

INCREASING PLACEMENT THROUGH PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING

—Allison Fleming and Diane Loud

INTRODUCTION

The national percentage of people of working age with disabilities who are employed continues to hover around 37%, compared with 80% for their peers without disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). However, according to the Harris Poll (2000), 67% of people with disabilities who are not currently working would like to be (Dixon, Kurse, & Van Horn, 2003). In the late 1990s, a Presidential Task Force began work on improving the employment rate for adults with disabilities, a national priority that was further supported by the New Freedom Initiative of 2001, creating a bipartisan effort. Despite these initiatives, the rate of employment for people with disabilities has not increased.

“One agency is not going to be able to change the numbers of people with disabilities who are unemployed. Collaboration is necessary if we want to see a difference.”

—GREGG AMES, MASS REHABILITATION COMMISSION

While many people are involved in the effort to improve this employment picture, much of the responsibility for helping people with disabilities secure employment falls on the shoulders of job developers. Typically, job developers act as the bridge between employment services, job seekers, and businesses seeking qualified employees. Good job developers need knowledge, persistence, creativity, and a superior ability to build relationships.

A successful job developer knows how to collaborate with others. Toward that end, one strategy increasing in popularity involves networking with fellow placement professionals working at other provider agencies or for the state. Referred to as an employment networking group, this model offers job developers the opportunity to significantly increase their networking base and thus their own efficiency.

Whether you already belong to an employment networking group or would like to start one of your own, this brief will provide you with important information about how to make an employment networking group work best for you.



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WHY JOIN OR START AN EMPLOYMENT NETWORKING GROUP?

At times, job development can be a difficult and lonely job. Working with job seekers who have multiple barriers to employment, reaching out to employers, and making quality job matches are challenging tasks. Because frequent disappointments and frustrations are a reality, you need patience, flexibility, and a thick skin. What's more, job development is often done by a single individual. While some agencies have several employment specialists, other, smaller organizations might only have one person assigned this responsibility. It can be helpful to know other job developers with whom you can talk, vent, and collaborate on placement projects. Joining or forming an employment networking group provides just such an opportunity. In employment networking groups, professionals can come together to discuss labor market issues, share leads and ideas, and collaborate on securing employment for their job seekers.

Many employment specialists, however, are reluctant at first to join networking groups.

In a field that relies on placement numbers for funding, competition is strong. Job developers often worry that collaboration could lead to the loss of their best-kept secrets, namely, their employers and job leads. However, job developers are finding that the benefits of networking far outweigh the risks. As Barbara Parmet from The Career Place, in Woburn, Mass., so aptly stated, *“More hands on deck means less work for everyone.”*

“Employers liked that they could talk to me and I could reach 30 other agencies for them.”

—COLLEEN CONDON, JDNG

Joining an employment networking group has a number of benefits for job developers. Professionals who spend considerable time out in the community on their own find the opportunity to interact with their peers invaluable. Networking group meetings allow for group problem-solving in challenging situations, broadening of networks, and the building of relationships with others in similar professional roles. Job developers with varied levels of experience can participate in brainstorming and problem-solving discussions. Those who have been in the field for a while bring stronger contacts and experience, while newer job developers bring enthusiasm and a fresh perspective. It can be interesting to hear other viewpoints and learn how other agencies operate. Lastly, making connections with other agencies can be helpful in identifying your own agency's strengths and weaknesses.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF PEER NETWORKING GROUPS

BUILDING TRUST

- ▶ It is important to acknowledge competition within your networking group and to revisit the topic from time to time. By talking about people's fears, concerns, and ideas up front, your group can set clear guidelines for sharing job leads and/or employer contacts. Trust is essential within networking groups, and discussing the issue of competition openly can help to build that trust.

