TPM
Academy
®

Talent Pipeline Management® (TPM)

TPM RESOURCE GUIDE:
Connecting Opportunity Population Talent to Better Career Pathways

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Resource 2:
Table of Contents

Resource 2: Employer Orientation to the Opportunity Populations Community

This resource provides employers an orientation to opportunity populations—that is, those individuals who experience barriers to education and employment—and the organizations that serve them. It is a part of a set of resources that, when combined with the introduction, make up the TPM (Talent Pipeline Management®) Resource Guide: Connecting Opportunity Populations to Better Career Pathways. Strategic and sustainable partnerships between opportunity population serving organizations (OPSOs) and businesses start with both parties developing a mutual understanding of each other's roles, needs, and respective value propositions.

This orientation aims to help employers better connect their own pain points to the services and expertise provided by OPSOs, to create more effective, long-term partnerships. It also introduces readers to opportunity population talent and outlines some of the assets these individuals bring to the workforce—and obstacles they face when trying to access education, employment, and career advancement. By working directly with OPSOs, employers can more effectively find new, previously untapped sources of talent and build robust, sustainable talent pipelines for the future. In addition, with clearer communication and a better understanding of each other's needs, all partners can share in the value that comes from training, hiring, retaining, and upskilling opportunity population talent.

Orienting Employers to Opportunity Populations

Employers of all sizes and industries can build with OPSOs successful partnerships that lead to new sources of talent, increased diversity and inclusion, and community impact.

The term _"opportunity gap"_ refers to the systemic barriers that prevent opportunity populations from accessing economic opportunity, stability, and/or mobility.

The terms _"opportunity divide"_ and _"opportunity gap"_ are often used to describe the lack of equitable access to education, employment opportunities, and career advancement that a variety of populations in America face. Factors contributing to limited economic opportunity can include educational background or lack of social capital and professional networks, as well as broader systemic and/or generational barriers related to poverty, gender, and race. Many opportunity populations face persistent gaps in three key areas: (1) accessing a good job with a livable wage; (2) connecting with the necessary supports such as housing, transportation, and childcare to be able to keep and thrive in the job; and (3) pursuing skill development and advancement opportunities at a low cost and with adequate mentorship and coaching. By forming intentional talent pipelines and pathways for opportunity populations in their communities, employers can play an essential role in closing the "opportunity divide" and creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

Becoming an inclusive employer can lead to dual bottom-line benefits that drive both business and social impact.

Inclusive employers proactively recruit, retain, and advance opportunity populations. Through strategic talent investments, these employers can realize what is sometimes referred to as a "dual bottom line" or "shared value." This shared value refers to multiple layers of impact for businesses that adopt inclusive practices in recruitment, hiring, onboarding, training, upskilling, retention, and advancement. Employers are increasingly recognizing that a diverse workforce—one that includes opportunity populations—results in significant business advantages including, but not limited to, better representation of their customer base, better hiring efficiencies, more innovative thinking, boosted productivity, enhanced retention and employee loyalty, as well as greater brand recognition and value among consumers. For example, research from the Center for Talent Innovation shows that when workplace teams reflect their target customers, the entire team is more than twice as likely to innovate effectively for their end users.[1] Inclusive employers often achieve bottom-line benefits while also making a social impact by helping underserved Americans achieve financial stability and economic mobility.

---

[1]   https://www.talentinnovation.org/_private/assets/IDMG-ExecSummFINAL-CTI.pdf

Opportunity populations are those individuals who experience barriers to education and employment.

Opportunity populations refer to people in America who have had limited access to educational and professional opportunities. Though not exhaustive, the list below gives some of the subgroups represented in opportunity populations who have traditionally lacked access to economic opportunity, stability, and mobility. It is important to note that not all members of these groups experience barriers to employment; an individual's circumstances—such as family background, race, geography, and other factors—also play a significant role in one's access to opportunity.

Moreover, many individuals experience barriers to employment but are not part of an opportunity population subgroup. For example, some veterans may face challenges finding employment when returning to civilian life, due to difficulty in translating their military experience into civilian roles; however, not all veterans are opportunity talent. Finally, it is important to note that these groups are not static—people may fit into one or more of these subgroups at any given time. Some common subgroups within opportunity populations can include:

- Opportunity youth: young adults ages 16 to 24 who are out of school or out of work
- Members of the immigrant or refugee populations
- Individuals impacted by the criminal justice system
- Members of indigenous communities
- People with disabilities (physical and/or cognitive)
- People who have limited English proficiency
- People who are (or who have experienced) homelessness

In addition, both systemic and institutional racism in America continue to negatively and disproportionately influence the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC[2]), often making access to economic opportunity and mobility—and enjoying a sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace—more difficult for these communities.

