

THE CHALLENGE

Txt2wrk was founded in Oakland, CA to improve access to employment opportunities for parolees with low levels of literacy and limited access to broadband. Removing these barriers to employment has never been more important. Oakland is expecting an influx of parolees over the next few years, due to a recent U.S. Supreme Court mandate to reduce California's prison population from 143,000 to 110,000 by 2013. In Oakland, as in the rest of the country, budget shortfalls have also threatened to close public libraries, an important resource for free internet access. Further compounding the problem, 85% of US juvenile inmates are functionally illiterate and 60% of adult inmates read at or below the 4th grade reading level. These factors combine to create an environment in which issues of access prevent participation in the job market, regardless of what skills and experience individuals have to offer the job market.

Finding a job is an important first step for successfully rejoining society, yet parolees face multiple challenges in their job hunts. Career centers, which provide assistance to parolees in their job search, typically limit internet access to one hour a day due to high demand. Half-way houses typically do not provide internet access. Smart phones are often economically out of reach. Even after moving out of the half-way house, many parolees cannot afford a basic computer or broadband. This lack of technology and internet access is a significant disadvantage for parolees in an increasingly competitive job market.

HOW IT WORKS

With txt2wrk, in a single visit to a career center, a career counsellor can help the job seeker prepare an online profile of skills, experience, and contact information that is stored in the txt2wrk database. Job opportunities added by employers or career counsellors are matched with job seekers in the database, and a text message containing clear instructions is sent to the job seeker's mobile phone.

To apply for the job, the job seeker can text back a response, or dial a phone number contained within the text message. After verifying their identity, the job seeker can listen to text-to-speech translations of the detailed job descriptions and apply to jobs using the numeric keypad on their phone. In both cases, their profile information is forwarded to the employer, no internet connection required. When employers or case workers log in, they can see all of the applicants for a specific job, review qualifications, and call the job seekers directly.

IMPACT

txt2wrk helps level the playing field for job seekers in several important ways.

- Job seekers have continuous connectivity to online services using any mobile phone, making up for a lack of reliable access to broadband. For the first time, applicants who are not near a computer can access publicly-available employment opportunities.
- Real-time alerts, and the ability to apply for jobs right over the phone, help job seekers compete more effectively in the job market with people who have better access to the internet.
- txt2wrk works with any mobile phone, including low-end, low-cost feature phones, thereby removing the barrier of expensive smart phones and data plans.
- Text-to-speech helps anyone with literacy issues or limited vision access the job market through spoken job postings.
- Beyond parolees or felons on probation, txt2wrk has great potential to empower many other groups, including immigrants, survivors of domestic violence, and those without permanent addresses.

txt2wrk focuses on populations who are traditionally disconnected, providing value by circumventing the broadband connectivity requirement for seeking jobs. While txt2wrk does not promote adoption of broadband directly, it does provide access to services traditionally provided exclusively by broadband. The effects of this are to widen the pool of users for these services, and enable people to access services that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Successful job placement ultimately helps to increase their standard of living, which in turn increases their ability to afford broadband.