



GETTING BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY INVOLVED

Education is a business, and there are consumers for our product – our graduates. These consumers include businesses, industries, government agencies, non-profits, and universities.

An actively engaged business team provides crucial leadership in developing graduates who are prepared to secure employment in the industry. These steps will help you create an active Business and Industry Leadership Team (BILT).

Let the businesses lead and they'll have a stake in your program. Involve them and they'll be so engaged that you can call on them for help, like providing guest speakers or mentoring students to prepare them for interviews. (We know of one school with a business group that continued to list members who were deceased – that's not engaged.)

Give the BILT something they want, they will participate. But they need to believe in the process and the program.

Remember this not the traditional "advisory group" that meets once a year to review and approve (or maybe rubber stamp?) what you present and may or may not feel connected to your school. Instead, you want this group to meet regularly, feel integrated with your program, and steer your curriculum.

1. Determine which businesses, industries, agencies, non-profits, and universities should be represented in the BILT.

- Distribution of size and type.
- Do not limit to only large companies (unless you have a national focus). Medium and small companies provide perspective and are likely to hire as well.

Who do you want involved? Technical leaders from companies that are hiring. Remember that large companies all have IT departments. You don't have to pursue just IT and tech companies. Invite temp agencies, non-profits, and government agencies. Public schools are good, even if they're often behind the IT curve. Universities are also good, but they sometimes have a 2-year-school bias.

Remember that you don't have to stick to your city limits. You can look beyond to neighboring areas. They'll hire too. In other words, it's okay to expand your geographic pool.

Human Resources executives have value because they're the first filter before an applicant sees the hiring manager. So if you have an HR rep on your BILT, that's okay, but they need to come with the hiring manager. HR may indeed turn down resumes, but they're often following guidelines set by the hiring managers.

"Regional BILTs" are groups that give guidance and feedback to multiple colleges. If you have more than one community college in your area, don't make BILT members advise each school individually. That runs the risk of cannibalizing your BILT members. Instead, consolidate your efforts. Then play this angle up to stress to your BILT members that their feedback will impact more schools and more students. You will need a strong facilitator to guide regional BILT and bring everyone together to work collaboratively with the businesses as faculty from different schools can come with their own agendas.

In more rural areas, BILT meetings don't have to be held at the school, but at least one meeting each year must be face to face. The key is to research labor market demands. That is, find out where students are being hired and target that the area when recruiting your BILT.

If you already have a BILT-like group, it's probably already "institutionalized" with faculty and courses set and certificate/degree patterns approved. If so, then the question for you is how the program could be improved with more engagement.

2. Determine what you want to get from the BILT and develop your "sales pitch."

Adjust your sales pitch as needed for each prospective BILT member. What do you want each member to do? Make a guess at why the prospective member can benefit from the relationship. Use this to help them buy into the premise. Even if you like to sell, create a script with a decision tree on how you might handle objections that might be brought up.

Ideally, you'd assemble one BILT group for each major subject area. If you have one big BILT to cover all computer subjects including programming, hardware, network infrastructure, etc., the members will likely get bored when you are working on areas they do not know, and the needs and priorities for all the constituencies will be blurred.

- Establish expected time commitment per quarter.
- Establish expectations of involvement and activities, including what is required and what are optional contributions the BILT member can consider.
 - Minimal expectation includes 4 BILT meetings annually
 - Job skills validation (annually, face to face)
 - 3 other 1.5 hour BILT meetings (virtual)
 - Optional opportunities
 - Course and curriculum validation and modification
 - Job forecasting – anecdotally and through surveys
 - Internships, both traditional and virtual
 - Job shadowing
 - Providing expertise in the set-up and operation of labs
 - Donating equipment or other resources
 - Providing speakers at student, public, and education events
 - Helping with recruitment
 - Teaching case study courses
 - Consulting with students

Plan to keep tabs on those who aren't attending. If someone hasn't attended in two years, that's a red flag. Ask them "What's changed?" "How is this working for you?" Maybe they can refer you to someone else at his/her company who's better suited. But even for those who are attending, you want to call them once a year and find out how it's going on their end. You cannot just send e-mails. Note also that sometimes a BILT member will disappear for a while because of job duties, then return and rejoin the group.

3. Recruit appropriate business and university partners by starting with your target organization's President.

- It's a "high-touch" activity, requiring personal contact, not mass mailings or mass emails.
- Identify businesses and industries, universities and agencies that hire people with the job descriptions representing your curriculum.

What's a big enough group? That depends on the size of your program and your college. Eight or ten per meeting is a good goal, but you have to typically have twice that many members because BILT members have jobs and can get overcome by events and not be able to attend, even though they want to. If you can get 50 or 70 on your BILT list and then get 20 to attend each meeting, you're doing great.

Over time, as you get to know the BILT members, you'll learn that they each have different motives and goals. Smaller companies may want to get engaged with the bigger companies, bigger companies may be interested most in a pipeline of workers.

- Contact the president of the company or university.

Start with the highest-level executive you can find in your region. You probably can't get that person on the phone, but you can talk to his/her administrative assistant. And often the admin can refer you to someone else in the company to handle the query. When you contact that person, indicate that (NAME) in the president's office referred you.

Strive for a mix of people and knowledge levels on your BILT: high-level technical executives, first-line managers, technicians, other appropriate Subject Matter Experts.

- Share your vision of what the program can mean to the area

Be excited! Passion is contagious.

- Explain the importance of the company having a subject matter expert, usually a first-line manager, involved in the BILT (typically the HR representative can also be involved, but you need to have an SME as well). Focus on the individual to whom you are talking. They will know if they fit the needs and can refer you to someone else as appropriate.