The size and characteristics of opportunity populations will look different in every community. If you are considering building a talent pipeline that includes opportunity populations, it is important to understand the makeup of the opportunity populations in your community. Several resources are available to support this kind of analysis, including local labor market data and various online tools such as The Opportunity Index[3] and The Opportunity Atlas.[4]

[2] https://www.dictionary.com/e/acronyms/bipoc/
[3] https://opportunityindex.org/
[4] https://www.opportunityatlas.org/

Key Takeaways

Opportunity populations refer to a large, diverse group of people who have traditionally lacked equitable access to good jobs with livable wages and career progression opportunities. Inclusive employers intentionally invest in these untapped sources of talent, often through strong partnerships with OPSOs. It is important for employers to first gain an understanding of the opportunity population and the OPSOs in their communities.

Opportunity populations are often an untapped source of talent in the community who bring a unique perspective and skillset to the workplace.

Opportunity populations can bring a wealth of experience and unique strengths to the workplace; however, certain employment practices, such as requiring a four-year college degree or sourcing candidates primarily through employee referral networks, can limit an employer's access to this talent pool. Research from Harvard Business School, Accenture, and Grads of Life shows that for many entry- and middle-skill roles, employers pay on average 11% to 30% more for four-year college graduates, despite reporting no meaningful difference in productivity between those with and those without a four-year degree.[5] Inclusive employers take a proactive approach to mitigating degree inflation and other practices that can lead to bias, and instead consider how diverse opportunity populations could become assets in their workforce.

Here are some examples of unique strengths that opportunity populations bring to the workplace:

- Opportunity youth are highly adaptable and are likely to have life experiences that translate well in the workplace. For example, many opportunity youth juggle multiple responsibilities—they are students, take care of family members, and volunteer or have after-school jobs. For a further introduction to the opportunity youth talent pool, browse these 7-second video résumés (https://7seconds.gradsoflife.org/) of real opportunity youth describing the strengths they have developed through their life experiences.

- People whose second (or third) language is English are fluent in another language and are bicultural. They know how to adapt, learn quickly, and can offer a cross-cultural or global perspective to the business.

- Many people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system are highly motivated to perform, and they are adept at overcoming challenging circumstances—often leading to lower turnover rates among this population.[6]

Gap Inc. is an example of a leading inclusive employer that has taken a proactive approach to building a diverse opportunity population pipeline. Gap's This Way Ahead initiative (https://www.gapincsustainability.com/people/talent/way-ahead) is a partnership between Gap and local nonprofits placing young adults ages 16 to 24 in a summer internship with a local Gap store. Since 2007, more than 3,800 teens have participated in the program, and Gap is on track to hit 10,000 by end of 2020. Gap has found that program graduates hired into jobs, 98% of whom are young BICOP stay with the company twice as long as their peers. The initiative has been so successful that Gap has committed to hiring at least 5% of all new entry-level store employees from This Way Ahead by 2025.[7]

Opportunity population talent, like other employees, face several barriers that inclusive employers can recognize and sometimes help address.

Just as various communities of opportunity talent have unique and enduring strengths, they also face some challenges outside of the workplace. Below are some of the most common barriers that these subgroups face, with some suggestions of how employers can support their employees as they navigate these challenges. Finally, it is also important to note that many employees (not just those broadly defined as opportunity talent) may also face one or more of the following barriers.

- **Orientation to workplace norms:** Many opportunity populations are new to the formal workforce. Employers can optimize their investment in opportunity populations by providing job-shadowing opportunities or internships before hiring, and thoroughly setting expectations in the onboarding process on topics like professional dress, working hours, breaks, and best practices in workplace communication. OPSOs often provide professional skills or "soft skills" training to individuals in preparation for employment. Through effective partnerships, employers can often influence that training such that it best aligns with their unique culture and needs.

5 https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/dismissed-by-degrees.pdf
6 https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/060917-trone-reportweb_0.pdf
7 https://gradsoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/GoLWorkforceWinsWhitepaper_2.5.18.pdf

- **Transportation support:** Many people in America do not own cars and do not have instant and easy access to reliable public transportation. Employers interested in helping opportunity talent grow in the workforce may need to help team members navigate transportation issues, including offering vouchers, subsidies, or flexible spending accounts.

- **Financial instability:** The Federal Reserve found that approximately 40% of Americans cannot afford an unexpected expense of $400.[8] Employers that successfully support opportunity talent have mechanisms in place to help employees navigate unexpected expenses—for example, through an employee assistance and financial wellness program and/or cash advances on paychecks.

- **Food insecurity:** In 2018, approximately 11% of people in America faced food insecurity, which refers to an uncertainty about where/when their next meal would come from.[9] Although it is typically not an expectation that employers provide basic needs such as food, it can be helpful to understand the challenges that employees may be facing outside of work in order to help troubleshoot and connect workers to external supports. Some employers develop informal food banks for their employees: employees donate food when they can, and team members are able to access the pantry if and when they need it.

