What are the Roles of Apprenticeship Drivers

Apprenticeships are most successful when the right partners are working together with a shared purpose. Each entity involved plays a different role, and each brings something essential to the process. When these roles are understood and coordinated, communities are better equipped to help young people, including youth with disabilities, access meaningful career pathways.

Across states and national apprenticeship systems, five primary "drivers" **(Who Are Drivers)** consistently shape how apprenticeship programs are created, supported, and sustained:

1. Business and Intermediaries

Businesses define the skills needed for success on the job and provide real work experience. Some businesses work directly as apprenticeship sponsors; others work through intermediaries that help coordinate training, mentoring, and administration. Their leadership sets the direction for the skills apprentices will develop and the jobs they will enter.

2. Education and Training Providers

Education and training partners deliver related technical instruction (RTI) and support skill development. They ensure that what is taught in the classroom aligns with what is needed on the job. These partners also play a key role in making training accessible and supportive for learners with different needs.

3. Apprenticeship Offices and Advisory Bodies

State Apprenticeship Agencies and the U.S. Department of Labor support and register apprenticeship programs. They help ensure program quality, consistency, and sustainability. These partners also guide organizations through the process of establishing or expanding apprenticeship pathways.

4. The Workforce System

Workforce agencies, including Vocational Rehabilitation, help individuals prepare for and access apprenticeship opportunities. They support career exploration, job readiness, and training services. The workforce system also helps employers connect with talent and strengthen their local pipeline.

When these four drivers communicate and plan together, apprenticeship pathways become easier to navigate—for both employers and jobseekers. For young people with disabilities, coordinated support means clearer entry points, stronger transition planning, and a greater chance of success in training and employment.

5. Stakeholders

All planning teams that are committed to outcomes for youth with disabilities should include Disability 'Stakeholders' in a leadership Role. In aligning purpose with the community of focus there are always additional organizations, associations or even key individuals with knowledge, interest and passion for your project's objectives. The engagement of these parties are a gift that should be embraced, while not including them may ultimately result in a roadblock to your success.

This toolkit provides practical strategies, role guidance, and collaborative planning tools to help states and local partners bring these drivers together in a meaningful way.

Role of Business / Employers / Intermediaries

Businesses and employers provide the real work experience that apprentices need to build skills and establish a career. They identify the knowledge and competencies required for success on the job and help shape the training that supports them. Intermediaries, such as industry associations or workforce organizations, often work alongside businesses to coordinate program design, administration, and ongoing support. If the apprentice or employee adds value to a business in meeting the business's objectives, it speaks well for their career aspirations.

What They Do in Apprenticeship

- Identify the skills, behaviors, and competencies needed in the workplace
- Hire apprentices or designate current employees to participate
- Provide on-the-job training and daily skill development
- Identify workplace mentors and supervisors
- Offer feedback on related training instruction (RTI) to ensure alignment
- May serve as the apprenticeship sponsor directly or work with an intermediary sponsor

What They Need to Be Successful

- Clear understanding of the skills and roles they are hiring for
- Support in navigating apprenticeship registration and administration
- Practical tools for mentoring and supervising developing workers
- Communication channels with education and workforce partners
- Confidence that the training supports real job readiness

How They Support Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

- Provide real experience that builds confidence and workplace identity
- Offer flexible pathways into careers where strengths can be demonstrated on the job
- Work with partners to provide reasonable accommodations and inclusive training practices
- Participate in a supportive network where challenges can be addressed collaboratively
- Contribute to building long-term talent pipelines that reflect the community and future workforce needs

Businesses do not have to create apprenticeship programs alone. When employers, intermediaries, education, workforce, and apprenticeship partners work together, youth and young adults with disabilities gain a clearer and more supported path into meaningful careers.

Role of Education & Training Providers

Education and training providers deliver the Related Technical Instruction (RTI) that supports the classroom or lab-based learning side of apprenticeship. Their role is to ensure that instruction aligns with workplace needs and leads to meaningful skill development. Depending on the community, these partners may include high schools, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, adult education programs, community colleges, universities, training centers, and union training programs.

What They Do in Apprenticeship

- Provide structured learning that complements on-the-job training
- Work with employers to align curriculum with current skill requirements
- Assess learning progress and support apprentices in gaining needed competencies
- Offer credentials, certificates, or college credit that stack toward career advancement
- May coordinate with employers, intermediaries, or apprenticeship sponsors to support administration and compliance

What They Need to Be Successful

- Clear understanding of employer expectations and skill requirements
- Reliable communication with business, workforce, and apprenticeship partners
- Guidance on how apprenticeship integrates with existing coursework and credential pathways
- Support in making instruction accessible for diverse learners
- Opportunities to strengthen their role in career-connected learning

How They Support Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

- Provide accessible instruction that recognizes different learning needs and strengths
- Coordinate with Vocational Rehabilitation and support partners when additional learning support is needed
- Offer environments where apprentices can develop confidence before applying skills on the job
- Help ensure that training leads to real, measurable progress toward a valued job or credential
- Create space for early career exploration that can lead directly to employment opportunities

Education and training partners play a central role in connecting skill development to real job opportunities. When instruction aligns with employer needs and support systems are coordinated, youth and young adults with disabilities are better able to move into meaningful, well-supported careers.

