

Why Targeting Matters

Turning Business Signals into Smarter Economic & Workforce Development Collaboration

By Mark Muckerman

Every community's economic and workforce development teams are chasing the same goal: help local businesses grow, adapt, and stay competitive. But most are trying to do it with a fraction of the resources the challenge truly requires.

Consider the numbers. Across the country, roughly 19 million businesses span more than 19,000 cities and 3,100 counties, organized into 525 distinct workforce regions. Each region covers anywhere from 1,000 to 449,000 businesses, from the smallest to the largest jurisdiction—supported by a patchwork of more than 10,000 EDCs, EDAs, chambers of commerce, and public-private partnerships.

Against that backdrop, one question becomes unavoidable: **which employers will most benefit from your attention today, and why should they be your priority?**

The Old Way vs. the New Way

For many economic and workforce development organizations, employer outreach still looks like business as usual: working chamber lists, leaning on existing relationships, posting on social media, driving around industrial parks. It also includes fielding calls from employers only after they already have a problem.

These efforts aren't wrong — they're reactive. They depend on who reaches out, who's on a list, or who's visible from the road.

A data-driven approach flips that model. Instead of waiting to be found, teams can:

- Mine their own internal program data for patterns
- Compare live market intelligence against their plan
- Build quantitative definitions of what “good” looks like
- Engage proactively based on data, signals, and triggers
- Triage engagement in a way that's aligned with strategy, not just availability

The payoff isn't just efficiency — it's reliability, consistency, accountability, and a model you can track, adjust, and repeat over time.

What Counts as Business Intelligence?

Good targeting isn't built from a single data source. It's a combination of signals working together:

- **Program data** — internal programs, CRM history, WIOA performance data, business engagement history, economic development data, LMI data, community college data, UI/WARN data, and OJT, work-based learning, re-entry, and veterans' programs.
- **Business identity** — industry, size, location, headquarters, ownership.

- **Characteristics** — woman-owned, veteran-owned, exporter, manufacturer, government contractor, certifications, NAICS code, supply chain position.
- **Workforce data** — occupations, employment, wage levels, skills.
- **Hiring activity** — job postings, hiring velocity, difficult-to-fill occupations, recruiting trends.
- **Business signals** — employment growth, facility expansion, new locations, capital investment, business age, business health, risk of failure.

Individual data points may tell you something. But multiple data points create a clearer picture—and that picture helps you prioritize outreach. This shift sets up the next step: turning signals into action.

From Signal to Solution

Every business signal can trigger an engagement opportunity, and early signals let you shift from a reactive to a proactive business engagement model. Depending on the signal, those opportunities may be independent or overlap between workforce development and economic development. Here are a few examples in practice:

Business Signal	Workforce Development Response	Economic Development Response
New business announcement / relocation	Recruiting assistance, hiring events, OJT, apprenticeships	Site selection support, business recruitment, community integration
Business expansion	Incumbent worker training, customized training, apprenticeships	Business Retention & Expansion (BRE), infrastructure, incentives
Difficulty filling critical jobs	Apprenticeships, career pathways, sector partnerships	Business retention, industry competitiveness
Hiring slowdown	Layoff aversion	BRE outreach, business assistance
WARN notice / plant closure	Rapid response, career services, worker transition	Business retention (if viable), redevelopment planning

There IS a pattern: the strongest possibilities for collaboration tend to cluster around growth indicators (expansion, technology investment, industry cluster growth) and around risk signals (hiring slowdown, financial stress, WARN notices). These are the moments when a coordinated, cross-agency response matters most—and when employers notice whether the community showed up. Use these signals to identify your next outreach list and coordinate the response before the opportunity passes.

Who Owns the Response?

Not every program belongs equally to workforce development or economic development. Some are clearly led by one side and supported by the other. Others are genuinely shared, and that distinction helps clarify how the response should move forward

- Workforce development typically leads on rapid response, apprenticeships, OJT/hiring assistance, hiring events, and work-based learning.

- Economic development typically leads on business recruitment, capital investment/site development, and business succession planning.
- High collaboration opportunities cluster around sector strategies and Business Retention & Expansion (BRE)—the areas where the two teams bring real value and neither should work alone.

Clear ownership matters because ambiguity causes employers to fall through the cracks—or get contacted by two different people asking the same questions. Clear roles also help teams move from overlap to coordinated action.

