

FOCUS GROUP: ENGAGING NATIONAL LEVEL BUSINESSES TO SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

KEY FINDINGS

While acknowledging the critical role that small and medium enterprises play in supporting school to work transitions in their communities, the purpose of the focus group discussion facilitated by the Partnership Brokers National Network on 4 March 2014 was to learn from national level business directly about their needs and their experiences of engaging with young people and the education sector.

The businesses in attendance were invited because of their commitment to supporting young people make a successful transition from school to work and included Microsoft, NAB, Johnson & Johnson, TNT, Stockland, Classic Holidays Australia and Yamaha. The focus group discussion was structured around a number of key questions under three broad headings.

- 1. The Value Proposition** – What are the drivers for national level businesses wanting/needing to engage with schools and other education and training providers?
- 2. Challenges/success factors** – What are the key challenges/success factors for national level businesses engaging with the education sector effectively?
- 3. Engaging national level businesses as partners in education** – What will it take to engage more/all national level businesses as partners in education?

Outlined below are the key findings arising from the focus group.

1. The Value Proposition

***Note:** The drivers identified below are not mutually exclusive and the order in which they are identified is not an indicator of importance.*

Workforce development was identified as a strong driver for many businesses. Business wants to contribute to young people's education and skill development so that when they enter the workforce they have the knowledge and skills that business needs. Engaging with the education sector and young people was also seen as an opportunity for business to promote themselves, or their industry sector, as an employer of choice, as well as a strategy for identifying talented young people that they can offer employment to. Workforce development was a particularly important motivator for businesses/industries experiencing skill shortages.

In some cases, engagement with education is an opportunity for business to dispel myths and change the perceptions young people have of their organisation/industry. Engagement was also a mechanism for attracting a particular group of young people to an organisation/industry sector where they are underrepresented. For example, increasing the number of women working in the automotive or IT industry.

Supporting young people's career exploration was another common driver. While career exploration produces benefits to business in terms of workforce development, there are also benefits for young people who are able to make better informed decisions about their future as a result of engaging with business.

Engaging with the education sector provides business with an opportunity to raise young people's awareness of the range of education, training and employment pathways available to them (not just university pathways). This includes raising awareness among young people and educators of the diverse roles and occupations within a national level organisation. For example, a national level IT business not only employs programmers – they need people with legal, marketing, finance, human relations and community relations skills.

Another driver for national level businesses is a genuine commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and making a positive contribution to the community of which they are a part. Businesses recognise that high levels of educational attainment and successful transitions from school to work have an enormous impact on local and regional economies. While prosperous communities also benefit businesses' bottom line, the greatest motivator is the satisfaction that businesses get from making a difference to people's lives. Engaging with young people and schools is a core element of CSR. Being employed by an organisation that is committed to CSR also has a measurable impact on employee morale and contributes to the retention of workers.

2. Challenges /Success factors

***Note:** The challenges and success factors identified were not necessarily experienced by all participating businesses.*

Challenges

Business needs to be able to measure and demonstrate tangible outcomes as a result of their engagement. This includes outcomes for young people, communities and/or business themselves. Assembling this evidence requires rigorous evaluation processes to be undertaken.

National level businesses often rely on a small team within the organisation to design and implement CSR activity. These teams are often based in a central location which makes it difficult to develop relationships at a local community level. Cold calling is difficult and time consuming and results in inefficient use of the limited resources that business has.

There are times when businesses' desire to engage with the education sector is met with reluctance and even suspicion. This is in part a consequence of the very different cultures of the business and education sectors. The two sectors need to develop a better understanding of each other's needs, but this takes time.

National level businesses often find it difficult to make connections and build relationships at a school level. Businesses don't necessarily know who to contact and can spend a lot of time being 'bounced' from one person to another without actually making any progress. Not knowing how or where to start and/or having negative experiences trying to engage with the education sector can lead to reduced engagement, or no engagement at all.

Differences in regulations and operating systems between jurisdictions pose a challenge to national level businesses' capacity to implement national level models of engagement. There are also particular challenges for national level businesses trying to engage with schools that are part of a system and bound by system requirements, as opposed to independent schools that have greater autonomy.

Success factors

Acting as independent intermediaries, Partnership Brokers have proven to be an asset for national level businesses engaging with the education sector. Using their connections at a local community level, Partnership Brokers have been able to alleviate schools' suspicion about businesses' motives and create the foundation for mutually beneficial relationships between the sectors.

While independent of the education and business sectors, the existing relationships Partnership Brokers have with schools are critical in encouraging schools to 'look outward' and engage with business as partners. While cross-sector collaboration involves a level of risk, the Partnership Brokers provide the support that schools and business need to build relationships and work together effectively.

Partnership Brokers have acted as enablers for business by providing the bridge into schools and building understanding and trust between the two sectors. This has accelerated the development of relationships. Partnership Brokers have also been able to use their knowledge of the local community to provide advice on tailoring engagement to meet the needs of a particular business, school(s), or cohort of young people. In some

cases, this includes introducing/adapting existing successful models of engagement as options for business and schools to consider. The national network of Partnership Brokers has also supported the spread and scaling up of effective practices and models of engagement.

While engagement can take many forms, business has found benefits in the partnership approach. Cross-sector partnerships have provided a good framework for collaboration and support a coordinated approach to planning, implementation and evaluation of activity. Partnerships have also encouraged sharing of different perspectives and ideas across sectors and provided fertile ground for innovation.

3. Engaging national businesses as partners in education

One way to promote more business involvement would be to hold forums where national level businesses can build their understanding of the benefits of engaging with education. This includes the benefits for young people, communities and business itself. Such forums could also be a platform for sharing examples of different ways that businesses are engaging effectively. This sharing could build a bank of models for engagement that could be used/adapted by other national level businesses. Models could include proven approaches that can be implemented in the various locations and sites where national level businesses operate.

While models for engagement are useful, business also needs to recognise localised/state differences and remain flexible. Access to human infrastructure that is connected to local communities and understands these differences is a huge advantage for national level businesses.

There is an opportunity to use government and/or private investment as leverage for business engagement. For example, major infrastructure projects being delivered by national level business could include contractual obligations to engage with the education sector.

It is important to promote successful examples of business and education engagement and highlight the tangible benefits. Work Inspiration is just one example of a model that illustrates to business what can be achieved and the difference that business engagement can make to young people's lives. Personal stories and the testimony of young people themselves are powerful motivators.

There is a role for government to support business to engage with education by funding a network of independent intermediaries. Without this infrastructure, engagement will be reduced or won't occur at all. Such a network could be strategically focused on areas of skill shortage or other national priorities such as the limited number of young people undertaking study in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM).

Business itself has a role to play in changing the mindset of businesses that are not engaging with the education sector. This could include bringing other businesses to an event that promotes the benefits of engagement and encourages new businesses to get involved. Such forums could be integrated into existing business/industry events/conferences. There could be significant advantages for businesses from a particular industry sector acting collectively as part of a coordinated industry wide approach to workforce development. Combining resources to achieve a shared objective can amplify the benefits for young people, communities and business.

There also needs to be changes in the way that some education sector stakeholders operate. Many schools are risk averse and inwardly focused. For those schools, there needs to be a cultural shift that results in schools becoming more enterprising and alive to the potential benefits that business can bring to them and their students. However, business acknowledges that schools are not resourced to do this. They rarely have people on the ground with the time and skills to develop connections beyond the school gate. Government and the broader community have a shared responsibility in supporting this cultural shift.

National level businesses would find it easier to engage with the education sector if there was greater alignment of systems and regulations across the jurisdictions.