research brief

The Personnel Factor
Exploring the Personal Attributes of Highly Successful Employment Specialists who Work with Transition-Age Youth

authors

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In the mission to assist youth and adults with disabilities secure and succeed in careers, employment specialists play an essential role, whether they work in schools, community rehabilitation provider agencies, or vocational rehabilitation offices (Blitz & Mechanic, 2006; Bond, 2004; Butterworth, Thomas, Hockridge, & Hooke, 2012; Fabian, 2007; Luecking, Fabian, & Tilson, 2004; Luecking, 2009; Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, & Gelb, 2012; Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002; Simonsen, 2010; Whitley, Kostick, & Bush, 2010).

The competencies required of these staff, enabling them to reach their desired outcomes, have been identified by leading professional organizations including the Association for Persons in Supported Employment, Training Resource Network, Council on Rehabilitation Education, The Division of Career Development and Transition of the Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. They include skills in the areas of (1) discovery: getting to know the job seekers; (2) establishing and maintaining relationships with local businesses; (3) brokering strong job matches, and (4) ensuring workplace supports for both the worker and the employer. The authors have termed these skill areas the foundational mechanics of the role because they describe the strategies and interventions used by the employment specialists. What have not been examined to date are the personal attributes of these professionals. The relationship between personal attributes and professional competencies, job satisfaction,

job performance, and career longevity has been extensively explored and documented in fields other than employment services for youth with disabilities (Barling & Beattie, 1983; Barrick, Stewart & Piotrowski, 2002; Goldhaber, 2002; Smith & Godfrey, 2002). Hence this became the central theory of our study: in addition to the concrete skills needed to achieve high placement and retention outcomes for the youth they are representing, the most successful employment specialists exhibit traits, behaviors, attitudes and perceptions that go beyond the mechanics of the job. Through in-depth interviews with employment specialists who have highly successful track records in job placement and retention, we determined that these professionals exhibit four unique personal attributes: (a) principled optimism; (b) cultural competence; (c) business-oriented professionalism; and (d) networking savvy. These findings have implications for recruitment, hiring, training, and advancing truly effective employment specialists, and further research.

methodology

In December, 2011 and January, 2012 we conducted intensive telephone interviews with 17 employment specialists from the Bridges from School to Work program, administered in eight cities by the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities. This program has been in existence since 1990 and has enrolled more than 18,000 youth with disabilities over its history to date. The overall job placement and 90-day retention rates for these youth have been 75% and 76%, respectively. For this study we recruited staff who had tenure of at least two years and whose individual performance outcomes exceeded the historic top averages of the program. To guide the interviews we developed a protocol covering a number of key areas: professional background; roles and responsibilities; collaboration with families, community partners, and colleagues; perceived youth factors; professional development; perceptions of program leadership and support; and personal life philosophy. Two researchers participated in each interview session, sharing responsibility for leading the discussions and taking notes. The sessions were also audio recorded for later transcription. Following accepted qualitative research practice, we developed summary reports after each interview, in order to capture preliminary themes. This process resulted in extensive text material which was then organized, collapsed, categorized and interpreted, with the assistance of NVivo, a software tool for analyzing qualitative data.

findings

Four distinct attribute categories emerged from the data: (1) Principled Optimism; (2) Cultural Competence; (3) Business-Oriented Professionalism; and (4) Networking Savvy.

Principled Optimism
Through our interviews, it became very apparent that these successful employment specialists demonstrate principled optimism which we define as "having a genuine belief in the capabilities of the youth job seeker and a responsibility to empower them and positively impact outcomes." The interviewees gave many examples that illustrated for us that they held high expectations for the youth on their case loads. They conveyed to the youth their belief in them – that these young adults could set and meet their personal goals. In order

to do this, the staff took great care to get to know each youth as a unique individual. This went beyond the standard required Bridges assessment process. They spoke of the importance of spending time with the youth in a variety of settings in order to establish rapport and trust. They made statements that indicated a high degree of empathy and compassion for the Bridges youth on their caseloads. The personal satisfaction these staff expressed when telling stories of youth successes was impressive. There was a sense of the celebratory as they recounted challenges that youth overcame in order to achieve their goals. Self-efficacy is a well-researched concept that refers to one's sense of personal ability to influence what happens in their life. From the strong statements the interviewees made about their belief in the significant influence they had on the youth's employment and retention outcomes, these professionals appeared to exhibit high self efficacy. Staff who demonstrated "Principled Optimism" appeared to view challenges as opportunities. As one interviewee stated: "we do whatever it takes to find solutions." This is a job where it is not uncommon for employment professionals to experience setbacks and unexpected obstacles. Among our respondents there was an expressed sense of resilience and a high tolerance for the ambiguity and paradox posed by working with inexperienced youth who face multiple barriers.

Cultural Competence

For the purpose of this study we adopted the definition of cultural competence espoused by Chamberlain (2005, p. 197): "the values, norms and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world." Expanding on this definition we describe cultural competence as having an awareness of the context in which the youth job seekers live. Ethnicity, race, language, and country-of-origin traditions

are therefore included in this construct. The employment specialists in our study were committed to getting to know the youth as individuals, understanding their unique life circumstances and learning as much as possible about the youths' support systems, both within and outside the family. Further, these staff expressed an understanding of the interconnectedness of cultural factors and the subsequent influence on job placement and retention services. For example, if youth live in a high-crime neighborhood with gang activity, there might be a fear of moving through certain areas to get to work. One interviewee spoke of a youth who claimed to be living with different relatives, when in fact she was in and out of a shelter. This certainly had an impact on this young woman's ability to prepare for and get to job interviews. As the staff person described it: "in some ways, the job interview was the least of her problems, but still, you know, having a job would help her get her own place to live." Throughout our discussions we had the sense that these professionals were very committed to forming trusting relationships with the youth and their families. Several interviewees mentioned their enjoyment at working with people from different backgrounds from their own because it gave them "multiple perspectives" and insights. One staff person said working with diverse youth "forced me to challenge my assumptions."

