Case Studies

Focus on Merging Cultures

on the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act

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The implementation of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) requires major organizational change for employment, training, and disability agencies. The initiative emphasizes coordination, collaboration and communication among organizations for better service delivery. At this time, states are developing systems that will enable them to address the needs of all customers, including those with disabilities, who are seeking employment.

Traditionally, service systems have required that consumers and their families who need a variety of services be able to negotiate the culture and language of multiple agencies. With the new WIA legislation, this task is now being required of the agencies themselves. In the process of collaboration and partnering, agencies have needed to reconsider the manner in which they operate. Changes to the agency and its culture can include its daily operation, nature of staff/client interactions, organizational structure, and staff roles. Not only do agencies need to adapt their own organization and culture, they need to adjust to the cultures of their partners. Although merging cultures ultimately can have many benefits for the customer, this shift does not come without its challenges for agencies. The following is offered as a tool for states to use in their efforts to help agencies negotiate a shared new culture in their One-Stop Career Centers (One-Stops).

This brief is part of a series of products offering practical solutions for state and local entities as they implement the Workforce Investment Act. Topics covered in other briefs include: leadership, accessibility, co-location of staff, and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce planning process. The source of much of the information presented below is from state case studies conducted in Maine, Minnesota, and Kentucky, completed as part of the Center on State Systems and Employment. Additional information is derived from other Institute for Community Inclusion work on increasing access for individuals with disabilities within the workforce system.

ISSUES

Privacy and confidentiality.

In situations where agencies come together, their daily routines inadvertently merge as well. When agencies have different methods of operation and they all share space, tensions emerge. For instance, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) departments have typically required that their staff have private offices so that they can have privacy during phone conversations and meetings. However, in shared space when workforce and VR staff are co-located, space limitations can cause this to be very difficult.

Partnering agencies often have different attitudes about how client information can be shared as well. Agencies like VR have strict guidelines about the sharing of client data, while Employment Services or Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) agencies allow greater flexibility with shared customer information. Although VR policies are rigid only to protect the confidentiality of their customers, this could compromise the intended seamlessness of service delivery.

Fear of job loss.

Professional identity concerns can arise in response to many different types of staff residing together under the same roof. In Minnesota, for example, VR had a history of being "absorbed" into other programs, so initially this agency collaborated with some hesitation. There was a real fear, in every state, that staff were going to lose their jobs because of the idea that "somebody else is serving my customer."

Professional concerns

Another aspect of an agency's culture is the certification and training of staff. Professional concerns create an inherent tension between counselors from VR and staff from other agencies. This is a concern for counselors in VR since they are required to have master's degrees but they work with other staff members that perform similar functions with less professional accreditation.

Service concerns

Another difficulty arises when agency cultures fundamentally differ. The manner in which customers receive services from agencies has contributed to the sense of cultural difference. In an agency like Employment Services, there was very high traffic and high volume of customers with a focus on self-service approaches. Agencies like VR saw a smaller number of customers but spent more time on intensive supports. Some staff referred to this as the difference between a "customized shop and a production shop." VR staff had concerns about how customers with disabilities would fare in a production-oriented environment.

STRATEGIES

Foster a shared message.

One strategy that Maine used was to eliminate their traditional agency names on One-Stop information and marketing material. This technique fostered a greater atmosphere of cohesion and reflected a new, shared culture of a comprehensive One-Stop rather than of each individual agency.

Communicate with a mutually understood language.

Minimize the use of agency-specific acronyms. Agency staff can more easily work out their differences when they speak the same language. In all states, joint meetings with the multiple partners helped to facilitate a better understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities in the One-Stops.

Create strong leadership.

At One-Stops, it is critical for the management to set the tone for a shared culture and reciprocity among agencies. When contentious situations arise, such as those between state and private workers, or between union and non-union employees, how the management responds to these disputes sets an example for how staff should interact with one another.

Encourage cross-awareness training.

Cross-awareness training aids mutual referral, collaboration, and investment in the One-Stop system. As workers develop a sense of other agencies' services, their commitment to and investment in a more coordinated system is solidified. Apprehension stemming from identity and culture shifts is eased through information sharing. Initially, staff were anxious about the prospect of cross training since they felt that the intention was that staff from another agency were going to take over their jobs. However, as one staff member noted, cross-awareness training does not result in the "butcher filling in for the pharmacist when things get backed up." It simply created a more seamless system of service delivery and referral.

Staff at all levels need a comprehensive understanding of each partnering agency and what it brings to the collaboration. Awareness training by each of the agencies should focus on the nature of the population that is served, type of services provided, funding sources, referral process between partner agencies, and resources and expertise that agency staff bring to these partnerships.

Involve front-line staff.

Minnesota created a committee structure that provided an opportunity for staff to have ownership of particular issues. These committees gave people a vehicle to communicate their perspectives and participate in multiple ways. Committee work ensures that each partner has a stake in the collaboration process. It creates a greater sense of investment while decreasing trepidation about the changes.