- **Housing instability:** There may be times when some employees face housing instability due to life circumstances such as the death of a loved one, financial challenges, an abusive relationship, the incarceration of a loved one, and so on. Employers can be supportive of opportunity talent through this kind of challenge, via partnerships with local government or nonprofits, financial assistance, and/or mental health services.

- **Trauma:** Many employees, including those from opportunity populations, have experienced challenges throughout their life that have led to long-term mental and physical health consequences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety and depression. An emerging best practice among inclusive employers is to provide frontline managers with trauma-informed management training to be able to best recognize and address when employees may need additional support in order to continue thriving professionally.

- **Involvement in the criminal justice system:** Research shows that nearly 75% of formerly incarcerated individuals are still unemployed one year after release from prison.[10] Opportunity populations with criminal records face significant barriers in accessing employment, due to both restrictive hiring policies and social stigma; however, members of this community are typically highly motivated to succeed and often have higher-than-average retention rates. For more information about this talent pool and the unique barriers they face, consider exploring Dave's Killer Bread Foundation (https://dkbfoundation.org/), a national organization that helps employers understand how to engage in effective second-chance hiring.

- **Care for family members:** Many people—not just opportunity talent—care for loved ones such as young children, senior citizens, and/or relatives with a disability. Inclusive employers try to ensure consistent and predictable scheduling for team members so that they can balance these family responsibilities, and these employers may also offer health benefits and/or emergency assistance to help support employees through a crisis.

It is worth reinforcing that many of these issues are endemic in America and not uniquely associated with opportunity talent. Many employees may not feel comfortable disclosing or speaking openly about some of the life challenges they face. Often, OPSOs offer added value to employers by serving as a community connector and ongoing resource for graduates of their programs. In some cases, employers may choose to directly hire a full-time employee (commonly called a *resource navigator*) who sits within the company

8 https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2019-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2018-dealing-with-unexpected-expenses.htm
9 https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/
10 https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/060917-trone-reportweb_0.pdf

and helps employees connect with community and social services as needed.

Finally, inclusive employers that invest in supportive practices and policies such as those listed above are likely to experience a powerful "Curb Cut Effect"[11]—that is, by investing in things that help opportunity populations, all employees stand to benefit and overall employee health and wellness is likely to increase. Finally, it is important to note that employers that develop inclusive practices and support networks will likely see improvements in staff morale, retention, and performance over time.

Key Takeaways

Opportunity populations can face challenges outside of work that impact their health and well-being and can be sources of stress. Creating strong partnerships with OPSOs can be a great way to offer additional supports to employees; many of these organizations can provide ongoing assistance and connections to community resources.

---

[11] https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/curb-cut-effect#:~:text=The%20Curb%2DCut%20Effect%20is,we%20rise%20or%20fall%20together.

Orienting Employers to OPSOs

A variety of organizations serve opportunity populations, and these nonprofits can be valuable, strategic, and long-term talent partners for employers.

OPSOs can provide employers with several unique assets: access to a diverse talent pool, demand-aligned training and upskilling of employees, post-hire support services to employees, and overarching strategic guidance on becoming a more inclusive employer. Creating partnerships with these organizations can offer a way to access, train, and hire opportunity population talent at a lower risk to the employer. Many organizations, for example, serve as the employer of record (and sometimes pay wages) while their trainees are performing internships or job-shadowing experiences with a firm, reducing the liability for the employer and allowing for a trial period of training, exposure, and orientation for the candidate. In other cases, employers can access government subsidies or take part in innovative "pay for success" models that lower the risk and/or cost of hiring certain populations.

For example, Roca is a nonprofit organization in Massachusetts that runs the nation's largest Pay for Success project to date.[12] Through the model, philanthropic organizations provide upfront capital to Roca, which provides employment training and placement services to high-risk young men exiting the criminal justice system. The initial investors are reimbursed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts only once successful outcomes in employment and retention have been achieved. This model allows incentives to be aligned by all parties and enables employers to tap into programs that are being held accountable for measurable, positive outcomes. Because this kind of model is still new to the field, it is being tested on a variety of fronts. Consequently, this model may not be replicable in every industry or locale.

Alternatively, employers have also explored (and used) a "reimbursement model" to workforce programs when an employee meets or exceeds predetermined outcomes for retention, performance, and/or advancement. The key in both models is to make sure that the employers' and the providers' incentives are aligned ahead of time.

OPSOs typically fall into a handful of categories based on the kinds of support they offer, their business models, funding sources, and governance structures. Many of these organizations work in concert with one another to serve their communities. Outlined below is an overview of the range of organizations that serve opportunity populations.

High Schools: High schools have myriad programming and educational philosophies. Career and technical (CTE) high schools and programs have specific career tracks where students learn industry skills and may be able to earn industry-recognized certifications. Many high schools have CTE programs as part of their curricula. CTE programs may also have additional programming and supports for students with disabilities or for other special populations. Several national, networked organizations focus on creating strong internship programs between high schools and employers, including National Academy Foundation, Cristo Rey Network, Jobs for America's Graduates, and Urban Alliance. In addition, adult high schools focus on providing GED, skill development, and industry training to those 18 and older.

