

First Impressions Matter: How to Approach Businesses for Work Placements

Mr. Allen is a work program coordinator at an urban high school where he is responsible for developing community-based work experiences for students with disabilities. When Mr. Allen first assumed this role, the school had several existing work experience sites (i.e., grocery store, restaurant, recreation facility, bank, bus station) that students sampled to develop job skills. These experiences did not always match students' interests. Furthermore, when students exited school, they frequently assumed similar positions due to limited experience with jobs in their area of interest. With one student due to exit school in two years, Mr. Allen sought to remedy this problem by creating a new paid work experience site for a student who expressed interest in working with electronics.

Mr. Allen decided to investigate a large retail store with an electronics department to determine if they might be interested in hiring a student. He visited the store after work one day and asked to meet with the store manager. Within minutes, the store manager approached Mr. Allen and asked how she could help. Mr. Allen explained he had a work program, and he was looking to partner with the store to provide a student with a paid work experience. The store manager responded, "Oh, you need to meet with our hiring manager, who is not here. He usually works from 5:00 AM until 1:30 PM. I am happy to speak with you briefly about our open positions. Was there a certain position you were interested in?" Mr. Allen explained, "I have a student with a disability who is interested in working with electronics. I know your company likes to help people with disabilities and so I am interested in seeing what is possible." The store manager responded, "We hire people, regardless of disability status, based on the skills they have, not out of charity. Also, we rarely have positions available in electronics. In fact, I think the last time we hired for an electronics employee was over six months ago. Had you reached out during July, we could have likely hired a few students."



Feeling a bit defeated, Mr. Allen decided to try a small locally owned store that sold new and used electronics. Having learned from his last experience, Mr. Allen visited the store and asked an employee if he could speak with the hiring manager. The employee responded that they did not have a hiring manager. Mr. Allen quickly apologized and asked to speak to the manager. The employee clarified that the store only had an owner and employees, and that he was the owner. To try and smooth over the situation, Mr. Allen responded, "It's so nice to meet you! I love what you do for our community." The owner cheered up and asked if there was something in particular Mr. Allen was referencing. Mr. Allen was unprepared to provide a specific example and vaguely responded, "Everything you do is wonderful."

Although Mr. Allen did not make a positive first impression on the people he approached at each business, he learned a lot from his initial attempts at job development. Upon further reflection and consultation with more experienced work program coordinators, Mr. Allen had several realizations.

- Developing new community partnerships takes time, effort, and intentionality.
- Prior to seeking a partnership, learn as much as possible about the business.
- There are differences in how to approach locally owned and corporate businesses.
- Businesses may have different hours of operation and terminology than schools.
- It is important to be able to present clear information about the work program.
- Highlight reciprocity with employers, not charity.
- When talking with employers, focus on students' skills and not their disability.
- Be prepared to answer questions employers may ask.

As a result of these realizations, Mr. Allen came up with a list of tasks to complete before initiating contact with businesses in the future (see Table 1). By completing each of these tasks, Mr. Allen was able to develop new partnerships with a variety of businesses. Of the lessons he learned, the two most important ones were to know who to approach when initially contacting the business and to emphasize reciprocity (i.e., a mutually beneficial partnership), not charity.

Additional Resources

Competitive Integrated Employment Toolkit

Information related to preparing students for competitive integrated employment is provided with extensive links to related resources.

transitionta.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/toolkit_CIE.pdf

Developing Effective Partnerships with Local Businesses

This webinar describes how to make connections with employers and approach school-business partnerships.

youtu.be/In4X-SRsmFM

Table 1

Tasks to Complete Before Contacting Businesses

Tasks
<p>Research the Business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify its purpose ▪ Know its mission and values ▪ Examine hours of operation ▪ Learn how the business supports the community
<p>Research Available Positions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify available positions ▪ Learn about the positions (e.g., read position descriptions, observe employees) ▪ Learn terminology specific to the position (e.g., fronting shelves, calculating shrink) ▪ Determine if available positions match student strengths and interests ▪ Review the hiring process
<p>Research the Key Players</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify key players (e.g., business owner, manager, hiring manager) ▪ Know the names and roles of the key players
<p>Prepare to Talk with Employers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practice your presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Describe your work program ◆ Share benefits of partnering ◆ Focus on student skills and abilities, not the disability ▪ Identify potential employer questions and how to respond

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