

Job Development in a Tough Economy: Mission Impossible?

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“No one’s hiring!” Have you heard colleagues say that? It almost seems to be a universal comment during the current lengthy recession. Is it true? Or is it an excuse for poor job development outcomes?

A key principle of supported employment, indeed of any sincere employment initiative, is the presumption of employability for all people with disabilities. That is, anyone who wants to work can obtain employment, regardless of the nature of disability, or regardless of the need for support in finding and succeeding in a job. We should also add another phrase to that statement: *regardless of the economic vitality of the community in which the job seeker lives.*

In spite of the current economy, the field has the tools to make employment work for all job seekers. We now know more than ever about how to engage employers. We know more about how to customize employment options for people with unusual or extensive need for accommodation and support. In addition, we have long known the value of having a broad network of colleagues, friends, relatives, and acquaintances from which to mine employment opportunities. It might be useful in this challenging job development climate to review some of what we know so that optimism, not desperation, guides employment service delivery. This brief article will touch on a few bedrocks of job development, along with some emerging job development strategies that can minimize the effects of rising national unemployment on employment prospects for job seekers with disabilities.

Employers as partners

In both practice and in policy there has been an important and increasing emphasis on informed choice for individuals who are seeking employment. That is, the individual should drive the job

search process based on clear interests and preferences. Person-centered planning has become one of the most popular strategies for insuring the involvement and input of job seekers. The evolution of employment service for individuals considered to have significant disabilities has been bolstered by stronger focus on informed choice and self-advocacy. Good job development does not happen without it.

However, good job development also does not happen without knowledge and appreciation of what employers need and how they operate. After years of supported employment experience and parallel research we know that employers are mostly interested in three things: making money, saving money, and/or operating more efficiently (Luecking, 2009). This is especially true during economic downturns. In a seemingly limited job market, might there be ways of discovering employer needs that would lead to job opportunities that might not be readily apparent? Here are three.

Get your face in the place. Employers, like potential partners in any kind of endeavor, are willing to do business with people they know, like, trust -- and are easy to work with. Savvy job developers go where employers congregate, such as chamber of commerce meetings, and they visit workplaces in order to meet, talk to, and most of all *learn* about employers. Amazing working relationships arise from frequent pleasant and positive interactions with employers; and unexpected opportunities for job seekers often spring from such relationships. Without such interactions, how will we ever know what employers really need and want?

Conduct informational interviews. These are great ways to meet new employers, learn about their needs, and to identify opportunities that may exist in their workplaces. Once a contact person is identified in a company job developers merely ask if they can set up a

visit. Make the request an “easy ask” almost always opens doors for job developers. For example, “I’m interested in learning as much as I can about companies such as yours. Would it be possible for me to set up a brief visit to see firsthand how your company operates?” During the visit to the company job developers ask questions and gather information about how the company conducts its business. This is a golden opportunity to observe, listen and learn. It is NOT a time to sell the employer on hiring people with disabilities. The most productive informational interviews are short so as to respect the employer’s time. If there is a potential opportunity to negotiate for a position for an individual job seeker, effective job developers will ask to come back to learn more (see comments below on negotiation and on customization). At the very least, the job developer now knows more about the company than before the visit. Optimally, a budding working relationship has been established leading to opportunities down the road.

Negotiate for mutual benefit. Each job seeker offers a potential range of competencies to any given workplace. Identifying those tasks that job seeker is good at or can perform with accommodation or support is a critical first step. Then, successful job development hinges on proposing and negotiating task assignments based on how they will help the employer. Negotiations with employers are most successful when employers see “what’s in it for them.” Job developers are in a position to negotiate for a possible hire when they see how individual job seeker task competency can benefit the employer’s operation, (such as making other workers’ jobs easier, making things run more smoothly, addressing back logged work, etc.). It is not uncommon for such negotiation to lead to a successful

employment proposal even when there are no job openings in company. In fact, emerging customized employment options are often great ways to capitalize on employer need.

Customizing employment options and relationships

In a down economy it is necessary for job developers to find jobs in unlikely places. Frequent employer contacts through such things as informational interviews can help uncover them. In fact, in recent years we have learned more ways in which jobs can be carved, created, or restructured so that individuals who have unique job support needs can contribute to employer operations (Griffin, Hammis & Geary, 2007). Thus, the job seeker can obtain a job with a “customized” job description. This is great for individuals who cannot easily apply for “off the shelf” jobs because they do not have the requisite skills, training, stamina or life circumstances that will allow them to apply for standard job positions. And when standard job positions are in short supply, customizing the job and the relationship with employers holds more promise than not.

Ideally such customized job assignments are those that match an individual’s task competency with a specific employer need. If we know how to determine employer operational needs and we know how to negotiate based on meeting those needs, then ultimately customized employment opportunities are unlimited. Sometimes easier said than done, perhaps, but a vibrant economy is not necessary to make it happen.

The value of networking

A large network of contacts is the foundation for all effective job development. As the old saying goes, it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. In an economic downturn it’s also *how many*

people you know. Who do you know that can identify potential employer contacts? Who do your friends know? Who do job seekers and their families know? Who do your colleagues know? Networking is essential to finding leads for potential job opportunities.

In fact, veteran job developers can tell you that no strategy can trump the value of a network of contacts. They help you get your foot in the door. They can introduce you to new contacts. They can tell you where you might go for informational interviews. Essentially, everyone you know is part of a network that can introduce you to potential employers. Experience shows that the larger the network, the more potential employer doors that can be opened. The task is to always be on the lookout for expanding the number of people you know, through both professional and social networks. The opportunities to interview and negotiate with employers depend on having a large base of potential contacts. Networking is a necessity, whether there is a good economy or bad.

Getting there from here

Good job development does not rely on “selling” employers on hiring people with disabilities. Decades of job development practice, along with recent employer research, show that company needs, not altruism, drive employer hiring decisions (Luecking, 2008). Providing service oriented consultation to employers – finding out what they need and offering to help meet that need – can result in jobs that even employers didn’t know they need to fill. Identifying ways to add value to employers’ operations will often create hidden, customized job opportunities for job seekers who ordinarily are not able to apply for “off-the-shelf” jobs. It is these kinds of jobs that are always available, regardless of the economy. We can only uncover them by spending time visiting and learning about employers. During economic downturns it is even more important for

job developers to get their faces in employers' places. Then, when economic times improve, we are even better situated for job development success. The jobs are there. We often have to help employers find them.

References

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