- **What they offer:** High schools offer a range of services and programming for young people, from career exposure (hosting guest speakers, organizing site visits, and job shadows) to career preparation (industry-recognized certifications, internship programs, and job training programs). Every high school is unique, so it is important for employers to investigate (and connect with) those schools that have the kinds of programming that complement their needs.

- **Typical challenges they face:** The staff who work in high schools serve many student needs (academic, social/emotional, health and safety, etc.) and may often offer some wraparound services to families (after-school programming, food drives, GED/night school, etc.) Though they have direct access to a large number of young people interested in career pathways, high schools may not always be attuned to employer needs in the local market. Forging proactive partnerships with high schools to begin workshops, career exposure, and internships is a good way to start building an early talent pipeline in the community.

---

[12] https://rocainc.org/work/pay-for-success/

Community Colleges: Like high schools, community colleges serve a vast number and range of students across an equally large spectrum of programming. These institutions likely have a standard range of academic programs, but they may also have CTE offerings, industry-recognized certification programs, and "nontraditional" courses of study (internships, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship incubators, etc.).

- **What they offer:** Community colleges may have both "for-credit" workplace readiness programming, such as certification courses and CTE tracks and degrees, as well as "noncredit" offerings, including business roundtables, shadow experiences, mentoring opportunities, and noncredit classes. These programs can offer excellent sources of entry-level talent for middle-skill roles, but they can also be excellent sources of support for existing employees who would like to seek additional training and upskilling opportunities.

- **Typical challenges they face:** Community colleges are often large (some serve tens of thousands of students a year) and dispersed (they may have numerous smaller satellite campuses within a region). Moreover, they may offer a considerable range of programs and services across many academic disciplines and industry tracks. Finding the right staff member(s) who can coordinate relevant programming can often be a challenge.

Four-Year Colleges/Universities: Like community colleges, colleges and universities also offer a large array of academic and nonacademic programming to a diverse student population. These institutions are often better funded than their community college peers, so they also have special programming (fellowships, paid internships, industry partnerships, etc.) and/or research hubs and think tanks that fuel innovation.

- **What they offer:** Colleges and universities offer a variety of degrees, courses of study, and programs to a highly skilled group of students. They are also drivers of economic activity and innovation within their communities. They are natural hubs to find and recruit talent as well as to build the skills of existing employees. Finally, it is important to note that colleges and universities have a wealth of knowledge about people, systems, education, health, and mental health. To find ways to improve the culture and climate of the organization, employers may want to partner with colleges and universities to gain insights into best practices around such topics as labor and training, online upskilling, mental health programming, accommodations for people with disabilities, and people management.

- **Typical challenges they face:** Many colleges and universities have decentralized governance and programming, and their funding streams are enormously complex. Consequently, many colleges and universities move slowly on new initiatives.

Community-Based Organizations That Provide Education and Employment Training: These organizations comprise both national networked or federated organizations, such as Goodwill Industries and Boys and Girls Clubs of America, as well as local, independent organizations with a single location. These organizations are mission driven and can serve a wide range of opportunity populations. Some focus specifically on one subgroup of opportunity populations, such as opportunity youth or individuals with disabilities, while others serve multiple populations or are open to all job seekers.

- **What they offer:** Community-based organizations have deep expertise in—and a passion for—the populations with whom they work, including their strengths and talents, career interests, and life backgrounds. They also have strong ties to other community members who provide essential resources to such populations. Many of these organizations offer some degree of pre-employment training and may also provide some social services, such as housing support and mental health counseling. Within their pre-employment training programs, they may offer general professional readiness training, such as résumé development and mock interviews, industry-specific training, credential-bearing opportunities, and connections or pathways to degree-bearing programs—though most of them do not grant degrees directly. A growing number of nonprofit organizations also provide post-hire services to support employers with ongoing retention, skill development, and advancement of employees. These services can include counseling and coaching, connections to community resources, training and upskilling programs, and management of education benefit programs.

- **Typical challenges they face:** Community organizations can sometimes be stretched thin given the needs of the populations they serve. Many are juggling multiple programs at a time and managing a constant stream of incoming clients who urgently need their support. These organizations often have limited budgets and need to regularly reapply for funding throughout the year to maintain operations—a task that takes up time and resources from their staff.

Social Service Organizations: Social service organizations focus many of their efforts on immediate and pressing community needs, such as food, shelter/housing, clothing, harm reduction (violence prevention, suicide prevention), counseling services, and safe spaces (community centers, after-school programs, and women's/family shelters). They generally do not have the broader programming that community-based organizations possess (such as job training or adult education programs) because they are focused on the immediate needs of their communities.

