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by Allen Anderson

Job Development During a Recession

With the fears of and potential reality of a recession, job developers, managers, and supervisors need to examine employment strategies and job-development techniques to ensure that they can still get jobs for their job candidates if the economy worsens. Such examination is crucial since it's necessary to acknowledge both some old and new truths about employment.

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Open Job Market Can Be Disastrous

The first truth involves the distinction between the open and "hidden" job markets. You may be aware that the open job market only accounts for 20% (at the most) of all jobs. These jobs are considered "open" because they are advertised in public venues like newspapers, the Internet, or public signs, and are therefore available to anyone who chooses to apply. In the open job market there is a lot of competition even in normal economies, *but in a recession, competition can significantly intensify as the number of jobs in the open market declines.* This is disastrous for people with visible employment barriers, who are compared to equal or better-qualified job candidates *without* such barriers. Visible barriers unfortunately identify and often exclude this group of job seekers.

However, it needs to be emphasized that employers' comparisons between those with, and without, employment barriers in an open job market is inevitable *regardless* of the economy. Comparison to other applicants is not effective for job developers even in good economies, and it only worsens during economic downturns!

Negativity Also Hurts

Negative comparisons between job candidates with and without disabilities can make job developers feel that the job seekers they represent are somehow "inferior" to others in an open marketplace. As a result, job developers may become reluctant to place a candidate with a barrier, fearing that he/she will lose in an open job competition.

A job developer's lack of confidence in his/her candidates can be demoralizing in good—*or* poor economies. However, in a recession enthusiasm can be especially difficult to generate, as those involved assume that finding jobs is impossible. *"No one will hire my job candidate, so why even bother?"*

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During these times, employment strategies and job-development techniques are illusions, because in reality, job developers have given up. Sadly, this mindset becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued unemployment, based on the assumption that there are better candidates and too few jobs. Consequently, an emerging recession scenario is potentially catastrophic for someone with a visible employment barrier wanting to go to work.

Put another way, negative employer feedback about hiring people with disabilities can dampen a job developer's enthusiasm even during good economic climates. It stands to reason then, that such negativity worsens during a recession. Supported-employment organizations may "give up" on employment and feel justified in doing so.

Overcoming Negativity

In a recession, it's important that job-placement supervisors **support** job developers, ensuring him/her that job placement is not only *possible*, but also that **maintaining** their confidence is crucial to sustaining **effort**. The importance of supporting job developers in overcoming negativity cannot be overstated. If a belief grows that there are no jobs and job development is useless, then efforts are doomed to failure. A mindset like this poses big trouble for a supported-employment organization.

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The Hidden Job Market

Next, let's turn to the hidden job market. This market contains scores of jobs that are never advertised. This market accounts for 80% or more of all jobs, and it has the greatest variety of jobs. This market continues to exist even during times of fewer jobs and higher unemployment. The difference is, during a recession, jobs usually don't occur from new business or business expansion. Rather, new positions are the result of jobs that are in transition.

Jobs in transition are the openings that occur regardless of the economy. These include retirement; people who die, quit, or are fired; those on maternity leave, etc. Circumstances in life have a way of moving a person out of a position, but opening up a job for someone else. The issue is not *if* there are jobs, but *how* these jobs can be accessed? This is an important question anytime, but it intensifies during a recession.

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Positions in the hidden job market are filled by “connections,” also known as “networking” (i.e. someone you know who is hiring), or by being in the right place at the right time. Fewer people are considered in a hidden-market job, as only a few people are typically aware of these positions. With some exceptions, qualifications are generally lower than open-market jobs.

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In a recession, jobs retreat into the hidden job market. Jobs just don’t get publicly advertised. Employers don’t want to be inundated with applications so they only tell a few key connections about their openings. The jobs that do exist are exposed to people that the employer already knows and trusts for recommendations. When unemployment is high, everyone tends to know someone who is looking for work. As a result, contacts alone can usually produce solid recommendations. This means that the employer doesn’t have to advertise to fill a position.

Conversely, during a good economy, connections may not be as fruitful since most people are already working. The reverse, as stated, is true during a recession. **To be effective in the hidden job market, job developers must become a trusted contact for employers.**

Hidden Job Market Barriers

Breaking into the hidden job market during a recession is difficult. The market is even more hidden, cliquish, and wary than usual. **If a recession and higher unemployment is imminent, employment organizations need to plan now to build connections to the hidden job market.** They must check if their area has an over-reliance on the open job market (mostly chasing newspaper and/or Web-based leads) so that pursuing the hidden job market will be less effective.

One tool for assessing hidden job-market potential is to count the number of existing employers who would accept your call because they know you and/or have done business with you in the past. If this number is not above 15-20 employers per full-time job, in a recession your organization will be on the outside, and not the inside, of the hidden job market. (Exceptions may occur in rural organizations with a lesser number of employers.)

The next article will focus on strategies, techniques, and skills to penetrate the hidden job market and prepare your organization and job developers for a recession.