



BUILDING EFFECTIVE RTO–EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

Effective RTO–employer partnerships are important for ensuring industry skill needs are met while simultaneously building the capacity of providers and employers.

This Good Practice Guide outlines the underpinning elements that help to foster the building and sustaining of successful partnerships between registered training organisations (RTOs) and employers. These elements are: quality training and service delivery; a customer focus; working together; and relationships.

This guide is based on case studies of RTO–employer partnerships that cover various industry areas, geographical locations, and employer sizes. The guide provides examples of what these elements look like in practice, with a focus on the role of the RTO.

KEY MESSAGES

- Listen, learn, do. Closely listening to an employer and gaining a clear understanding of the nature of their business means RTOs can better support current and future training needs.
- Be part of the workplace. Being flexible about where and when training is delivered is important for employers, with delivery in the workplace preferred by the employer. Having the trainer on site helps to foster meaningful relationships with the employer and their workers.
- Build. Earnest communication and collaboration builds a dynamic relationship, transforming a simple transactional arrangement of training delivery into a longer-term partnership, with more substantial benefits for all involved.

BACKGROUND

Effective partnerships are important in ensuring a robust vocational education and training (VET) sector. There are many different types of partnerships in VET, including between: industry and providers; learners and providers; community and providers; and government, industry and providers (Kilpatrick, Fulton & Bell 2001, in Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003).

The learnings shared in this guide are based on case studies of six RTO–employer partnerships. Interviews were undertaken with individuals who were directly involved in the selected partnerships at both management and operations levels. Current learners were also interviewed in some of the case studies. The key characteristics of the RTO–employer partnerships are described in the table below.

Case study	RTO size [†]	Employer size [†]	Industry area	Location
1	Large	Large	Meat processing	New South Wales Regional
2	Medium	Large	Primary health	New South Wales Regional
3	Large	Large	Disability care services	Western Australia Regional
4	Small	Small	Retail (bicycle sales, repair)	Tasmania
5	Medium	Medium	Construction	Northern Territory
6	Large	Medium	Food manufacturing	Tasmania

[†]ABS employer-size categories: micro (0-4 employees), small (5-19 employees), medium (20-199 employees), large (200 or more employees), ABS 8165.0 Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits, June 2018 to June 2022, Annual Data cube 2: Businesses by main state by industry class by employment size ranges, Table 1, December 2022.

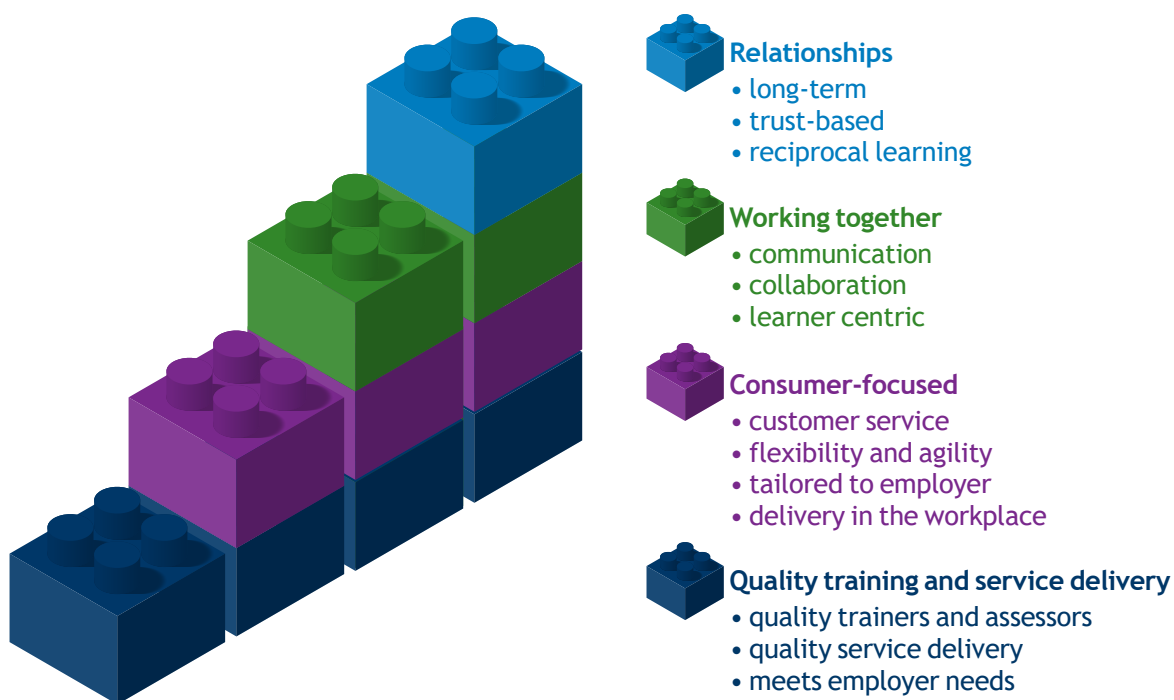
This Good Practice Guide has two accompanying documents: a research report and a support document. The research report provides an overview of the project and a review of the literature, along with insights from the key stakeholders and case studies related to the drivers, benefits and challenges of building and sustaining effective RTO–employer partnerships. The support document contains the case studies, from which the examples of good practice in building effective RTO–employer partnerships were taken.