- **What they offer:** Many of these organizations often have established, long-standing connections throughout the community as well as deep ties and trust among the stakeholders they serve. The people who work in these organizations are mission driven and know their communities well; in fact, many of them often bring deep subject matter expertise to bear (in areas like hunger, mental health, violence prevention, individual or family counseling, trauma-informed practices, crisis supports, etc.). They can be excellent ancillary partners to augment an opportunity populations strategy, especially if your primary organization partner focuses mostly on employment training and less so on more holistic needs. These organizations can offer critical support to opportunity population talent as they progress throughout their careers.

- **Typical challenges they face:** Many of these organizations operate with small budgets and have very little margin for error. They serve high-needs communities with complex challenges; therefore, the organizations (and staff) may often work both inside and outside of their core competencies to help their communities. People in these organizations often wear many "hats" and juggle several job responsibilities.

Governmental Agencies: Governmental organizations and their departments cover an enormous range of community services, and there is typically considerable variation in how these departments are structured and resourced at the local level. Employers might intersect with the board of education, the department of corrections, the office of workforce development, the mayor or governor's office, and/or the department of labor and training.

- **What they offer:** Governmental departments contain deep subject matter expertise, access to funding, a broad and deep reach across the community, and a corps of committed civil servants. Many local chief officials (e.g., governor, mayor, county executive) are tightly connected to community-based organizations and can play a connector role between groups. It is common for these offices to also run their own employment training programs for opportunity talent; summer internship programs have been growing in popularity in recent years. Further, these agencies and the people within them sometimes represent important power brokers in the community who can bring the right resources and/or people to the table. Having local governmental agencies involved in an opportunity populations strategy as a resource or advising partner can be helpful to unlock knowledge about the local landscape that may not be easily searchable on one's own.

- **Typical challenges they face:** Governmental organizations and their departments do not always communicate with one another, which may create confusion about the various initiatives and relationships within a local context. In addition, the pace of activity and decision making can sometimes be slower among government agencies given complex layers of approval and competing priorities. Finally, transitions between administrations can sometimes lead to changing priorities and budget shifts that make long-term partnerships more challenging to maintain.

Other Organizations That Serve Opportunity Populations:
In addition to the entities listed above, many of which focus mostly on providing education and employment training, many other organizations likely interact with and support opportunity populations. Broadly, these organizations can be categorized into the following:

1. Organizations that provide housing support
2. Organizations that provide transportation assistance
3. Organizations that offer health, wellness, and recovery services
4. Faith-based organizations
5. Organizations that provide infrastructure, technology, and information services in the community
6. Organizations focused on public policy reform

These organizations will be able to help employers assess their capabilities and build new competencies. They can also offer direct services and support to a wide range of employees with an equally diverse array of needs.

Key Takeaways

Organizations that serve opportunity populations have enormous diversity in terms of size/budget, mission, scope of work, populations or regions served, and programming; however, they all possess deep subject matter expertise within their areas of focus, and they address the pressing social, emotional, educational, and developmental needs of their clients. Employers will need to research and partner with those organizations whose missions, visions, values, and programming best align with the talent needs of their workplace.

Organizations that serve opportunity populations sometimes form networks to organize their services.

In a growing number of communities across the country, groups of organizations that serve opportunity populations are forming networks and collaboratives in order to better organize their activities, share knowledge and expertise, fill holes in one another's programming, interact with the employer community, and ultimately increase their collective impact. These groups are sometimes known as "communities of practice," whereby organizations meet regularly to learn from each other and improve their approaches to serving their stakeholders. In some markets, these collaboratives are highly structured, with a clear backbone organization serving as the funder and lead facilitator. Sometimes the backbone organization will also play a leading role in communicating with employer networks in the community to help the organization group speak as one voice. In other markets, the groups may be less formal and not have a clear structure, meeting cadence, or facilitator. It can be helpful to research whether your community has an existing network that serves opportunity populations; such networks can speed up your due diligence on the key players in your market.

Some examples of national associations/networks of OPSOs are Jobs for the Future's Young Adult Talent Development network, a coalition of national organizations that train opportunity youth for employment; STRIVE, a national network of programs that use common programming for career development and placement of opportunity populations; and Catalyst Kitchens, a national network of organizations that use food service and preparation as a vehicle for employment and skills training of opportunity populations. Local examples include the EMPLOY Collaborative in New Orleans, the Philadelphia Youth Network, and the Opportunity Youth Partnership in Santa Clara County, California.

Key Takeaways

Many practitioners are starting to form groups with other like-minded organizations in their community. Researching these groups can be a helpful place for employers to start engaging the practitioner community and get an efficient and comprehensive "lay of the land."

OPSOs utilize professionals in multiple roles for supporting opportunity population talent.

In preparing to engage with organizations, employers will find it most helpful to have a sense of the common roles and responsibilities that personnel involved in the partnership will likely have; this way, employers can work most effectively with their partners and reap the benefits of their knowledge, expertise, and ongoing support.

