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Job placement

For people with disabilities

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Job Development

The importance of building effective employer relationships

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Across Canada, employment participation rates continue to be low for specific populations, for example, persons with disabilities, newcomers to Canada, Indigenous persons, social assistance recipients and racialized youth. The strategy most often used to increase employment rates for these populations is to build a better job seeker – to teach them the skills and competencies to find, do and keep a job, and to win job competitions. However, there are many people who want work, have the skills to do the job and, despite their best efforts, will not win job competitions. There are also many people already working who were not competent when they landed the job, and/or didn't have to compete for the job. So clearly, there is a flaw in the “build a better job seeker” strategy that needs to be addressed for employment rates to increase for populations most often detached from the labour market.

The flaw in this strategy is that it is one-sided, focusing only on the sup-

ply-side of the employment equation (job seekers). For the employment “supply chain” to function effectively, the demand-side (employers) of the equation also needs to be engaged and influenced. Similar to any supply chain, you can have the best product in the world, but if no one knows about it, it will not be sold and will gather dust. The same goes for employment: you can have the best job seekers but if employers don't hire them, all of the efforts on the supply-side will be for naught as people will still be unemployed.

The vocational rehabilitation industry tends to be stellar on the supply-side, but we need to significantly improve the capacity on the demand-side to meet the goal of increasing employment rates for specific populations. Their barriers to employment may or not be personal barriers, but they are certainly systemic barriers.

The industry needs to recognize that employer perceptions, biases and hiring practices are often significant systemic barriers to employment for some job seekers. Employers may not even recognize that these barriers exist and are preventing them from benefiting from the strengths of these diverse job seekers. Research indicates that a promising practice to overcome these barriers is for employment/vocational service providers to do extensive employer networking and collaboration (Crawford, 2012). But what is this, and how is it done?

First, organizations which assist individuals with disabilities to find employment must recognize that one of their key functions is to engage employers to hire job seekers who cannot land jobs on their own. Then, they must create the capacity to build em-

ployer relationships and influence hiring decisions, often referred to as job development. To build this capacity it is necessary to understand what job development is and who it is for.

Allen Anderson, a leading expert in job development, defines it as follows:

Job Development is building relationships with employers to secure opportunities that align with the strengths and interests of job seekers with employment barriers. The job development practitioner proactively ensures that employers view job seekers from the perspective of their strengths, not their personal barriers. The practitioner intervenes at all stages of the hiring decision to substitute, supplement, or complement job seekers' efforts to secure employment. Job Development is not posting job orders from the open job market or teaching job seekers to engage employers on their own. (2019)

The literature presents a compelling case for job development, in these cases for individuals with severe mental illness (although, I would argue, not unique to this specific population):

- ▶ Regardless of work experience, job development increased the likelihood that a person would obtain a job, and people with no previous work experience had virtually no chance of acquiring a competitive job without job development (Carlson et al., 2008)
- ▶ Individuals who received job development were almost five times as likely to obtain competitive employment as individuals who did not receive job development (Leff et al, 2005).
- ▶ When job developers accompany job seekers to job interviews, the job seekers

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are nearly four times as likely to receive a job offer as job seekers who went into a job interview alone (Gervery & Kowal as cited in Carlson et al., 2008).

The critical role of the job development practitioner (i.e. job developer, employer liaison/consultant) is embedded in the definition and the above-noted findings. This begs the question: what are the characteristics of successful job developers? My thesis research revealed the characteristics that you might expect, including being organized, flexible and responsive with strong interpersonal, sales and marketing skills. In addition, some possess unique qualities which set them apart from the others. The literature review revealed the differentiating qualities of successful job developers, including:

- They are effective communicators and create partnerships, verbalize expectations of mutual support and communicate in a transparent, explicit manner.
- They believe in the importance of work for their job seekers and they have positive attitudes, passion, optimism and enthusiasm for their work and their job seekers. This allows them to effectively market job seekers to employers.

(Marrelli et al as cited by Glover & Frounfelker, 2013)

These qualities are consistent with my survey results of employment service managers who noted successful job developers believe in their job seekers and the employment service, as well as being able to understand and balance job seeker and employer needs.

Another research project indicated that employers defined successful job developers as follows:

- They are accessible, friendly and trustworthy.
- They understand their business needs and provide timely responses to their requests.
- They advocate for their job seekers. For example, they contact employers when they think they have a job seeker fit, even if they know a job is not available, and they encourage employers to give job seekers a chance when the employer is hesitant about hiring.
- They provide follow-up services to check in on how the job seeker is doing and offer support in good and challenging times. (Delicate & Hoyt, 2013)

These are consistent and powerful findings that highlight the reality that when job developers have strong relationships with employers and are seen by employers as credible business partners, employers will remove systemic barriers (like traditional selection processes) that prevent them from considering suitable, but not necessarily typical, job candidates.

The competencies of the job development practitioner and the organizational capacity to support success are absolutely critical to secure job opportunities for job seekers with employment barriers. If you have job seekers “stuck in the hopper”, sitting on your caseload, who want to work and aren’t working, maybe the solution is not to build a better job seeker. Perhaps it is to build better (and more) employer relationships.

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CEO of Evolution Group Inc., has over 30 years of experience in the employment service sector as a job developer, director and consultant. Angela is considered a subject matter expert in employer engagement and job development for persons with employment barriers. Her MA thesis research, “The Organizational and Individual Characteristics of Successful Job Developers”, engaged 13 employment service managers and 113 job development practitioners across Canada.