HOW AN RTO CAN BUILD AND SUSTAIN AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WITH AN EMPLOYER

Previous research suggests that, to build and sustain effective RTO–employer partnerships, open communication, a proactive approach to collaboration, and shared networks/resources are essential (Callan & Ashworth 2004; Smith et al. 2017).

Based on our case studies, and focusing on the role of RTOs, we expand on this previous research and find that the following four elements underpin effective partnerships:

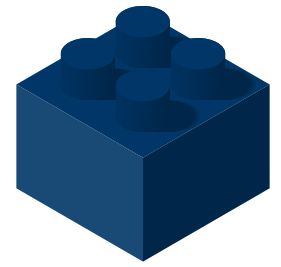
- *Quality training and service delivery*: we view this as the foundation of partnerships. Here, quality refers to the trainers and assessors and to the service delivery, including understanding and anticipating the employer’s needs.
- *Customer focus*: having established ‘quality’ allows RTOs to be more customer-focused; to be more agile and flexible in their response to employers’ needs; and to offer tailor-made, customised training.
- *Working together*: the customer-focused approach is enhanced by: working together; strong communication and collaboration; and a willingness to be learner-centric in the approach to training and assessment.
- *Relationships*: this element is related to working together but focused on the longer-term. This aspect is critical for sustaining partnerships



While we have described these elements as separate entities, in practice there is a degree of overlap and often they build on each other.

Based on learnings from the case studies, we now provide examples of how these elements look in practice.

QUALITY TRAINING AND SERVICE DELIVERY



Quality trainers and assessors

Successful RTO–employer partnerships rely on the expertise of competent trainers and assessors, who possess exceptional interpersonal skills, extensive industry knowledge, and proficiency in delivering training in the workplace environment. The RTOs in the case studies acknowledge the essential role of the trainer and assessor who works on the frontline, engaging with both the employer and the learners and ensuring the ongoing success of the partnership.

Box 1 Valuing quality trainers and assessors

RTOs in effective partnerships with employers understand and acknowledge the importance of having quality trainers and assessors. The senior lecturer from case study 5, who was involved in a partnership with a medium-sized employer in the construction industry, credited the lecturer as the key to the partnership:

“ My lecturer is very important because if he’s not successful, then the whole thing will just become a failure and when you’re a lecturer it’s actually quite a lot more difficult when [you’ve] got to go to a construction person’s timeline. You know, you might have your class day organised ... or you might have something booked outside and then you can’t do it because of something you find out, maybe last minute. So you’ve always got to be prepared for stuff like that because it always comes up. Always have extra stuff in the background you’re ready to do. And a big thing is your relatedness and speaking to the students as well, you know ... you can’t have someone out there screaming and swearing at them. ”

Similarly, in case study 4, which involved a partnership between an RTO and a small business that built, repaired and sold bicycles, the employer was appreciative of the skills of the trainers to effectively deliver the Certificate II in Bicycle Mechanical Technology or the Certificate III in Bicycle Workshop Operations to their employees of varying educational backgrounds:

“ They’ve just got guys who can deliver training effectively, you know, and at the right level. You can be dealing with very academic people, people with tertiary degrees, down to guys who have probably barely got through Year 7 ... But, I suppose the easy thing is, all the people they’re dealing with have got a strong interest in bikes. So, it’s a bit of passion there that helps. But they’re able to deliver to a pretty broad spectrum of backgrounds. ”

Further, RTOs in successful partnerships entrust their staff with the responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the partnership with support and autonomy, and without unnecessary interference. For example, in case study 2, which involved a partnership between an RTO and a large, regional-based employer in the public health sector, the trainer-assessor was given full responsibility for the training service design and development, which involved the implementation of a co-designed model of training delivery. This model of training delivery (which is explained in more detail in box 9) was new to the trainer, but they demonstrated a great willingness to involve themselves fully:

“ Hats off to [the trainer-assessor]. [They] were able to see the vision and see the importance and actually change their delivery, although I don’t think they knew exactly what they were in for until they got there ... But then when it started ... they said they got a lot, a lot more momentum from it. ”

(Employer program manager).