Acknowledge each partner's expertise and evolving role.

Respondents in all three states described the importance of understanding and validating each partner's unique role and area of special capability. VR, for example, provided expertise and consultation on employing individuals with disabilities. This made VR staff feel useful and needed, and showed the partners that each has something of value to contribute. In Kentucky, staff emphasized the role of consultant so that it was clear that serving people with disabilities was the responsibility of the One-Stop as a whole, and not just of VR staff. VR remained available to help the One-Stop address any issues that arose.

Other changing roles involved state employment agencies. Traditionally viewed as a funding stream, after WIA implementation they were now taking a more active role in service provision.

Tolerate variation and remain flexible.

Because local communities each have unique characteristics, tolerance of local variation is critical to a state's success. In the area of One-Stop management, in Minnesota some One-Stops have their own manager while other managers oversee multiple sites. In Maine, originally there was a call for a single manager at each One-Stop. After much negotiation and discussion, staff agreed that team management would be a better fit for their One-Stops. By remaining flexible, management style was able to be negotiated based on the needs of the community.

Work on relationship building.

Strong working relationships underlie all successful collaborations. Partnerships based on mutual support, respect, and shared goals were built horizontally (between entities at the same level); vertically (between federal, state, and local government); informally (among staff at various levels); and formally (through the use of memoranda of understanding, MOUs). All of these different types and levels of relationships helped to ensure that agency staff were working together to better address the needs of all customers.

Focus on fun (and food).

Sharing a meal can defuse stressful situations, ease tensions, and bring people together. States reported using this strategy to allow the partners to discover common concerns and interests in a cordial and casual atmosphere.

Maine was especially innovative in creating ways to make WIA implementation "fun" for staff. For instance, staff at a Maine One-Stop rewrote a mandated training, incorporating an interactive skit for participants. Maine was also effective in getting people together to creatively share their ideas and expectations. By suspending the idea of ever-present limitations, staff were able to enjoy creating a unified vision and then worked collaboratively towards realizing that vision.

Address concerns around data sharing.

If an individual receives services from multiple agencies that do not share client information, service coordination may be compromised and duplication of services could occur. Although guidelines are in place to ensure customers' privacy, careful planning could allow agencies to share data while preserving confidentiality.

One-Stops in Kentucky worked to create a data system that enhanced services for people with disabilities without comprising confidentiality. This was accomplished through the use of security tabs. Basic demographic tabs were available to anyone using the system, but more confidential information could be accessed only by a limited number of people who required access to the data.

CONCLUSION

No prototype exists for the best way to implement this new workforce system. Local cultures vary, and the key to successful implementation is not national standardization but flexibility. The many changes brought forth by WIA create opportunities and challenges. To ensure success, it is important for partners to consider a wide range of possibilities in addressing these issues. Strategies presented in this brief must be adapted locally and are intended to stimulate discussion, creativity, and thoughtful planning among members of the workforce and disability communities.

The self-assessment on the following page is offered as a planning tool for One-Stops to identify effective strategies for merging cultures of their partnering agencies.

Merging Cultures: Self-assessment for One-Stops

Foster a shared message
- Do One-Stop marketing materials represent all of the workforce partner agencies?
- In what ways do partnering agencies share a cohesive One-Stop identity?

Communicate with mutually understood language
- What strategies have been used to ensure that staff avoids jargon and acronyms with others from partnering agencies?
- How has staff from different agencies become familiar with one another's language and terminology?

Create strong leadership
- How does management negotiate with partner agencies in a manner that fairly resolves disputes?
- Does leadership help to facilitate a cohesive culture or identity for the One-Stop?
- How do partners work together to provide effective leadership?

Encourage cross-awareness training
- Has staff from all partner agencies participated in training concerning each agency's eligibility requirements and services?
- What strategies does management use to free staff from their typical responsibilities so that they can attend trainings?
- How does management convey the importance of staff training?

Involve front line staff
- What opportunities are there for staff to take the lead on aspects of One-Stop design and operation?

Acknowledge each partner's expertise and evolving role
- Is all staff encouraged to serve all customers and only refer to specialized partners in the event that core services cannot meet the individuals' needs?
- Does workforce staff use VR staff for consultation on how to work with a customer with disability rather than immediately referring out?

Tolerate variation and remain flexible
- How does the state board and workforce department encourage local variation in One-Stop design and operation?
- How does management convey that there will not be repercussions if staff tries an innovative approach that may not be successful?

Work on relationship building
- What opportunities are there for staff from different partner agencies to work collaboratively on initiatives?
- What type of formal mechanisms is in place for relationship building?

Focus on the food (and fun)
- How does leadership create opportunities for individuals from partner agencies to interact informally?
- How does leadership create an environment that encourages creativity in dealing with challenges?

Address concerns around data sharing
- Has management identified critical data elements that can be shared across partner agencies?
- What strategies are used to ensure that confidentiality is respected?

These questions are specifically targeted to One-Stops, but can be useful to any entities within the workforce system.

This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.