- **Executive team:** The executive team/executive director is responsible for the financial sustainability of the organization and the quality of outcomes. They will not (likely) be deeply involved in the day-to-day management of the initiative, but they are important stakeholders because they will help set up the program, resource it appropriately, and provide executive support and oversight. Executives at nonprofits and community-based organizations have deep subject matter expertise and are also strong, strategic managers. They can help employers envision new programs, develop ways to assess the success of these programs, and build sustainable business models over time.

- **Employer engagement:** Most (though not all) organizations will have an external relations manager (or team) that oversees employer partnerships and may also be responsible for marketing and/or communications related to the initiative. It is likely that a person from this team will oversee the development of your partnership and day-to-day operations of the initiative. The point person for the employer will likely work very closely with a person in this role on the initiative from day 1.

- **Program operations:** The team of people involved in the operations of the program (i.e., providing training and other services to the opportunity population talent) will have deep subject matter expertise. They will likely be consulted about the structure and timeline of the program, especially if the organization's training will be modified to meet your needs as an employer. It is likely that the point person for the employer partner will meet with a representative group of programmatic team members from time to time to review outcomes and think of ways to improve the experience for all stakeholders involved.

- **Fundraising and marketing/communications:** Organizations often have dedicated staff members (sometimes only one or two people) who are focused exclusively on fundraising and grant reporting, which is usually critical to financial sustainability. In very small or resource-constrained organizations, the executive director may take on most of this role and serve as the external face of the organization. Sometimes, fundraising (also known as development) personnel are also responsible for marketing and communications activities. In other cases, organizations will have separate staff members who focus on external communications, including material development, event planning and participation, social media, and so on. It is worth noting that marketing is often not an area where organizations can afford or prioritize significant investment, so you might find more budget-conscious approaches to materials, websites, videos, and other externally facing content. As an employer, you will likely interact with communications personnel over time as the organization seeks to tell the story of your partnership—something that can be beneficial for your own stakeholders as well.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Occasionally (and much less likely for smaller organizations), organizations may have dedicated staff who focus on, research, and analyze programmatic outcomes over time. These staff are often trained in evaluation methods and come up with various methods for analyzing an organization's impact, which can include following up with program participants, capturing data, or engaging in more formal research studies in partnership with funders or other agencies. Most independent organizations (those not associated with a larger national network with multiple office locations) do not have dedicated staff who focus on monitoring and evaluation, and therefore other staff members, including employer engagement, program operations, and the executive team, can often take on the additional role of outcome measurement and assessment.

- **Additional support staff:** Most organizations have personnel devoted to additional support for clients, including connections to community resources and social services. Typical job titles for these individuals include "case manager," "community liaison," and/or "client services manager." It is less likely that you will have regular contact with these staff members, although your point of contact may pull them in for discrete recommendations about specific participants. They are a great resource should you have any specific questions about the range of supports available to opportunity populations served by the organization.

Key Takeaways

Most practitioners in your community will have an executive director as well as employer engagement, fundraising, and program operations teams that run the day-to-day business. Depending on organizational size, structure, and budget, other roles may include communications, monitoring and evaluation, and additional support staff. Your point person will likely be on the employer engagement team, and that person will bring in additional stakeholders as needed.

OPSOs have varying business models and funding streams.

OPSOs access funding according to their structure, needs, goals, and geography. The section below outlines common funders and the structures of these funding streams.

Funders: Below are the most common funders of organizations that serve opportunity populations and their work.

- **Government:** By far, the biggest funder of workforce development programming is government (federal, state, and local). Government funding comes in a wide variety of forms, from educational/workforce programs such as AmeriCorps and the state-college system to partnerships with businesses and nonprofits, to government-sponsored grants and funding streams, such as the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act. State agencies often coordinate the flow, distribution, and monitoring of federal workforce–related funding at the local level.

- **Philanthropy:** Philanthropic organizations and individual donors often try to fill the "holes" in government funding by investing in "innovation," "venture-philanthropy," or unique cross-sector partnerships. Consequently, they rarely fund operational expenses over the long term. Rather, many philanthropies will fund innovation, specific programs, or critical infrastructure for the future.

- **Employers:** Employers and industry associations also fund workforce-readiness initiatives throughout the United States. The type of programming and funding will depend on the needs of employers within a given industry or locale.

Structures of Funding Streams:

- **Grants:** Grants are funding sources developed by government or philanthropic organizations that encourage organizations to develop solutions to an identified issue, apply for funding, and then run the program and evaluate the results. Grant funding comes with rigorous and standardized reporting and key performance indicators (KPIs) as well as regular reporting periods. Many governmental funding streams offer the potential for ongoing operational funding (assuming the requirements of the grant are met each cycle). Many organizations depend on year-over-year governmental funding to help finance their operations.