Understand and anticipate the employer's needs

Successful RTO partners stay up to date with industry trends, best practices and emerging technologies to ensure that their service is relevant and aligned with the employer's current and emerging needs. The RTOs have a deep understanding of the employer's operations, organisational requirements, training needs and limitations. They acquire this knowledge by actively engaging with and listening to both the employer and the learners over time. As a result, the RTO is equipped to anticipate and align its training services with the employer's expectations. This demonstrates the RTO's commitment to providing the current skills and knowledge valued by the employer and the industry, and providing learners with the skills they need for real-world application in a specific workplace.

" The main thing for me, if I was to suggest anything to any business, is finding a partner [RTO] that understands what your needs are and where you're trying to go with the training. That's the biggest opportunity I think for a business, and to be able to be successful is to have a partner that can make sure you know that, if they can't deliver it, they don't also beat around the bush and they are upfront with us, they tell us what they can and what they can't do. And you know, as I said, over time we're certainly doing more training with [the RTO] now then we were 18 months, two years ago, because of that partnership and them understanding what our needs are. And then you're able to develop and grow from there. "

(Training manager of large employer in the meat-processing industry in partnership with a large RTO)

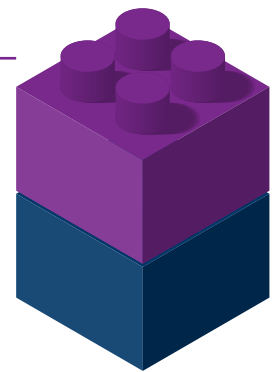
CUSTOMER-FOCUSED

Having quality trainers and assessors who have extensive industry knowledge and proficiency with delivering training in the workplace allows RTOs to be truly customer-focused.

On site, at the workplace or worksite

Training delivered on site offers many benefits for employers: it's cost-effective, enables more staff to participate, helps to minimise workplace disruption, is more hands-on and more immediately relevant.

But it is also more than that. In successful RTO–employer partnerships, RTO staff actively engage and integrate themselves in the employer's work environment. By being physically present, they foster meaningful interactions, cultivate relationships, facilitate the exchange of information, and encourage ongoing collaboration. This immersive approach contributes to the creation of robust and long-lasting partnerships, enhancing their strength and durability.



Box 2 On the scene

Case study 5 highlights the benefits of having trainers and assessors located on site. The employer involved in this partnership constructs modular housing for remote communities. The houses are built in one location and transported to the regional or remote location. The RTO delivers the Certificate II in Pathways Construction, including the white card ('Prepare to work safely in the construction Industry'), and the required training for a forklift licence and a scaffolding licence. The learners are unemployed and recruited by the RTO from job organisations, with the majority being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Training delivery generally involves two days of theory and three days of practical work alongside the skilled tradespeople on a worksite. Being in close proximity to those already in the industry in which they are training is of great benefit to the learners. As the senior lecturer from the RTO claimed, *" Yeah, it works. Hand-in-hand. They probably actually learn a bit more on the job site than what's in the course. "*

Box 2 On the scene (cont.)

The lecturer similarly championed the benefits of an authentic workplace experience for the skill development of the learners:

“ *It’s basically a live construction site ... You couldn’t get a more real workplace experience, you know, you’re working alongside the carpenters, you’re working alongside all the people [who] are on site. Anyone from wall framers, window installations, painting, the electrician sometimes ... It’s an all-round experience for them.* ”

The lecturer also noted the benefits of being on site for enhancing communication between the partners and relationship-building:

“ *The biggest thing in regard to that is just communication, you know. The office where we do our classes and basically the main office is just up 50 metres away. So I’m actually checking every morning. I participate in their toolbox meetings every morning. Then I pull the project managers aside and, like I said, some days I might have to stop class for the day because they need to get a roof on before trucks come to pick up the transportable. So biggest thing with us is communication and if it’s open communication, just makes it so much easier.* ”

Training delivered on site also helps to minimise disruption to the workplace. This is particularly important for small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), who may not have the resources to replace staff who are off site for training.

Box 3 Minimising the disruption

In case study 6, which involved a large RTO and medium-sized employer in the food-manufacturing industry, both unaccredited literacy training and accredited technical training were delivered. The literacy training was targeted to staff in supervisory and management roles, while the technical training was delivered to production workers and included the Certificate II and Certificate III in Food Processing, as well as forklift training.