FAIR PLAY

- ▶ Some members may be more willing to share leads, contacts, and ideas than others, but the issue of unequal contribution has a way of righting itself throughout the life of the group. In one particular networking group, those who did not share ideas or leads gradually found themselves receiving less information from other members and eventually left the group. You may decide that not everyone is required to bring leads and contacts to every meeting, but that it is essential that everyone participate in idea sharing and brainstorming. In this way, members with fewer contacts can still feel comfortable participating, and those contributing more contacts can feel otherwise compensated.

TOLERANCE

- ▶ Not every agency or job developer has the same philosophy about who can and should work. Job readiness can be a controversial topic. Some job developers have the flexibility to look for volunteer positions; others are only able to count paid placements. Where do your group's participants stand on integrated community work versus sub-contracted work? Are they looking for group placements or individuals jobs? Transitional employment or permanent positions? Some initial introductions on the part of your group's participants, including the type of agencies they represent and placements they make, will allow members to have a better understanding of one another. Having the exact same values is sometimes less important than fostering an atmosphere of tolerance for different placement philosophies.

PROFESSIONALISM

- ▶ Professional standards should be defined from the beginning. Some questions for the group to ponder and discuss: Do all members practice similar business etiquette? Are there different approaches to and feelings about disclosure of disability information? Are all members

interacting with and representing people with disabilities in a positive and empowering way?

- ▶ And keep in mind your networking group will hopefully gain visibility in the field as you plan activities or market to employers. Consider how can you ensure that your group develops a good reputation in your local community and how your affiliation with the group will reflect on you.

SUSTAINABILITY

- ▶ A networking group requires commitment and energy if it is going to succeed over time. Groups need to be structured in a way that will accommodate staff turnover. Sometimes, demands in the job development field limit a person's activities beyond the typical scope of his or her job description. One practice that may prove useful is clearly defining and recording the leadership responsibilities in your group so that those practices are available to anyone new taking over a leadership role.
- ▶ The reality is that the makeup of any group will likely change over time. The big question is how to sustain momentum despite inevitable changes. At start-up, it may be useful to designate one individual or agency as the one responsible for sending out emails and reminders, and for performing other basic group functions, until a strong member base is established.

BEST PRACTICES

In successful networking groups:

- ▶ There is an atmosphere of cooperation and trust
- ▶ All members contribute to the coordination and momentum of the group
- ▶ Meetings are regularly scheduled and productive, and they meet the expectations of the group

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- ▶ **EASE INTO SHARING LEADS.** If the first time the group meets, everyone is asked to share job leads and employer contacts, group members may feel uneasy about their involvement. Instead, engage in less competitive start-up activities, such as discussing goals.
- ▶ **DEVELOP PROTOCOLS FOR SHARING JOB LEADS.** One group created a form on which members could fill in a job description, the name of the employer, whether or not the employer should be approached directly, and if the person bringing the lead wanted to be involved.

Once group members get to know one another better, they can decide how free they want to be with contacts.

Knowing if you can contact the employer directly or if you need to go through the job developer is important. For some positions, a job developer might even do a prescreening interview prior to sending a résumé.

- ▶ **CREATE A CORE LEADERSHIP TEAM.** Successful groups identify a core leadership team as essential to group longevity. Without one in place, many groups fizzle out. A leadership team can carry out administrative tasks associated with the group, such as organizing meeting details, maintaining member lists, and using input from the group to bring requested topics to the table. These and other tasks, such as hosting, providing refreshments, sending out meeting reminders, and taking and distributing minutes can be shared among members, but someone needs to be in charge to make sure it all gets done.
- ▶ **SET UP A CONSISTENT MEETING SCHEDULE.** Early on, you should establish where, when, and how frequently your group will meet. Whether you meet monthly or quarterly, it is essential that you choose a consistent day and time, such as the last Friday of every month at 2 p.m. or the first Monday of the quarter at 10 a.m. Groups should also decide if the meetings will always be held at the same location, or whether the locations will vary. Depending on the community, members must consider such factors as accessibility, ease of commute, access to public transportation, and parking. One advantage of varying the meeting location is the shared responsibility of hosting. Some disadvantages are that not all agencies have adequate meeting space and a change in venue sometimes means confusion among members.