Turning Data into Priorities

An engagement framework is good, but it's only useful if it holds up against real-life business scenarios. To show how the framework works, consider these examples:

A Growing Manufacturer

- 150 employees
- Opened a second facility
- Employment up 18%
- Actively hiring CNC machinists and industrial maintenance technicians.
- No registered apprenticeship program

This business is making long-term investments, not just filling seats. Therefore, that's a natural opportunity for workforce development (apprenticeships, incumbent worker training, recruiting assistance) and economic development (a BRE visit, infrastructure and utilities coordination, supply chain development) to coordinate.

A Family-Owned Manufacturer at Risk

- Employment down 12%
- Hiring freeze
- A major customer lost
- An owner nearing retirement
- A declining industry

Multiple weak signals stacked together tell a much stronger story than any one of them alone — and they point to exactly the kind of employer where early intervention may prevent layoffs altogether. In this case, workforce development can support ownership and workers' skills development, while Economic Development provides guidance, resources, and access to financial support programs.

Layoff Aversion in an At-Risk Sector

- A priority strategic industry showing declining activity
- Increased business failure risk
- Unfilled job postings

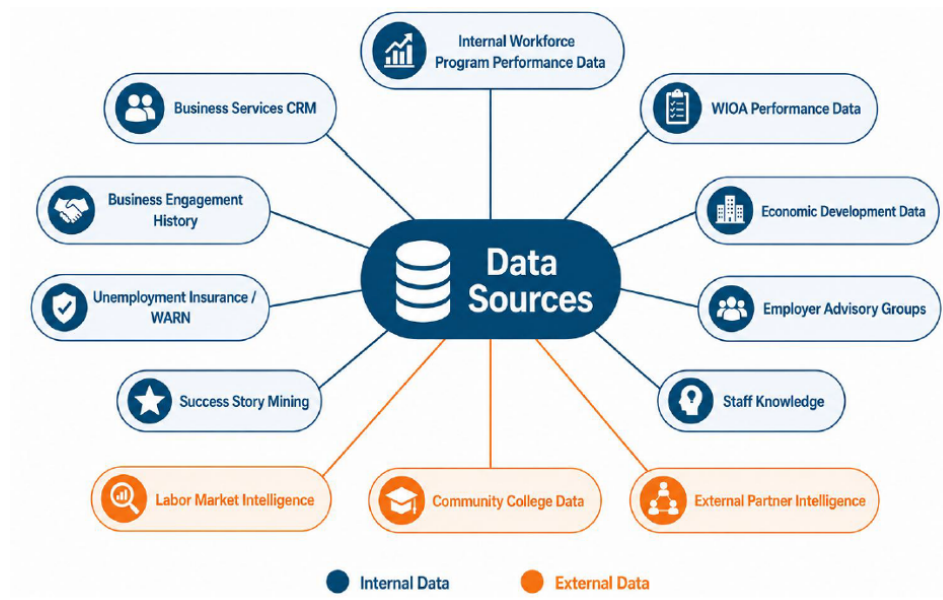
Proactive, coordinated outreach here can mean the difference between mitigating a downturn and reacting to closures after the fact.

The Common Thread is Simple

Good targeting rarely comes from a single data point. Instead, it comes from combining signals. Start by reviewing your strongest growth and risk indicators. Then assign the next employer outreach accordingly.

Are You Using All the Available Data?

Workforce and Economic Development agencies also have more internal intelligence than they realize—it's just scattered. Internal data assets include workforce program performance data, business services CRM records, WIOA performance data, business engagement history, economic development data, UI/WARN data, employer advisory group input, staff knowledge, and success story archives. External resources — labor market intelligence, community college data, and external partner intelligence — round out the picture. Together, these sources help reveal what to look for next.



The internal knowledge sources deserve particular attention, because they're often underused:

- Your CRM/business services data shows your most contacted and most responsive employers, repeat program participation, and outreach history—building a profile of engagement level, responsiveness, and relationship history.
- Business Services visits and business surveys surface expansion plans, hiring plans, capital investment, and workforce issues — translating directly into growth plans and investment-level profiling
- Community college data shows employer partners, skills and curriculum strategy, and support resources — mapping to talent pipeline and skills requirements.
- Employer advisory groups and sector partnerships capture recurring concerns and emerging industry trends — indicators of collaboration readiness and innovation interest.
- External and third-party business and market data. DOL & BLS data assets are available, along with commercial partners that provide deep, robust, and sophisticated business-specific data and analysis tools to strengthen collaboration capacity.