Talk about the benefits you can provide the business and their worker pipeline.

Note also there is often appeal in sharing and discussing trends in a non-proprietary, neutral environment.

- Mention that you have grants from NSF, DOL, etc. if you have them. This carries a lot of weight.

Everyone in the Convergence College Network (CCN) is part of the CTC's NSF grant. The term "federal grant" gets respect. Tell the BILT prospect that you're part of a network of colleges funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation that includes professional development for faculty.

- Establish time expectation of BILT members.

Set your regular meeting time. For the CTC, meetings are usually on Tuesday mornings at 8:30 before the BILT members can get trapped in crises at work. The annual meeting lasts 4-6 hours, and the other three meetings last 90 minutes.

After you establish the time commitment up-front, do not exceed the time requested without the businesses volunteering. For example, if you say you'll end meetings in 90 minutes, end them in 90 minutes. Don't go long. Anything left to be done can be done via email or on the next meeting. Overall, you're asking for maybe 10 hours a year total. Later, once they're engaged, they'll likely volunteer more time.

4. Conduct initial BILT meeting.

- Invite all faculty to attend the meetings as observers to gain their buy-in to what the BILT wants.

Faculty attends BILT meetings to hear first-hand what BILT members have to say. The goal is to hear from BILT members, not endure a faculty filibuster. But because some faculty might not believe the BILT summary you provide, it's good to remove the intermediary and put them in the room with the BILT members.

Overall, you don't want faculty members designing a program, then presenting it to the BILT and saying this is how it is. Faculty members are the skilled implementers and have expertise, but they must follow the business leadership if you want them to hire your graduates. You will lose BILT support if the faculty dominates the discussion.

Avoid also putting adjuncts on the BILT because of the appearance of a conflict of interest when voting on curriculum (even if they know industry very well and have valid opinions).

There can be fear from the faculty. "Oh no, what if they tell me I have to teach something I don't want to teach?" Change can be scary. The first thing to do is get a Dean on board. Explain why BILT feedback is important so you can strategize together on how to deal with the reluctant and the stubborn. You may also encounter a "What's in it for me?" attitude from faculty. Remind them that we're all here to help the students. Maybe recruit a faculty member who's a leader and can sway his or her peers. Another strategy: avoid doing all of the legwork – present the problem and then ask the faculty "What do you think?" It is important to let them lead, come up with topics, and do the thinking.

- Publicity – invite reporters (if your college has a PR department, they could manage this).
- Refreshments – not elaborate, but important to have, especially in the morning.
- Time – early morning typically works better before BILT members go to the office.

Mornings are better for meetings than afternoons because office schedules change. If BILT members get settled in at work, something may (and often will) come up that prevents them from attending an afternoon meeting.

- Explain how important BILT leadership is to the program and what their companies will get from their involvement.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities between the BILT and educators. (Educators are there to listen, not to present or run the show.) Consider choosing one of your strong business leaders chair the meeting. Do not ask for volunteers.
- Explain the need for quarterly meetings and establish dates for the year.

If you meet less than quarterly, you run the risk of an "out of sight, out of mind" situation.

- Review opportunities for helping (from your "sales pitch").
- Ask for feedback on industry trends, which helps you anticipate what your students will need to know in the future.

Community college curriculum is always behind, so ask the BILT for an update on trends that are coming on a quarterly basis. That way, you can start discussing early how to develop new or adapt curriculum for the future. Ignore the BILT's advice at your peril; they will ask you later what you did with their suggestions. Consider sub-committees (sometimes called Tiger Teams to work on more complex projects like adding a whole new area to the curriculum.

- Stick to the agenda and keep the discussion rolling, limiting those who might want to dominate (both BILT members and faculty.)

Have an agenda for each meeting.

BILT members need to know what's happening at your college. Discussing your grant/program status is an important agenda item of every BILT meeting. Some BILT members may not care, but gently remind them it's important because funders expect grants to present their activities and progress against goals to the business community for feedback.

BILT members love student presentations. They enjoy seeing what your program (and their wise counsel) provides students, so make student testimonials a regular agenda item.

- Acknowledge the importance of their time by starting and stopping on time regardless of whether or not you complete your agenda. End early if you have what you need. You can always complete your work later via email.

Acknowledge the BILT, thank them, show your appreciation.

- Take minutes. Publish them. Have the BILT approve at the next meeting, or at minimum, email them out to BILT members and ask for comments.

5. BILT recognition

- News releases/articles
- Thank you emails (personal, not mass emails)
- Thank you letter to the President or their managers
- Certificates
- Plaques

Businesses enjoy publicity, so invite reporters, get a write-up in the paper or tech blog. You can also post photos and bios on your website.

6. Reporting

- Quarterly minutes
- Yearly accomplish report – activities, not just head count
- Have students present
- Strive to get at real student impact rather than just numbers

7. Keeping the BILT fresh

- Add at least one new member each quarter and introduce them.

Keep the BILT fresh. Mix it up. Eventually, existing BILT members will invite new members.

- Talk with each member individually at least yearly to ask them what they think you could do differently to obtain more from them or the entire BILT.

8. Benefits from following this approach

- Business ownership of your curriculum and your program in general.
- Interest in hiring your students above other applicants because they understand what your students know.
- Faculty recognizes and understands business requirements first-hand.



National Convergence Technology Center
Collin College 9700 Wade Blvd. #J130
Frisco, TX 75035
www.connectedtech.org
972.377.1582



This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No.1205077. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.