Not being a large employer, it was important that the technical training delivered to those ‘on the floor’ was conducted in an efficient manner, to minimise disruption to production and discomfort in employees. The technical trainer and assessor brought the classroom to the workers:

“ *I don’t disrupt work, I try to fit around work as much as possible, you know, go in and cap up, gown up. I go into the production area, they don’t come out and explain to me, I go in and watch them. So it’s the limited disruptions ... So you’re standing beside them, going through the questions with them while they’re actually running the machine. It’s fairly comfortable for people. And I might have stood beside them previously and actually written a standard operating procedure with them. So I was asking them questions about what was going on and so you build the relationship and then it’s just not an issue.* ”

(Technical trainer and assessor)

Customisation

Each employer has unique requirements and preferences when it comes to the skills and knowledge needed for their specific work environment, as well as the way in which those needs can be fulfilled. In effective partnerships, RTOs invite employers to have input into the curriculum and how it is delivered, ensuring it aligns with the employer’s needs and context. The training service then accurately represents the employer’s current and changing organisational needs – and this has the greatest positive impact on their workplace.

Box 4 Tailor-made training

Case study 1 involves a large RTO and a large employer in the meat-processing industry, who have a long history of working together, primarily in relation to delivery of the Certificate II in Meat Processing, going back more than a decade. In addition to the certificate II qualification, a broad range of other training services are delivered, including the required compliance training (such as that related to first aid, working in confined spaces, forklift training and animal welfare), higher-level qualifications in meat processing, traineeships in administration and information technology, and other accredited training related to workplace health and safety and risk management.

The benefits of having this well-established partnership is that the RTO has a deep understanding of the training needs of the employer and is therefore able to work with the employer to customise training to meet their specific organisational needs. The RTO business development manager described how they delivered tailor-made leadership and management training to the employer's workplace supervisors:

" *it was only short course, was four units ran over ... one day a week for eight weeks, something like that. So yeah, short, to-the-point customised training ... our trainers, they tailored the content to suit the workplace. So it wasn't [the RTO] coming in saying, 'this is what you should do as a leader and a manager and a supervisor'. It was [the RTO] coming in after having had many meetings with [the employer] and [the employer] saying 'well, this is what we want you to train our people in. Here's some of our workplace documents. Can you customise the solution, the training solution to meet those needs?', which our teaching section was able to do. And the outcome was that they actually had some of the workers writing to the executive management saying ... that it was the best thing that they've ever done. They feel that they're now in a better position to be equipped to lead their own teams. So in terms of improved culture in the workplace as well, really positive outcomes. So yeah, I think that the benefit there is that the partnership is so targeted and it's so focused on outcomes and I think that's probably the real win out of it.* "

Informed by a deep understanding of the employer's needs, the RTOs in successful partnerships customise their training service to address these specific needs. They offer efficient training services, acknowledging the employer's cost burden of worker release and backfill, and the disruption to normal operations. The RTO's willingness to continuously work with the employer and customise the service demonstrates the RTO's commitment to meeting the employer's unique needs, builds trust and differentiates the RTO from its competitors.

" *It's not like we're just creating a course and we're hoping some students might enrol. This is really genuine[ly] needed training. We know who the cohort is. We know why the participants are coming. We know what the outcomes are that the business wants. So, in terms of having a quality of student and learning outcomes, it doesn't get much better than that. It's so understood and so targeted.* "

(RTO business development manager in partnership with a large employer in the meat-processing industry)

Customer service

RTOs in successful RTO–employer partnerships demonstrate a high level of customer service. They are responsive to enquiries, address concerns promptly, and go above and beyond to meet the needs of the employer. The RTOs proactively seek and use feedback to review, adjust and continuously improve their service. A strong customer focus helps to instil confidence in the employer that they are receiving the best possible training and customer care through the partnership.

Box 5 Above and beyond

Case study 4 is a partnership between a small RTO and a small employer in the retail sector, selling, building and repairing bicycles. The RTO and the employer established their partnership five years ago. The RTO owner initiated the partnership after being approved to provide government-funded accredited training in bicycle mechanics. The interesting aspect to this partnership is that the RTO is not based in the same state as the employer but identified and met a local need in a niche, but growing, market not being serviced by local RTOs. The RTO manager was proactive in seeking employers who were willing to provide accredited training to their employees:

“ I set up, you know, a meeting and we had lots of invites go out and there was someone from Skills TAS came along and none of the employers. So, it was me and [Skills TAS person] sitting there talking and I thought, ‘I’ve allowed two days to be down here’. So, then I went and visited them all in their workplaces. So, I met and spoke with [the employer] and identified what his needs were. At the time there was funding available for existing worker traineeships. So, we started there. ”

The training services delivered included the Certificate II in Bicycle Mechanical Technology and the Certificate III in Bicycle Workshop Operations and consisted of face-to-face training sessions and self-paced learning, using workbooks. The face-to-face sessions were done in blocks, and because the RTO and employer were in different states, they required a great deal of organisation by the RTO to ensure all of the correct training equipment was available for the learners at the allocated training time. Some logistical challenges arose initially, but were overcome, with the RTO working hard to ensure minimal impact on the employer:

“ Yeah, try to minimise any stress on the employer side. So they just have to, you know, send their employees, they show up and ideally we’re self-sustained. We’ve got everything we need. Well, that was the plan ... I don’t think there was that many challenges whatsoever. I mean, ideally everything was either done in house or in that area. ”

(RTO manager)

The effort to which the RTO went to deliver the training locally was appreciated by employees:

“ The fact that they actually came to Tasmania was a big thing. The alternative was we got on planes and flew to Sydney ... And that would have almost certainly stopped it happening. ”

(Bicycle technician)

Intrinsic to offering a high level of customer service is being adaptable and agile. RTOs in successful RTO–employer partnerships are flexible, responsive and solutions-focused. To accommodate the employer’s evolving needs, they demonstrate flexibility in all aspects of their training service, including adapting learning content, and in delivery modes, training location and scheduling.

Box 6 Flexibility

The RTOs in the case studies demonstrated flexibility in the different ways in which they catered, often on the fly, to organisational and/or learner needs and constraints. This flexibility requires more effort from the RTO, but rather than this being viewed as a burden or a chore, the RTOs appear to accept flexibility as a reasonable demand of the partnership, and the staff appear to enjoy rising to the challenge.

For example, case study 1, a partnership between a large RTO and a large employer in the meat-processing industry, describes a situation whereby a sudden need for forklift operators emerged:

Box 6 Flexibility (cont.)

" So they're very flexible, like, for example, just this week alone we just started doing, next three weeks, we're doing forklift training because we need some more forklift operators. And so having that partnership there, I guess ... they are able to go out of their way and try and move things around to cater for us, knowing that we've got numbers that we could put on the ground so they can come on site and deliver it. "

(Employer training manager)

Another example of the RTO in case study 1 demonstrating flexibility was provided by the RTO training coordinator, who said:

" The other thing I think that makes it [the partnership] work is that the RTO really has to understand the limitations on the workplace and their reasons for training, and what it means to them, and how to make things as convenient as possible for them. And honestly, we inconvenience ourselves to an nth degree. Like, the trainer that's working out there today, at 1 o'clock yesterday afternoon was told that he could have a group of people that he wasn't planning on at 6.00 am this morning. So he's there at 6.00 am this morning with those people, because they had a change in production schedule that [had] made a group of people that we had difficulty accessing [suddenly] available. "

WORKING TOGETHER

Communication

Successful RTO—employer partners communicate frequently and openly. However, there is no one 'right' way to communicate, as it depends on the partners and the individuals involved. Regular communication builds trust and a stronger working relationship between the partners.



Box 7 Open communication

The partners in case study 3, which involved a large RTO working with a large regional provider in the disability care service sector, appreciated and understood the importance of having regular formal or informal, open and frank communication:

" So we need quality training products. We need to know our product. We need to have the resources that are absolutely up to date. But then what we need to do is we need to know how to communicate and impart that to organisations. And we need to also have uncomfortable conversations, where maybe the plan is to do this, we're part way through the plan, but it's not coming together because ultimately, yeah, we need to do that [review the original training plan]. "

(RTO portfolio manager)

" I think the underlying setting-up of the actual course itself, where the managers were talking, they were giving them honest and reachable goals with what we can actually do. I also feel that with [the employer] they were on board with making sure that it worked and we always had that access [to the worksite for their learners] ... There was always good communication and if anything did arise, then there was always somebody [the managers] could talk to - either myself or it was my team leader. So ... working together and being proactive [in dealing with] any issues that did come up, we worked out some of the problem-solving for them rather than just ignoring it and 'it's our way or their way'. I think we actually worked quite well together from that point of view. "

(RTO lecturer)

Collaboration

Tied to communication is collaboration. Successful partners collaborate to address industry challenges and foster innovation. By working together, they recognise emerging needs and skill requirements, overcome organisational limitations and develop training solutions that cater to evolving employer needs.

Box 8 Working together

The following three quotes take us on a journey of increasing complexity and effort associated with collaboration.