Mining Data for Patterns

Once you know *what* to look for and *where* to find it, the next step is to interpret and apply it across your market. Teams can data-mine their own program history—apprenticeships, OJT, incumbent worker training, layoff aversion, and rapid response—to identify what successful engagement looks like.

Patterns of a Successful Engagement

For example: which employers launched programs successfully, which occupations and industries were involved, completion and retention rates, time-to-launch, and more. When applied across the broader business universe, those patterns can surface high-match candidates before they ever raise their hand.

That broader view also connects directly to how engagement unfolds over time. Use these patterns to build your target list and begin outreach. Start with the employers most likely to respond.

Collaboration Across the Entire Business Lifecycle

Successful business engagement cannot be transactional. Every business moves through stages — startup, growth, expansion, innovation, maturity, and transition — and economic and workforce development have a role at each one. Even if engagement ebbs & flows, use the business lifecycle to decide when to engage. Also, use it to decide what to offer and which team should lead.



Economic development keeps engaged across the entire lifecycle: recruiting and removing barriers at startup, supporting retention and networking during growth, coordinating BRE and infrastructure during expansion, backing capital investment and partnerships during innovation, assisting with export and market diversification at maturity. At the transition stage, it also supports succession planning.

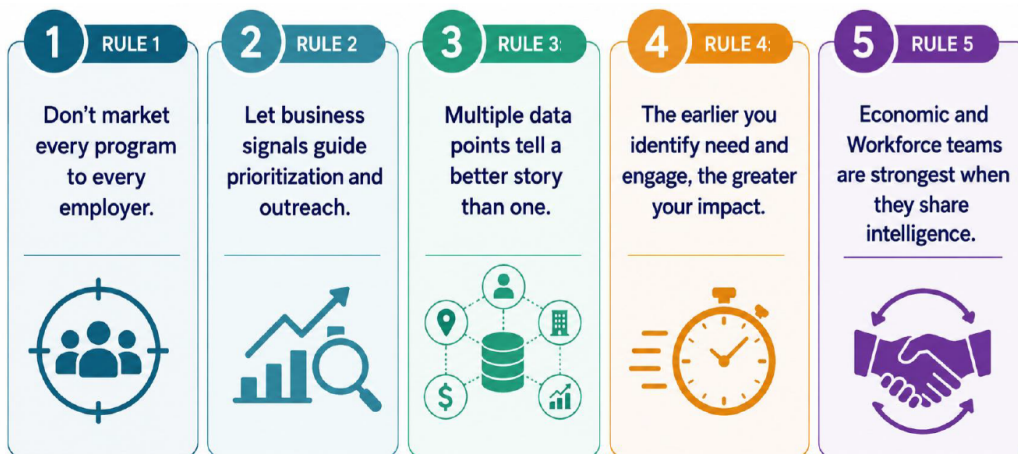
Workforce development engages most heavily once talent becomes a competitive advantage—from labor market information and early hiring support, through recruiting and OJT during growth, to apprenticeships and

incumbent worker training during expansion and advancement. As businesses mature and transition, workforce development focuses on leadership development. It also focuses on layoff aversion, rapid response, and succession planning at the transition stage.

Mapped side by side, it's obvious these aren't two separate parallel engagement paths. They're a single continuum of support. In fact, the handoffs between them are where partnership either works—or doesn't. That's why the transition between economic and workforce development matters so much.

Five Rules for Smarter Outreach & Collaboration

Keep it simple, and remember just 5 guiding principles:



The Bottom Line

Successful business engagement is not about “your program.” Businesses don't care about your programs, metrics, or goals. Instead, successful, effective business engagement by workforce and economic development agencies must be about the businesses' experience with you: unified, coordinated engagement; collaboration; and community support.

Finding the right business for the right program at the right time depends on effective targeting. This means combining program data, business signals, and shared intelligence to know which employers need attention now. It also means ensuring economic and workforce development show up together. They should show up with the right message at the right time.

This blog was adapted from a presentation by Mark Muckerman, CRO & Director of Strategy, “Targeted Business Engagement – the Collaboration between Economic & Workforce Development,” BSA 2026.

Questions about the framework, or curious about how EconoVue helps economic and workforce development organizations put targeted, signal-based business engagement into practice? [Contact us](#).