- **Outcomes-Based:** Recently, funders have been developing "outcomes-based" funding streams that provide revenue for an initiative if the program meets the outcomes requirements. Common outcomes requirements are contingencies like a recruited employee staying for a set amount of time or a team member meeting certain performance conditions. Outcomes-based funding has been developed to align the incentives for organizations and employers.

- **Social Impact Bonds:** These bonds are a form of outcomes-based funding, but they may have a broader lens and/or timeframe for securing the outcomes. For example, an outcomes-based initiative may focus on helping opportunity talent secure employment for at least six months post-hire, while a social impact bond might track the growth of a person's W-2 over two or more years.

- **Fee-for-Service:** Some nonprofits develop fee-for-service arrangements with businesses. These agreements can be mutually beneficial because both parties' incentives are aligned. Employers can push for outcomes-based results (e.g., well-trained employees staying on the job for a specific time period), while organizations can secure a stable and ongoing source of revenue. Some organizations further diversify their revenue streams through additional business models, such as Goodwill, which runs retail stores as supplemental income, or by renting their buildings as event spaces during off-hours.

- **Hybrid Models:** Most organizations pull together a variety of funding streams to help build and run their programs. It is not uncommon for a single program to have government funding that covers some operations, philanthropic funds to cover new initiatives or pay for equipment, and a fee-for-service component with an employer partner. Hybrid funding models give organizations flexibility to innovate and work with a variety of stakeholders, but they are not without challenges. The reporting requirements for these types of initiatives are diverse and multifaceted, and organizations must manage the needs of a wide array of diverse stakeholders (governmental agencies, philanthropic organizations, clients, and employers).

Key Takeaways

Organizations access a diverse array of funding streams to cover their operating expenses as well as new initiatives. Each funding stream has its own unique reporting requirements, KPIs, reporting timeline, and critical stakeholders. As an employer, it is important to remember that organizations have often fully allocated their resources according to their various income streams at any given moment. Therefore, determining together new potential funding streams to cover any additional costs of partnership with you is an important step in building a strong partnership.

There are best practices to follow—as well as common pitfalls to avoid—when partnering with OPSOs.

There are thousands of partnerships between employers and OPSOs all over the United States (and globally), from local partnerships in just one location to national and international partnerships that span multiple states and even countries. Learning from these models and what has made them successful can be a helpful start in pursuing your own partnership strategy. Below are examples of key drivers of success as well as common pitfalls of such partnerships.

Best Practices

•   **Getting internal buy-in:** The most successful partnerships start with strong buy-in within an employer for building opportunity population talent pipelines at multiple levels. It is important that, to the greatest extent possible, senior executives such as the Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) or Chief Operating Officer (COO) as well as frontline staff who will be directly managing opportunity talent are aware of and supportive of pursuing new partnerships to access untapped talent. The TPM model—described further in Resource 3—can provide a pathway for employers to bring the right stakeholders to the table and align parties toward common goals.

•   **Adopting a pilot approach:** Framing your internal communications with an innovation and testing mindset can help free up creative thinking and reinforce a long-term perspective on the partnership. Thinking of the partnership as a learning process that you improve upon over time will help create realistic, short-term goals, and it allows you to pivot as necessary along the way.

•   **Designating clear ownership and roles**: In many successful partnerships, one specific person, usually in human resources (HR), owns accountability for success with opportunity population hiring and advancement. Just like specific HR personnel are responsible for campus recruiting at universities and play the role of liaising with those institutions, placing students into roles, monitoring performance, and so on, designated HR team members who will manage opportunity population partnerships and their outcomes are key to success.

•   **Analyzing your internal policies and practices with an equity lens:** In most successful partnerships, employers take a proactive approach to evaluating their practices, policies, and culture with a view to equity and inclusion. Reviewing and assessing things like the environment and mindsets within your workplace, barriers that might be limiting your talent pool in the hiring process, and your hiring, pay, and promotion rates by race and gender will help you become a more inclusive employer and ensure that opportunity populations can grow and thrive in your company. Your opportunity populations partner can often be a great resource in helping you to evaluate your internal systems and policies and suggest evidence-based strategies for building in equity and inclusion best practices.

•   **Developing metrics of success:** Successful partnerships between employers and OPSOs usually agree on metrics together (this topic is discussed further in Resource 3), and these metrics are driven by both partner goals and funding/reporting requirements.

    Some examples of metrics include:

    –   Rates of hire/placement from partnership (including interns converted to full-time employees);

    –   Retention and performance of opportunity talent at three months, six months, and 12 months;

    –   Culture and climate survey data at three months, six months, and 12 months from the launch of the partnership (this information can help employers and organizations adjust their work with opportunity populations to ensure that the program is working as intended);

    –   Employer, organization, and trainee/employee satisfaction with the partnership; and

    –   Community impact measured by number of target population trained or employed, reduction in recidivism, local economic growth, and so on.