Working together when everything is positive and there are shared goals:

" *This [partnership] has been really positive because [the employer] has really been on board with making change and working with [the literacy trainer and assessor] ... who has so much experience and knowledge in this space and obviously [the employer] sees that and embraces the opportunity to have someone like [the literacy trainer and assessor] in their workplace. So that has made working with [the employer] productive and in some ways, easy is not the right word, but a collaboration, I guess, if you like, between us and [the employer]. And I guess the evidence of that being really positive is that they've asked us to come back again and they're looking for us to do another project with them when they open up their new site.* "

(RTO manager in partnership with a medium-size employer in the food-manufacturing industry)

RTO anticipating employer challenges and doing something extra/less convenient for them to ease those challenges:

" *It was something they had to fit around what they [had] already [done], so at the end of the day, they are a manufacturing plant, they need to get product out the door ... I understand that kind of ethos that drives these businesses and the actual commercial realities here. So when we develop things, and we did it collaboratively, what we did make sure is ... we tried to make systems processes lean. So we were not just looking for the best way of doing things, we are looking for the best, most efficient, cost-effective ways to do things, and that's where you need to have that understanding. It would have been quite easy to do what they needed by ... developing really, really complex systems and processes, but the reality is you need to be able to put something in place that enables them to still do their core business.* "

(Technical trainer and assessor in partnership with a medium-size employer in the food-manufacturing industry)

RTO negotiating competing obligations:

" *I guess one of the challenges is obviously we both have competing obligations. So [the employer] obviously does have a client base and they do need to provide care for their client immediately. They can't put care off to a client because they are a high-quality, direct client care service program. So sometimes the competing obligation is where they need [the] student, staff [and so they] may not be able to attend our training sessions because they need to do that. It's a competing one, but it's an understandable one ... The other [challenge] is that we work under units of competency and so organisations may have a particular range of skills that they may need to also develop for their staff, because that's related to their particular client or their service, and sometimes aligning the two together can be difficult. Under compliance, we can't assess staff or assess students on a range of skills that aren't in units of competency ... which usually leads to a further conversation and a 'How are we going to work that?' "*

(RTO portfolio manager in partnership with a large employer in the disability care service sector)

Learner-centric

In effective RTO–employer partnerships, the learner – and what they require to be a successful worker with the employer and in the industry – is at the centre of the training design and learning processes. The partners support learners to access and successfully complete the training and are responsive to the competing demands workers face, of juggling work, training and their personal lives. The partners prioritise the individual needs and aspirations of the learners within the constraints of their operations.

Placing the needs of the learner at the centre can take many forms, such as providing them with more flexibility to complete the training requirements, providing logistical support to help them to attend the training, and having the learners fully involved in the design of the training and its delivery, as occurs in a co-design approach.

Box 9 Co-design: where a learner-centric approach, communication and collaboration intersect

Co-design is a collaborative and participatory approach to designing learning experiences and involves both trainers and learners in the design process. Traditional training, on the other hand, typically involves a top-down approach, whereby trainers design the training program and deliver it to learners. The main difference between co-design and traditional training is that co-design involves learners as active participants in the design process, while traditional training is designed and delivered by trainers without significant input from learners.

Case study 2 involved the delivery of a number of units of competency from the Diploma of Leadership from the Business Services Training Package, as part of a program designed to prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers for leadership roles. The initial delivery of the program used a traditional trainer-centric model, but it became evident that a shift to a more learner-centric design model, one reflecting the learning needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, was required. By aligning with the employer’s leadership framework, the RTO collaborated using the employer’s co-design model and co-delivered with the employer. The program manager with the employer explained:

“ We first came together traditionally, the way it’s [done] normally, but as we workshopped and facilitated what we wanted to achieve and how we’re going to achieve it, then there was a respectful sort of, there was a bit of tension in that changing [of] the model delivery to suit the participants for the outcomes that they need. So there was a willingness to flex those traditions to meet the needs of the participant. ”

The trainer-assessor was new to the concept of co-design and was supported to get up to speed by the employer. He said:

“ I mean, most trainers think they know everything, but we know very little. But the fact that you could ring up someone and ask for something. I mean, I knew nothing about co-design. So, [the program manager] was kind of like my go-to man on all of that. And honestly, I’ve worked with some employers [who] say, ‘mate, that’s your job’. But we didn’t have that. ”

RELATIONSHIPS

Reciprocal learning

Effective RTO—employer partnerships involve the mutual exchange of information, best practices and lessons learned. The partners leverage each other's strengths, address weaknesses, and develop solutions to achieve their shared objectives. Through the partnership, the RTO gains insight into the current and emerging industry skill requirements and develops their workplace delivery methodologies. This enables the RTO to better align their services to meet the employer needs, resulting in better outcomes for that workplace, the learners and the broader industry. A specific example of reciprocal learning, known as two-way learning, is described in box 10.



Box 10 Two-way learning

Case study 2 features a partnership between a medium-size RTO and a large regional employer in the primary health care sector. Together, they successfully designed and implemented a culturally sensitive and tailored Aboriginal leadership program, which prepared existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clinical health workers for higher-level management roles.

The partner's shared commitment to achieving real outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers drove the design of the learning.