Role of Apprenticeship Offices and State Apprenticeship Agencies

Apprenticeship Offices at the state and federal levels support the registration, quality, and sustainability of apprenticeship programs. They help ensure that programs meet required standards and that employers, training providers, and workforce partners have the guidance needed to launch and maintain strong apprenticeship pathways. In some states, this role includes Apprenticeship Advisory Councils that provide direction, problem-solving, or coordination support.

What They Do in Apprenticeship

- Support the design and registration of new apprenticeship programs
- Ensure programs meet federal and state standards for safety, instruction, and progression
- Provide guidance to sponsors and employers as programs develop or expand
- Track program outcomes and support continuous improvement

- Connect partners to state and national apprenticeship resources

What They Need to Be Successful

- Clear communication from employers, training providers, and workforce partners about goals and timelines
- Early engagement in planning so guidance can be proactive rather than corrective
- Shared understanding of roles, especially when intermediaries are involved
- Realistic expectations of capacity, especially when demand for apprenticeship is growing
- Coordination with workforce and education systems to support long-term sustainability

How They Support Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

- Help ensure that apprenticeship pathways are designed to be welcoming and supportive
- Offer guidance to sponsors on inclusive practices and reasonable accommodations
- Encourage alignment between pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and long-term career pathways
- Connect partners to national models and promising practices that support access and success
- Reinforce that quality and accessibility are compatible — and essential — to strong programs

Apprenticeship Offices and State Apprenticeship Agencies help ensure that programs are built to last. When they are brought into planning early and collaborate with employers, training providers, and the workforce system, apprenticeship pathways become clearer and more supportive for youth and young adults with disabilities.

Role of the Workforce System

The Workforce System helps individuals prepare for, enter, and advance in employment. This includes career centers, youth and adult workforce programs, and Vocational Rehabilitation working together as part of one system. Workforce partners support career exploration, skill-building, and access to training, while also helping employers strengthen their talent pipeline. When workforce partners coordinate with employers, training providers, and apprenticeship offices, apprenticeship pathways become easier to navigate and sustain.

What They Do in Apprenticeship

- Provide career awareness and exploration activities
- Help individuals prepare for work and develop foundational skills
- Connect jobseekers to pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities
- Offer supportive services such as transportation, tools, clothing, or testing assistance (varies by program)
- Coordinate funding and services to support participation
- Vocational Rehabilitation, when involved, provides disability-related services such as planning, accommodations, assistive technology, and job coaching

What They Need to Be Successful

- Clear understanding of available apprenticeship pathways and entry points
- Regular communication with employers and training partners
- Shared expectations around roles in mentoring, coaching, and problem-solving
- Processes for coordinating funding and follow-up services
- Strong relationships built through ongoing collaboration

How They Support Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

- Provide guidance in exploring career options that align with strengths and interests
- Assist with preparing for training and workplace expectations
- Coordinate accommodations and supports across training and employment settings
- Offer coaching and stabilization support during early work experience
- Help ensure apprentices can continue and grow in their careers long-term

The Workforce System plays a central role in helping youth and young adults with disabilities access and succeed in apprenticeship. When workforce partners collaborate with employers, training providers, and apprenticeship offices, pathways become clearer, supportive, and more effective.

Role of Community Stakeholders

Some apprenticeship efforts benefit from the involvement of additional community partners who bring lived experience, cultural connection, and trusted relationships with youth and families. These partners are not always formal system leaders, but they often influence whether young people feel welcomed, seen, and supported.

Examples include:

- Community-based and faith-based organizations
- Disability advocacy groups and peer networks
- Youth self-advocacy and leadership groups
- Local leaders who are trusted in the community

Why this matters:
Stakeholders help ensure that apprenticeship outreach, messaging, and support reflect the community's voice. Their perspective strengthens connection, builds trust, and can prevent barriers or misunderstandings later in the process.

Practical first step:
Include stakeholders when planning outreach and communication strategies. Ask what matters to the youth and families they serve — and listen.

Engagement Levels Roadmap

Communities begin apprenticeship work from different places. Some are just getting started, while others have well-established partnerships. The goal is not to be at a specific level, but to understand where you are now and identify the next reasonable step. Progress comes from building relationships, communicating openly, and aligning around shared purpose over time.