Common Pitfalls

- **Staff Turnover.** Working across organizations is complex work that requires strong communication and ongoing collaboration. The departure of key staff members can slow or stall an initiative. Organizations that manage successful cross-organizational partnerships work diligently to involve a core team of stakeholders who become deeply involved in the work, rather than handing all responsibility to one person. That way, if a team member moves on, the rest of the team can continue the work.

- **Lack of a Clear Communication Plan.** A lack of clear (and ongoing) communication can also derail a project. Every organization has strengths, growth areas, and "blind spots." Unless the cross-organizational team clearly outlines the communications plan and the roles and responsibilities of each team member, the broader team may make assumptions about the flow of information and the project can lose momentum. Developing a communications plan and agreeing on frequency of touchpoints can be a helpful way to mitigate this issue.

- **Underestimating Resources Needed.** Helping opportunity talent become part of the overall fabric of a high-performing organization is complex and multilayered. It involves a mixture of training and development; organizational culture and practice change; and new infrastructure to support this work. Although it is always important to be efficient and conserve resources, carefully and realistically think through the resources required of you and your partner in order to be successful. Come up with a contingency plan for when things change or milestones miss expectations. Reaching clarity with your partner at the outset about how problems will be addressed will help you tackle unforeseen challenges as a team.

TPM integrates these best practices (and more) into a structured framework and provides more guidance on how to operationalize a partnership strategy with OPSOs. Resource 3 of the TPM (Talent Pipeline Management®) Resource Guide: Leveraging TPM to Achieve Better Outcomes for Opportunity Populations offers an overview of the TPM model and how it can be leveraged to activate strong, scalable partnerships that lead to shared value.

Key Takeaways

There are many things you can do internally, prior to an engagement, and as you begin to develop partnerships to set the stage for an effective long-term collaboration. Gaining buy-in and having a pilot mindset are helpful places to start. As you build and strengthen partnerships, set clear expectations about communication, metrics, and contingency planning—especially related to staffing—as these are especially important steps for long-term success.

Recommended Actions for Employers

Employers should consider the following actions in working with OPSOs:

1. **Engage in an internal assessment and/or reflection process.** If you are looking for a place to start, consider exploring the Opportunity Navigator (https://opportunitynavigator.org/), a self-assessment tool for employers that covers best practices in hiring, retaining, and advancing opportunity populations.

    Questions to consider:

    a. What is your corporate culture like (e.g., norms, behaviors, mindsets), and how might it affect the success of opportunity population talent?

    b. How might your current recruitment and hiring policies be limiting access for opportunity population talent (e.g., degree requirements, partnerships with four-year colleges)?

    c. What resources are available for employees to help with access to housing, transportation, childcare, and other basic needs? How might an OPSO provide access to these services?

    d. What systems are in place to support coaching, mentorship, and advancement of employees, including opportunity talent?

2. **Consider your business and social impact goals to evaluate how opportunity populations can be a solution.** Gather stakeholders internally from HR, corporate social responsibility or social impact and the executive team to align on the double bottom-line outcomes you are seeking to achieve by building new talent pipelines.

    Questions to consider:

    a. What kinds of opportunity populations exist in your community?

    b. What strengths could they bring to your workforce, and what unique barriers might they face? How will you support opportunity populations in navigating those barriers?

    c. How might opportunity populations best fit into roles and talent needs at your company?

    d. What goals or commitments do you have for diversity, equity, and inclusion?

    e. What goals do you have for community leadership, impact, and brand, and how might this initiative help support those goals?

    f. What are some outcomes that would help you achieve a double bottom-line impact (e.g., increased diversity, stronger retention, increased brand recognition)?

3. **Explore the local landscape of organizations that serve opportunity populations and set up discussions to learn more.** Research the OPSOs in your area, shortlist those that appear best aligned to meet your needs, and engage in initial dialogue to further explore a partnership.

Questions to consider:

a. Are there any existing national or local networks of organizations in your community?

b. What are the range of organizations in the community that help connect opportunity populations to employment?

c. Have you worked with these organizations before?

   i. If so, what was your experience like, and what do you hope will be different this time?

   ii. If not, why not? Are there organizations you have not considered yet that could be helpful in achieving your goals?

d. Are there any influencers in the community whose perspectives would be useful as you pursue outreach and/or who could connect you to resources or specific people?

4. **Be mindful of best practices and common pitfalls as you explore potential partnerships.** Review case studies of partnerships that have worked well (in your industry or others). Set up the internal systems necessary for success and prepare for effective conversations with potential partners.

Questions to consider asking:

a. Do you have buy-in at multiple levels of the company?

b. Have you designated clear owners with accountability for success?

Questions for OPSOs:

a. What kind of support is offered to trainees in advance of employment? What kinds of support could you offer post-employment?

b. When have you successfully worked with employer partners in the past, and what were some of the best practices from this initiative?

c. How do you measure your outcomes? What data do you have that demonstrates your organization's success in supporting populations beyond job placement?

d. Who will be my point of contact for this partnership, and how often should we plan to communicate?