're buying them from the same people who supply the local businesses in your industry.

For these vendors, connecting customers is a big "win;" they're providing value and positioning themselves as a partner. So ask your vendors who else they sell to in your field, and whether they'd be willing to connect you with some possible partners.

Action Item

List three vendors you can ask to connect you with businesses in your field:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

CURRENT PARTNERS

As the old saying goes, “your current customer is your best customer.” In the partnership world, your existing partners are essentially your customers, and they’re worth their weight in gold. These are people who already feel invested in your work; they know your teachers and students; and they are strongly motivated to help you and your students succeed.

It should be easy to approach them about your partnership needs. Ask whether there are others in their company who might be interested in joining them as a volunteer or mentor. If they work for a larger company, see if they can introduce you to contacts in other departments or other local offices. Ask if they have any contacts, including vendors or other area businesses, who might be able to help. And finally, ask if they feel fully utilized, and if there are other ways they would want to support the work you do. (See Guide 6, “Keeping Partners and Building Stronger Ties,” for more on this front.)

Action Item

List three current partners you can talk to about introducing you to other contacts or being more involved themselves:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ADVISORY BOARD

Since you have an active advisory board, or a professional association or sector partnership that serves that function, your board members should understand that partnership development is one of their core functions. (This should be included in board members’ list of job responsibilities; review the state’s Advisory Board Handbook for more at <http://coloradostateplan.com/>). If they’re working to support your program, helping you find new partners and work-based learning opportunities has got to be at the top of their list. Talk with your board members at an upcoming meeting, and set a goal of a certain number of introductions within the next three months. Talk with board leadership about setting regular goals, or even setting up a dedicated task force or subnf with the purpose of establishing new relationships for the program.

Action Item

List three ways in which you can ask advisory board members to support your partnership development efforts:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

PARENTS

Parents are typically a significantly underutilized partnership resource, but no one cares more about providing opportunities for your students than their parents. Chances are that at least some of your students' parents work in your target professions or industries, or may at least have personal or professional contacts to share with you. As a bonus, your parents' introductions to these new contacts will carry a sense of passion and personal importance that will hold great weight with your prospective partners.

There are various ways you can reach out to parents. Make individual contacts with those you already know; host an open house for parents; send newsletters, flyers, or emails; or look for ways to connect with them through school or extracurricular activities.

Action Item

List three ways in which you can reach out to parents of your current students:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SECONDARY/POSTSECONDARY PARTNERS

CTE programs often collaborate with their secondary or postsecondary counterparts. This makes sense, first and foremost as a way for them to coordinate instruction to make sure students are fully prepared for their postsecondary experiences, as well as to increase postsecondary participation for those seeking to enter various career fields.

In some cases, particularly in rural settings, secondary and postsecondary programs work even more closely, sharing instructors, advisory boards and resources. Regardless of your current relationship with your secondary or postsecondary partners, you likely at least have some contacts, and those can be leveraged to not only improve coordination and quality, but also to share partners and set up coordinated work-based learning models.

And don't forget partnering with different departments within your own school system or college! You have various offices, including IT, facilities, foodservice, business (including accounting and finance), and others, all of whom can talk about their various occupations, take interns, and support student learning in other ways.

Action Item

List three secondary or postsecondary partners you can talk to about sharing partners or trading contacts:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

FORMER STUDENTS

Former students who now work in the field are fantastic resources for CTE educators. They make great guest speakers and volunteers on their own, with current students affording them great credibility and respect; they also serve as ideal contacts with their employers, since they represent firsthand the value of your program. While it used to be difficult to stay in touch with former students, the advent of Facebook, LinkedIn and other online forums makes it easier than ever to find and contact those who graduated from your program.

Action Item

List three former students you can contact about volunteering in your program and introducing you to their employers:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

PERSONAL CONTACTS

While many of us are extremely dedicated to our work, we all have lives outside of school. We are spouses, friends, neighbors, and family members. We belong to faith-based organizations, civic groups and social organizations. We participate in a range of hobbies and activities.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with mixing your personal and professional lives a bit, just long enough to let people know what you do and the fact that you're looking for connections to certain businesses or industries. Your personal contact will often be very happy to help someone with whom they spend time on a personal basis.

Action Item

List three personal contacts you can talk to about finding business partners:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

CAREER TECHNICAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Career Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) are invaluable partners in education, and the leaders of those organizations often have their own network of contacts helping them provide students with work-based learning opportunities. Sit down and talk with your CTSSO partners about swapping leads so that students receive an increased number of opportunities both within the classroom and outside of it during CTSSO activities.

Action Item

List three CTSO contacts you can talk to about finding business partners:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ACTION STEP: BUILDING YOUR PLAN

Throughout this guide, you’ve been encouraged to generate a list of at least three things you can do to reach out to partners in each section. Now it’s time to compile those ideas into a plan of action. Use the following table as a model for deciding who you’re going to contact and how:

Category	Action Step	Deadline
WITHIN THE NEXT WEEK		
Teachers/Administrators	Ask for two minutes to share at weekly staff meeting	October 1
WITHIN THE NEXT TWO WEEKS		
Current partners	Ask volunteers for referrals at mock interview day	October 15
WITHIN THE NEXT 30 DAYS		
Former students	Review account, ID former students, send an email	October 25
BEFORE THE END OF THE SEMESTER		
Business networks	Ask Chamber if we can host the workforce committee	November 18
CTSO officer team	Join executive meeting to discuss partnerships	November 20

Use these examples as inspiration for your own list, then put your plan into effect: You’ll have a strong group of partners in no time!

ADDENDUM 1: CONNECTING TO RESOURCES WITHIN COLORADO'S TALENT DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

TalentFOUND is the brand of the Colorado talent development network, comprising all the systems, partners, programs, and initiatives offering services to ensure students, job seekers, and workers have access to meaningful careers and businesses have access to skilled talent.



Visit talentfound.org to connect with Colorado-specific websites addressing career and college advising, education and training options, key industry career exploration, work-based learning opportunities including internships and apprenticeships, and Colorado's job board, and labor market data/analysis. Connect to zip code-specific resources to help address barriers and support student and job seekers' paths into meaningful careers.

ADDENDUM 2: CONNECTING WITH INDUSTRY NETWORKS IN COLORADO

Not sure where to start getting connected with local industry groups and professional associations in your area? Here are some resources to help:

- **Colorado Workforce Development Council**- Visit <https://www.colorado.gov/cwdc> for connections to these networks and resources:
 - Sector Partnerships
 - Industry Intermediary Group
 - Workforce Investment Boards
 - Workforce Centers
- **Colorado Association of Commerce & Industry**- Visit <http://cochamber.com/about-us/local-chambers/> to connect with local Chambers of Commerce.
- **Economic Development Council of Colorado (EDCC)**- Visit <https://edcconline.org/> to connect with local economic development organizations.
- **Colorado Small Business Development Center Network**- Visit <https://www.coloradosbdc.org/locations> to explore how to connect with small business owners.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit <http://coloradostateplan.com/>.



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