Level	What It Means	What It Looks Like	Next Step
Isolated	Partners are working separately.	Each organization is designing or delivering programs independently. Little awareness of what others are doing.	Identify the key contacts and begin simple information sharing.
Communicating	Partners are aware of each other's work.	Occasional updates or meetings; informal referrals; no shared planning yet.	Establish regular communication and clarify who does what.
Coordinating	Some activities or timelines are aligned.	Partners share information intentionally and coordinate certain steps, but systems still operate separately.	Work together to align processes, entry points, or messaging.
Collaborating	Partners plan and make decisions together.	Shared goals, shared problem-solving, ongoing alignment between roles and expectations.	Identify shared outcomes and define how progress will be measured.
Integrating	Systems are connected and sustained.	Joint planning, shared accountability, stable communication channels, and a consistent structure for supporting youth.	Continue adapting as needs change; support leadership transitions and new staff onboarding.

Every partnership moves through these levels at its own pace. The important thing is to build trust and clarity at each stage. Small steps—like aligning enrollment points or sharing training calendars—can make apprenticeship pathways easier to navigate for youth and young adults with disabilities and the partners supporting them.

Supporting Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities in Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship can open meaningful career pathways for youth and young adults with disabilities, especially when support is coordinated early and consistently. When partners understand their roles and communicate clearly, young people are better able to explore careers, develop skills, and move into jobs with long-term growth potential.

What Helps Young People Succeed

Youth and young adults with disabilities are most successful in apprenticeship when:

- Career exploration happens early and includes real work experience
- Expectations are clear and consistent across partners
- Instruction and training are accessible and flexible
- On-the-job support is available when questions or challenges come up
- The young person is part of a team that plans, communicates, and adapts together

These are not extra steps — they are built-in practices when the four drivers are working together.

Example 1 — Starting from High School or a Community Program

A student is interested in machining and is enrolled in a CTE program. The school partners with a local employer and the workforce system to provide exposure to the workplace through tours, guest speakers, or hands-on projects. As the student gains confidence, the employer offers a paid pre-apprenticeship experience where the student learns foundational skills and becomes familiar with workplace expectations.

What makes this work well:

- The training provider and employer talk regularly about skill needs
- The workforce system helps with tools, transportation, or job readiness
- Supports (including disability-related supports, if needed) are coordinated early

- The path from pre-apprenticeship to apprenticeship is clearly explained

The result is a **smooth transition** from learning → experience → job entry.

Example 2 — Entering from the Workforce System
A young adult is exploring career options and visits a local job center. Staff help them assess interests and introduce apprenticeship pathways in their region. The individual chooses healthcare and is connected to a training provider for classroom instruction while working part-time at a local clinic.
Job center staff and the clinic supervisor stay in communication, checking in regularly to support progress. If the individual needs accommodations, VR may contribute planning or tools, while the employer and training provider adjust expectations and instruction as needed.

What makes this work well:
- The job center explains apprenticeship as a career pathway, not a single job
- The employer and training provider coordinate expectations
- Supports are added when needed, without drawing attention to disability
- Feedback is shared in a problem-solving approach

The result is stability and growth, not trial-and-error.

What All Partners Can Do
To improve access and success for youth and young adults with disabilities:
- Talk openly and early about what success looks like for the learner
- Align expectations so messages are consistent across settings
- Share information that helps support learning and work experience
- Offer flexible approaches to training, mentoring, and skill demonstration
- Assume ability — and adapt the environment where needed

When partners move forward together, apprenticeship becomes a launch point for long-term employment, not just short-term training.

Apprenticeship works best when each partner does a part consistently, rather than one partner trying to do everything alone. Shared clarity, communication, and flexibility help youth and young adults with disabilities build confidence, skills, and careers that last.

Leadership and Shared Ownership Across Drivers

Strong apprenticeship partnerships develop when each driver takes an active role in shaping direction and supporting implementation. Leadership in this context does not mean one partner is “in charge.” It means each partner:

- Understands how apprenticeship supports their own goals
- Contributes expertise, not just attendance
- Shares responsibility for communication and problem-solving
- Invests time and attention consistently

When partners show up in this way, apprenticeship efforts move with more clarity and stability. Apprentices feel supported, employers stay engaged, and the pathway strengthens over time.

Leadership Role
A partner is demonstrating leadership when they:
- With other leaders, set shared objectives related to apprenticeship
- Commit staff time, expertise, and resources to meet those objectives
- Participate actively in planning, not just implementation

Leveraged Role
A partner is in a leveraged role when they:
- Are available as a resource if asked
- Support the effort, but do not help guide direction
- Provide services or input reactively, rather than proactively

Both roles can be present in early stages of collaboration.
However, shared leadership creates stronger systems over time.

Reflection Questions
Use these to support team discussion:
1. Where is our organization currently demonstrating leadership in apprenticeship work?
2. Where are we primarily being "leveraged" as a resource rather than shaping direction?
3. What is one small step we could take to increase shared ownership?

The goal is not to require every partner to lead everything.
The goal is to ensure that each partner leads in the areas where they have strengths.