Business-Oriented Professionalism

Success in any profession demands a strong work ethic. Therefore it was not surprising to see this trait in the employment specialists we interviewed. What made a strong impression were the many parallels between the approaches and attitudes described by these staff and those found in the literature on leading business practices. People in the field of job development typically come from social or human service backgrounds and are often more oriented to the "helping" side

of the equation. Their focus is primarily on assisting the job seekers through a counseling approach rather than what we think of as a "business lens." Bridges is different in that it is considered to be an "employer driven" model – meaning as much attention is paid to the employers' needs as the youth. It may be because of this emphasis of the model, that the staff we interviewed may be more inclined to be "Business Oriented" than professionals in other job placement settings. First and foremost, these staff frequently referred to themselves as having a customer service orientation. And they recognized that they had two primary customers: the youth job seekers and the employers – with many other secondary customers. In order to meet their customers' needs and carry out their job responsibilities, they have to be highly organized and able to determine and juggle priorities constantly. The staff described themselves in a manner that suggested they were strong multi-taskers, able to balance direct services with required administrative duties – recordkeeping and data management. While they were mindful of process, these staff appeared to consider their accountability to outcomes and results as more important. A theme repeated throughout our conversations was how the job requires these staff to be independent and autonomous. As one person stated: "I'm on my own most of the time. It would be easy to goof off, but I'm always aware that I am accountable to getting things done. If I don't do the work, it shows." The interviewees described behaviors that could be interpreted as demonstrating high personal standards for themselves. They also expressed an appreciation for what their business partners expected in terms of the youth candidates – and the employment specialists themselves. One quote summarizes this nicely: "It's all about the soft skills." These staff felt it was critical for them to model these so-called "soft skills" to the youth. "If I don't demonstrate my reliability, why should they?" In our study

staff described experiences and beliefs that mirrored the concept of conscientiousness in terms of reliability, thoroughness and persistence.

Networking Savvy

The field of employment services is characterized by the many relationships we are required to establish and maintain – and this describes the fourth attribute "Networking Savvy" which we define as "the ability to connect with people and resources to create and access opportunities for youth and employers to achieve specific tangible and measurable results." The employment specialists in our study demonstrated networking savvy through their descriptions of creative strategies they used to identify possible opportunities, negotiate mutually beneficial partnerships, and collaborate with others. Certainly networking savvy is needed to identify and approach potential employers. Most of the interviewees provided examples of their active participation in business groups and networks, such as local chambers of commerce and Rotary Club. In some cases, they served on committees within these business organizations – demonstrating leadership beyond their required duties, while cultivating important contacts for assisting youth with the job search. However, networking savvy also extends further out into the community. The staff shared many scenarios where they had coordinated with contacts in other organizations to meet the many needs of the youth on their case loads – addressing issues as varied as dealing with social security benefits, to finding a place to live, to passing the GED, to mediating a dispute between the youth and someone else, to getting suitable work clothes and so on. Their ability to reach out to their contacts quickly was essential. One employment specialist made a statement that resonated with the other respondents: "You have to be able to tap into the collective wisdom of

the community. Lots of people are out there doing good things and we need to know them. Help each other." Devora Zack (2010) defines networking as "the art of building and maintaining connections for shared positive outcomes" (p. 4). This was certainly reflected in the comments by our interviewees – and nicely frames our definition of networking savvy.

implications for the field

It is critical that employment specialists be capable of acquiring the unique professional competencies that lead to successful employment outcomes for their job seekers, in our case those youth who face multiple barriers to employment. The professionals we interviewed worked with youth with a variety of disabilities (including intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, autism, and emotional disabilities) primarily in urban settings. All of them demonstrated their effectiveness in achieving excellent outcomes as indicated by the high placement and retention rates for the youth on their caseloads. The four discrete personal attributes emerging from the study provide a framework that could potentially enable the field to take specific steps in staff development and support. Further, the findings from this study contribute to an important discussion about ideal attributes organizations should consider when recruiting, training, and hopefully developing the careers of employment specialists. Perhaps this will contribute to improved retention of top performers, which would ultimately benefit the job seekers they serve. Data from our study also raise the question: can these four attributes be taught or acquired, and if so, what are the best strategies to use? That said it may be that these attributes are more innate than "teachable" and that recruitment of highly effective employment specialists would be best served by finding creative ways to attract, screen, hire and advance individuals who already have these characteristic, along with requisite competencies, and above all a strong desire to help people find and retain work.

further research

The findings from our exploratory study suggest a number of areas for ongoing research related to the topic. Replicating the study among professionals in school transition programs and community rehabilitation provider agencies would determine whether the four personal attributes emerging from our study hold true in these different settings. Further, incorporating comparison groups of employment specialists whose placement and retention outcomes are lower than expected by their organizations would add another layer of methodological rigor. Other studies might look at the perceptions of attributes held by employment specialists' supervisors. Given that employment specialists work in diverse settings that may or may not be similar to the program we examined, it would be beneficial to carefully document organizational and leadership support for employment services.

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