" Well, they're both wanting to educate and, you know, improve outcomes for First Nations employees. So that's probably ... [how] they ... do complement each other. They're definitely on the same page where that's concerned. "

(Mental health professional/learner)

The learning model used was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander two-way learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander two-way learning involves integrating the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into Western-style education. It necessitates a dialogue between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and Western knowledge systems and seeks to promote mutual respect and understanding between different cultures. In this approach, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge is not merely an add-on but is integrated into all aspects of the learning process. Two-way learning emphasises the importance of language and culture in the learning process, and recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners may have different learning styles and needs from non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (Hooley 2002).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander two-way learning model facilitated the exchange of knowledge and perspectives between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and the trainer-assessor. Over time and with the support of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, the trainer-assessor learned how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into their teaching methodology.

" You know, it became a two-way learning process ... our organisation and the participants were actually imparting knowledge, cultural knowledge in how to deal with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander workers for the [trainer-assessor], and the [trainer-assessor] was imparting leadership knowledge and capability with [the participants] as well. So, it was that, that beautiful partnership and [the trainer and assessor] ... was very open and vulnerable and said 'look, I know I'm learning from you as well' and they were. It was ... a bit clunky initially but became a really strong co-facilitated model. "

(Senior manager with the employer)

Another example of reciprocal learning occurs when the trainers and assessors gain industry currency through being physically on site or through work placements, as described in box 11.

Box 11 Developing together

Case study 3 was a partnership between a large RTO and a large regional employer in the disability care service sector. In this partnership, the learners engaged in accredited training and were provided with valuable work placements. At the same time, the trainers and assessors had the opportunity to access work placements themselves, ensuring they maintained the currency of their industry skills and knowledge. The reciprocal arrangement not only strengthened interpersonal relationships but also contributed to a deep understanding of the employer's operations. The advanced skills lecturer with the RTO summarised this aspect of the partnership:

" Part of me going out there to do some of my industry currency was part of building [the partnership] because it just fosters better relationships. So, I was with them for a couple of weeks. And I went to three different group homes. I'm a nurse by profession ... so it keeps me current as well so I know what's happening in industry. But, because I was then able to work with their staff and because some of their staff are also our students now, they're relaxed at being a student because it's scary for people to become a student when you've not studied for many years, you're already working in industry, now that industry said, 'yeah, now you need to get a qualification'. It's a real barrier and it's scary. So that sort of fosters that relationship where it's OK ... we're here to help guide you through it and nurture you through it. We're not here with a clicky pen and a clipboard going, 'Didn't do that right', you know, it's about nurturing and saying, 'but you're already doing this. You don't realise you're doing it, but you're doing it because this situation happened and you did this, this and this'. I didn't do much of that [assessing] when I went [for the two weeks] because I didn't want to be there as a trainer, I wanted to be there as somebody working the floor. "

Relationship management

Partnerships usually begin with an initial connection or transaction and gradually progress into a more established and mutually beneficial relationship. RTOs in successful RTO–employer partnerships actively employ strategies and practices that are designed to build trust, foster strong and mutually beneficial connections, maintain open lines of communication and achieve shared goals.

Box 12 briefly describes the types of organisational relationships evident in the case studies and illustrates that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to relationship management. What is important though is an RTO-designated point of contact.

Box 12 Types of organisational relationships

The organisational relationship models vary across the case studies. However, what successful partnerships between RTOs and employers have in common is the presence of an RTO-designated point of contact. This person has a deep understanding of the employer's needs and is empowered to access resources and on occasions make decisions on behalf of the RTO.

Smaller RTOs adopt simpler models to manage one-on-one relationships, an approach reflective of their own simpler internal structures. For example, in case study 4, which involved a partnership between a small RTO and an SME, the RTO owner managed the relationship directly with the owner of the organisation. They also designed the training and delivered some of the training themselves. Another example of an RTO employing a simpler model is case study 2, which involved a partnership between a medium-size RTO and a large, regional-based employer in the primary health sector. In this case study, the trainer and assessor managed the relationship with the employer, and designed and delivered the training service.

Larger RTOs employ more complex models to establish a single point of contact and to manage the relationship. For example, in case study 1, which involved a large RTO and a large employer in the meat-

Box 12 Types of organisational relationships(cont.)

processing industry, the relationship was managed by a dedicated business development manager in the RTO. This person had no direct involvement in the training delivery but acted as a shield, protecting the employer from the internal complexities of the training organisation. The training manager with the employer appreciated this type of organisational relationship:

" You know, I work closely with [the RTO business development manager] ... and having someone like that is really beneficial in making it all work together. [The RTO], being a big organisation, I guess it could be difficult if I was dealing with hundreds of different people and trying to coordinate all these different types of training; you can get quite busy. I've had that with other training providers in the past. But having a central point that helps coordinate and keep that together has made it a lot easier as well. Like I've probably broadened out now and I talk to a lot of the other direct trainers and coordinators as well, but just having that central point, [where] we can sit down and coordinate and work out our plan for how to deliver all the different training over the years really is beneficial for us and I think it's beneficial for them too, because it gives them more opportunity to scope out where they need to put their trainers. "

