

# UW-Madison: Industry partners leverage UW-Madison for business success

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## INDUSTRY PARTNERS LEVERAGE UW-MADISON FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

Representatives of four large Midwestern businesses spanning retail, Internet technology, insurance and finance gave an insider's view on establishing and profiting from expertise at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the world's great universities.

The talk, part of the Office of Business Engagement's "Day on Campus," on Aug. 15, explored the genesis and evolution of relationships that spanned from a few months to many decades.

The office's mission is connecting businesses, in Wisconsin and beyond, to the vast expertise and enthusiasm found at UW-Madison, a campus with more than 44,000 students, 22,000 faculty and staff, and expertise in almost any conceivable field of science, culture and art.

The panel of industry representatives shared how they initiated their partnership with UW-Madison, how the process had progressed, what they learned along the way, and how the relationship had affected their product lines, technology and

workforce. “We have been a partner with UW-Madison in a number of areas including retail, e-business, and supply chain management,” said Adrienne Bestul, senior manager, talent development, at Lands’ End. “With that comes challenges; how to stay in front of what is happening in the university, how to stay ahead of students, and ensure that they continue to be engaged.”

Although it’s a key player in financial information, Morningstar Inc. had difficulty being taken seriously when it attempted to recruit employees at other colleges, said Leslie Mullins, the firm’s talent & culture business partner. “It was difficult to get in the door, because we were not hiring hundreds each year. At Wisconsin, I was connected to Melissa Simon of the Office of Business Engagement, and it was amazing. She took me around campus, introduced me to four or five colleges, and I found a great partner at the personal finance program in the (Wisconsin) School of Business.”

Morningstar is a data-driven organization that rates mutual funds, Mullins noted, “so I started tracking how our Wisconsin hires were doing, and I saw they were progressing quicker and taking on more meaningful and challenging assignments.”

Being small was not the problem for Richard Vincent, chief business officer at Foxconn Industrial Internet’s technology solutions group, the newest partner in the panel. “Foxconn is more than 100 companies with more than 1 million employees. So when everybody got the memo to come to Wisconsin, it was easy to inundate campus when group after group said, ‘I need access to this professor.’ We backed off, focused, and have had success with a couple of programs. We are pleased that we have been able to figure out the right way to do this relationship.”

Indeed, starting small was the advice from Bestul, noting that Lands’ End chose to open an office in Madison to further facilitate its 30-year relationship with the university and its students. “Pick a lane and get started. We’ve had a phenomenal opportunity recently where we bring our senior leaders into the classroom. Requests to speak to clubs are a great way to interact with smaller groups of students.”

Many relationships flourish in terms of hires and interns. But they can also produce tangible business benefits, said Glenn Fung, director of the research, machine learning research and innovation group at American Family Insurance. “We had a project with a UW-Madison computer science professor to develop a data machine to recognize different spellings and different addresses as the same individual.

Commercial solutions require you to learn the particular software language. Instead, we used machine learning to teach the computer to recognize a match by itself. There's talk about setting up a company to bring this to market."

Relationships between business and the university don't fit cookie cutters, Fung added. "Our staff has published about 25 papers in the research journals. People ask why an insurance company would want to publish? Because these are data scientists and they want the world to know who is doing that work. We do this to keep our people engaged. IP can come from that, which is key for the company."

As several panelists noted, relationships are critical – but they take time and face-to-face connections. Morningstar wanted to connect some of its senior leaders to the personal-finance students, says Mullins. "It took a while, and we could not get all the leaders here in person, but we ended up streaming one in to the classroom so she could answer student questions. It ended up being something simple, but effective."

Amy Achter, managing director of the Office of Business Engagement, shared what she hopes attendees take away from the day. "In talking to the companies that came here, we learned that there are some very common challenges, but they are all going about addressing them in their own unique way. That tells us our office needs to be flexible and agile in order to respond to every request individually. Each solution will look different."

Overall, Achter says, the key message from the day was, "You can start anywhere and do it for next to nothing. Start small, start purposefully, come on in and learn how we can work together. The key is to figure out the starting point and grow from there. You don't need to know anything about UW-Madison when you start. That's the Office of Business Engagement's job."