



INSTITUTE FOR
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INCLUSION

Tools for Inclusion

An Examination of Teaching a Networking Strategy to Job Seekers

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Introduction

Two basic facts that critically emerge about employment of people with disabilities are that there is a high rate of unemployment and that they are more likely to rely on agencies to get jobs. Getting a job is hard work. On average it takes 10 - 20 calls to arrange an interview and 7 - 10 interviews to secure a job. Networking is a way to speed up the process. While research has consistently shown that networking is the most effective job search tool for all job seekers, it is probably the most under-used strategy by people with disabilities. However, a study conducted by the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) found that it is equally effective for individuals with disabilities. It also showed that using a networking approach to job development yielded jobs with better pay, more hours, and that the job search took less time. (Temelini & Fesko, 1996)

What is networking?

Networking refers to a process of interacting with the people one knows as well as with their contacts, communicating about one's interests and needs, and following up on their suggestions. In using approaches such as scanning newspaper ads, cold calling, filling out applications, going through the yellow pages, etc., one must get so many "no's" before getting a "yes." These strategies are still popular among job seekers and the professionals assisting them, yet using personal connections as a key component of the job search can reduce the number of rejections, and decrease the amount of time a job search can take.

Networking is nothing more than a systematic examination of the people one knows and deliberate outreach to them, based on the assumption that it is human nature to prefer to deal with people with whom one feels comfortable. Groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club have been using networking for decades as they get together to exchange information for the mutual benefit of all. Also included in this process is the development of skills that enable a person to transform formal connections into more personal connections. Thus the nature of interactions can become more friendly and less formal.

How can Networks work?

A networking approach allows the job seeker to become an active participant in the process. After an individual identifies a job goal, the next step is to brainstorm any personal and professional connections the individual, family members or professionals have. These can be used to gain

information, identify job leads, or introduce new contacts to the process. Many contacts will simply be used to help identify other people. A friend of a friend may be able to arrange an informational interview that provides face to face contact with others. These informational interviews may lead to real job interviews and ultimately, employment. Opening the door of a local business for a job seeker with disabilities for tours, informational interviews, etc., increases the odds of his/her being considered for employment now, or in the future.

Teaching A Networking Strategy

The ICI developed a curriculum, "Building Community Connections" to teach job seeker and staff to develop skills in networking. This two-day workshop focuses teaching how to identify and utilize connections such as family members, friends, present and past employers, agencies, professional organizations and other community resources as a part of the job search. With this training, individuals are ready to build connections in their communities and expand their opportunities. Securing employment is the ultimate goal.

The objectives for the training are to: (1) review fundamentals of the importance and benefits of networking in comparison to other approaches; (2) explore ways to identify, engage, & expand networks; (3) develop skills and abilities in using connections; (4) discuss personal approaches and action plans. This training also highlights the fact that in addition to obtaining specific job leads, networking is beneficial for gathering information about the job market, facts about careers or specific employers, and for developing contacts to be resources in the future.

Studying The Effectiveness of the Training

In order to better understand the effects of the networking training, ICI staff collected information from trainees on their knowledge of networking and the impact of the workshop on how they implemented their job search. Information was collected from participants before and after the training, and then two months later. Demographic and employment outcome information was also collected from the participant's Rehabilitation Counselor.

Findings

The information gathered is limited due to the sample size. Results fell into three categories: Learnings, Actions/Strategies, and Outcomes.

Learnings

- Individuals learned that using multiple job search approaches was the most effective technique for finding a job, and that networking was a crucial part of this process.
- The benefit of informational interviews for job seekers and employers was clarified to trainees.
- Participants learned how to follow-up with contacts as well as effective ways to ask for help. For example, not every contact can hire, but they may know other people who could help.

Actions/Strategies

- Although there was not a marked increase in the number of interactions with people within one's networks, there was a change in the nature of the conversations. There were significant increases in the number of people who talked to people about looking for a job after they had attended the training. Specifically, trainees were more likely to ask about job leads.
- 59% of consumers reported having an informational interview since the training.
- 64% had one to three informational interviews in the two months post training.

Outcomes

- 70% of participants did not use the 30 day action plan introduced in the training, however, 75% said that they developed an action plan that defined goals that met their specific needs.
- Of the 22 participants who responded to the two month follow-up, six people had obtained a job.
- For individuals who had not yet found jobs, 96% were continuing their search. That same percentage of people felt that using networking was helpful to them.

Conclusion

As a result of the networking training, individuals learned to identify and broaden components of an effective career development network. They also learned valuable techniques for creating a total networking systems, including how to seek informational interviews, how to dress, what to say, how to follow up on job leads, and how to develop action plans.

Only 15% of the total group was employed at the two month follow-up. Many indicated that they did not follow through on their 30 day action plans. Thus, the training developed skills, gave action steps, and energized the job seeker, but that energy may not have been sustained over time.

One of the most important lessons is to remember that job hunting is a long process which takes time and energy

and maintaining a positive disposition can be difficult. While job seekers with disabilities can become actively involved in the job search, they also need help maintaining the energy and optimism. It is ICI's perception that the workshop energized the group for a time, but that job seekers need ongoing help in maintaining that energy. Suggestions for the professionals support staff are to:

- Have regular brief meetings with the individual to discuss action steps and help maintain energy.
- Counsel the individual on what to expect during the search. Review the number of contacts and interviews it takes on average to secure a job.
- Develop a support plan for the job seeker. Determine areas in which the person will need support, and plan supports accordingly.

As professionals think about their roles in supporting job seekers with disabilities, it is crucial to remember that major transformations are occurring. First, the job seeker is moving from a passive to an active role. Next, once a job is found there will be logistical and physical issues to address. And finally, job seekers must mentally adjust to see themselves as workers rather than recipients of services. The counselor plays a crucial role in supporting the person through these changes. While the job seeker becomes more independent, the above steps are reminders that support is still required. In dealing with the logistical/physical changes one must consider issues such as child care, transportation, stamina, and getting the lay of the land on the job. Through discussion and planning, these can be handled to avoid problems when the job begins. The final area, mental transformation, is more subtle in that the person must make a mental shift into a new role where expectations of productivity and dependability now exist after being a recipient of supports and services.

Through this transformation, the individual becomes an active contributor. At work the contribution is to productivity. In the rest of the person's life, it is becoming available as a member of a large network of individuals to whom the client may be of assistance in the future.

Reference

Temelini, D. & Fesko, S.L. (1996, June) *Research to Practice: Shared Responsibility: Job Search Practices from the Consumer and Staff Perspective*. Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion (UAP), Children's Hospital

This brief reflects the contributions of staff at the ICI, in particular, Sheila Lynch Fesko.

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