The RTO business development manager alluded to the financial positives for the RTO of this organisational relationship model:

" They keep coming back! They love their relationship [with the RTO]. It makes life so much easier for them. It really does. You know, they just don't have to think too much about it. They just can contact me, [the RTO], and [say] I need this, I need that and we're able to, nearly every time, deliver on what they need. I just think that having the trusted relationship is crucial to them. It just takes away a lot of the hard work of, I need to go on Google and I need to find out how do I do this and where do I do it? They know they can come to me and [the RTO]. "

Strong organisational relationships are fuelled by positive interpersonal relationships within and between the RTO, the employer and their employees. These relationships foster trust, which leads to smoother collaboration, shared decision-making, and increased confidence in each other's abilities.

" We're not just trainers and assessors here. We get phone calls in the middle of the night with some of our students from present or past courses and they're just looking for help sometimes or just somebody to listen to them, you know, and we take that on. "

(Lecturer in partnership with medium-size employer in the construction industry)

Mutually beneficial and long term

With increased trust, understanding, collaboration and mutual investment, the relationship between the partners matures and evolves over time. This in turn provides opportunities for further work for the RTO and ensures the longevity of the partnership.

Successful partnerships, those that focus on building and sustaining a long-term relationship rather than focusing on the short-term completion of a transaction, do so by sharing responsibilities and pooling their resources, skills and expertise. The longevity of partnerships, and their enduring benefits, is dependent on the collective efforts of both partners.

Box 13 In for the long run

The partnership described in case study 1, between a large RTO and a large employer in the meat-processing industry, has not always functioned as well as it does now. But once each partner made a commitment to a long-term relationship and invested in their relationship-management model (see box 12), the partnership evolved into the successful union that exists today. In doing so, it led to the RTO becoming the employer's preferred training supplier:

" It's basically where we're working pretty much as a preferred supplier, so to speak, and trying to find training solutions to their training requirements in a way that suits them best ... And from their point of view, them being committed to working with us ... so that making the delivery happen is a joint arrangement. Not just, OK, we've signed you guys up to deliver Cert 2, go and do it. No. How does it work for you? How does it work for us? OK, so we've made a commitment at the same time you guys have made a commitment and you've got to honour your part as well as us honouring our part. And in us honouring our part means going way beyond what is just required to deliver the qualification. "

(RTO business development manager in partnership with a large employer in the meat-processing industry)

This long-term commitment to training employees is also evident in the case study involving an RTO working in partnership with a large employer in the disability care services sector to provide work placements for students undertaking qualifications in the Community Services Training Package, as well as upskilling staff already employed with the organisation. The RTO portfolio manager said:

" I find them a very communicative organisation. I find them very interested in upskilling and training staff. They're very committed to that. They've been having this dialogue and interaction with us for a few years now, so it's a long term commitment ... that's really helpful for us because we've got a lot of organisations that touch base with us, then things change, and they're unable to progress and there's all sorts of reasons why, you know, organisations suddenly lose funding, client base changes, we've got COVID, you know, there's all that sort of stuff in the middle. But I find that [the employer] has always come across as an organisation: this is their end goal and they're committed to this and they're doing it in multiple ways. So you can see that their commitment to have high quality staff either when they come on board or to upskill is very evident in any of our conversations, and there isn't a reluctance to talk about how [long] it's going to take, but there's no short term. "

We end with a piece of advice from an RTO business development manager in partnership with a large employer in the meat-processing industry, which sums up the key elements of an effective RTO–employer partnership: quality training and service delivery; customer-focused; working together; and having a trusted relationship.

" I actually think, more than anything, it's about building a trusted relationship. I really do. I think that if you can be there to listen and then to act promptly and accordingly, and then more than anything, deliver on what they're needing in terms of training, that's the basis of a very, very good industry-RTO, employer-RTO relationship ... it's just that trusted relationship, [which] if you work with that customer for long enough, or industry or the business for long enough, and you keep going back to them and offering your support and your help, then they know, they get to a stage pretty quickly, that they can just come to you and they keep coming to you. And as I said before, even more importantly, is that through that you've got the trusted relationship, but then you actually can deliver quality training as well. That's it, it's pretty simple. "

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Additional related publications published by NCVER are:

- Trimboli, D, Circelli, M & Berghella, T 2023, *Building effective RTO-employer partnerships*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Berghella, T, Circelli, M & Trimboli, D, 2023, *Building effective RTO-employer partnerships: support document*, NCVER, Adelaide.

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