“I really expected more of a sense of competition, but when you’re working together on something like a job fair or an employer forum, it becomes less about what you can do for your agency and more about what you can all accomplish together for the job seekers.”

—BARBARA PARMET, THE CAREER PLACE

- ▶ **CREATE AN ONLINE COMMUNITY.** Whatever the nature of the communication, groups need to develop a mechanism for sharing information between meetings. Some groups have created an email distribution list, a listserv, or an online message board. These tools can be used to support both the operation of the group itself as well as sharing information about job leads, new employers in an area, upcoming relevant training or professional development opportunities, job fairs, or job postings from member agencies.
- ▶ **DIVERSIFY.** Successful networking groups encourage a wide variety of employment specialists to join them. Greater diversity among populations served decreases the sense of competition and can result in a greater likelihood that members will pass on leads they cannot fill. Mentoring relationships can also develop. When ideas and knowledge are the focus, competition over contacts is greatly reduced, and participation is seen as a benefit, not a risk.

“The more often we can say to a business looking for an employee, “We can find you the right person,” the more valuable we will be to that business. Even if that person does not come from our caseload, we will be developing a relationship with the business.”

—DOUGLAS WHITNEY, VABIR BURLINGTON

Group Activities

- Tour one another’s agencies. Members are able to see how other agencies do business and make an assessment of their own program by comparison.
- Facilitate vocationally oriented, beginner American Sign Language (ASL) classes to assist job developers, area VR staff, and employers in communicating with people using ASL in the workplace.
- Hold in-service trainings on topics that members commonly struggle with. Guest speakers could include disability specialists from a local community college, human resources professionals, job seekers, benefits specialists, and other nonprofit agencies, such as food share or clothing-assistance programs that could help job seekers with other areas of their lives.
- Plan employer events and job fairs together. Non-competitive activities give group members an opportunity to get to know and develop confidence in one another.
- Tackle processes that members struggle with, such as online job applications and other troublesome pre-employment screens.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the goal of every job developer is to secure placements, not to run networking meetings. But forming or joining an employment networking group is a practice that has helped many to do their jobs better. Ultimately, what gets people jobs is links to businesses and contacts with those in a position to hire. Networking groups can help make those connections easier to form and maintain. The members of a group can serve as resources, support, and partners in planning events. How much or how little to undertake is up to a group’s individual members. So check out the networking groups in your area or consider starting one of your own. You never know where it could lead.

Toolkit

To maintain a networking group, you'll need

- A leadership team
- An agenda or meeting format
- A consistent location and schedule for meetings
- Listserv or email distribution lists
- Affiliations with employers or business advisory councils
- Protocols for sharing job leads and employer contacts
- A system for rotating administrative duties:
 - *Secure or schedule a place to meet*
 - *Send a reminder/attendance confirmation prior to meetings*
 - *Provide refreshments*
 - *Have a typed agenda (solicit items from the group & distribute it with the meeting reminder)*
 - *Take minutes & distribute them to all members*
 - *Record tasks and persons responsible, and send reminders*
 - *Recruit new members*

To start a group:

- Begin by contacting other community rehabilitation programs in your area. There may be a group you didn't know about or people interested in joining one.
- Reach out to VR, MR/DD, and MH agencies, and to other referral sources, to see if you can get their support. If there is interest but no staff time available, see if they can contribute other resources.
- Hold an open meeting to gauge the level of interest and commitment. Don't worry about being small at first. People are often reluctant to try new things until they see evidence of success.
- Be patient and persistent. Groups of this nature need some time to take off.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was funded by a grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education (grant# H264BO50009). The opinions contained in this publication are those of the grantees and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education.

Special thanks to Cecilia Gandolfo, Cindy Thomas, Danielle Dreilinger, Melissa Cook, Colleen Condon, Hugh Bradshaw, and Barbara Parmet for their input and editorial assistance.

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