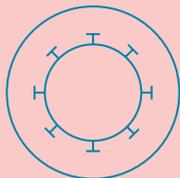


STRATEGICALLY VIRTUAL



Lessons Learned from the New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community

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Contents

Introduction	1
Logistics of the NJCN Job Seeker Community	2
Intentions and Origins of the NJCN Job Seeker Community	3
NJCN Job Seeker Community Approaches and Activities	4
NJCN Job Seeker Community Observations	6
Lessons Learned	7
Replicability and Scalability	8
Conclusion	9
Acknowledgments	10
About the Heldrich Center	10

Introduction

One of the many lessons emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance and inherent value of human connection and support. This lesson was especially notable for individuals going through times of transition in an already unstable period, namely those searching for work throughout the pandemic. During a time of great isolation, stress, and exhaustion, human-to-human supports in the forms of a listening ear, a compassionate tone, or a friendly face, were often noted as being deeply helpful and impactful for those trying to navigate the difficulties and uncertainties of job search. The wide-reaching challenges and well-being impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the degree to which holistic supports touching on the needs of the whole person could be of great value to individuals trying to pull themselves together and make progress in their job search.

Virtual methods of connecting and communicating continue to be a new frontier for many still navigating the uncertainty of the pandemic and its lasting effects on the way individuals interact with the world around them. Now, in a more virtual world, it has been proven that a lot of formerly place-based processes or in-person and face-to-face interactions and events can exist in a digital environment, allowing people to operate in a safer manner. Moreover, it can be seen that human support and genuine connection can also exist in a virtual space, offering a host of opportunities for the way workforce professionals and the public workforce system at large could think about job seeker support moving forward. As has been thoroughly documented, the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything about the way work, searching for work, and networking has been done for nearly the past two years. Leaning into these changes and building upon the

progress that has been made, there is much that could still be done in the way of creating virtual communities of care and connection for those in need of support on a larger statewide and nationwide scale.

With these learnings in mind, in 2020 researchers at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey undertook a new project titled the **New Jersey Career Network (NJCN) Job Seeker Community**, with the goal of testing and gaining a better understanding of how human connection in a virtual space could support individuals looking for work during the pandemic. Researchers created an online community for job seekers in the state of New Jersey to both give and receive support, ask questions in a safe space, and feel seen and heard throughout their job search. This endeavor constitutes a new way of working with job seekers, one born out of necessity during the pandemic, but the lessons of which are universal and should be carried forward long after the pandemic comes to an end.

Figure 1: Screenshot of NJCN Job Seeker Community home page



Logistics of the NJCN Job Seeker Community

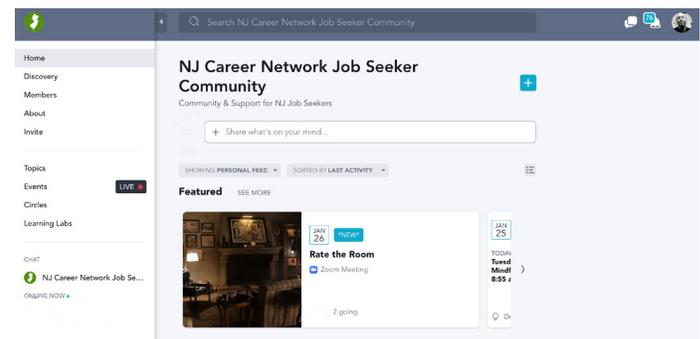
In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, in the summer of 2020, researchers at the Heldrich Center undertook the task of designing a virtual job seeker community hub and procuring the technology and securing staff to operate such a system. Researchers were operating in response to a need that was arising from numerous interactions with job seekers via the Heldrich Center's other job seeker program, the New Start Career Network, a program designed for individuals over the age of 45 and long-term unemployed in the state of New Jersey. From discussions with job seekers, it was apparent that people were looking for opportunities for virtual connection and interaction in a time when more traditional means of connecting, such as in-person or face-to-face meetings and networking, were not safe. For this reason, the NJCN Job Seeker Community was designed to be a 100% virtual program from the beginning.

It should be noted that this effort was funded by the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL) and operationalized by researchers on the technical assistance team at the Heldrich Center. It is also important to recognize that the Heldrich Center has the ability to operate more creatively and flexibly than NJDOL, working outside of the more traditional reporting systems and performance measure requirements. This freedom created space for innovative and agile programming, fully centered on job seekers' challenges and needs.

Researchers at the Heldrich Center were familiar with the development of job seeker-facing tools and programming, as the technical assistance team was directly involved in the development of the [NJCN Technology Platform](#), a job search recommendation engine, also funded by NJDOL. The NJCN Job Seeker Community constitutes an expansion of the NJCN project, adding a human touch component. In terms of the program logistics, the team at the Heldrich Center procured [Mighty Networks](#) to host the NJCN Job Seeker Community. Mighty Networks is a white label social media hosting platform that allows customers to design and customize a website without the responsibilities of building a website. Researchers felt the familiarity of the

social media website configuration would ease job seekers into this new programming endeavor and allow them to more intuitively navigate the site. The organization and orientation of the community is an active social media feed, which updates as new content is posted by members and community facilitators. This design makes it so the website is constantly changing, invoking a more interactive approach to content dissemination. Researchers believe that this is more appealing for individuals to interact with and use in their job search, versus the more traditional and often stagnant content pages that are only updated every so often.

Figure 2: Screenshot of user content feed



Overall, researchers painstakingly outlined the kind of community that they wanted to create and the type of experience they hoped job seekers would have upon signing up to be a member, always leading with human-centered design principles and heavily considering the human experience. Reducing barriers to entry, ensuring simplicity of navigation, and leading with a welcoming and empathetic tone were a few of the core principles that also drove design decisions, as well as staffing decisions. Heldrich Center researchers were able to easily recruit volunteer community facilitators from the New Start Career Network, which already had access to volunteer career coaches willing to offer their services to help those searching for work during the pandemic. With these resources in hand, by early fall 2020, the community was operational and taking on its first volunteer community facilitators and job seeker members.

Intentions and Origins of the NJCN Job Seeker Community

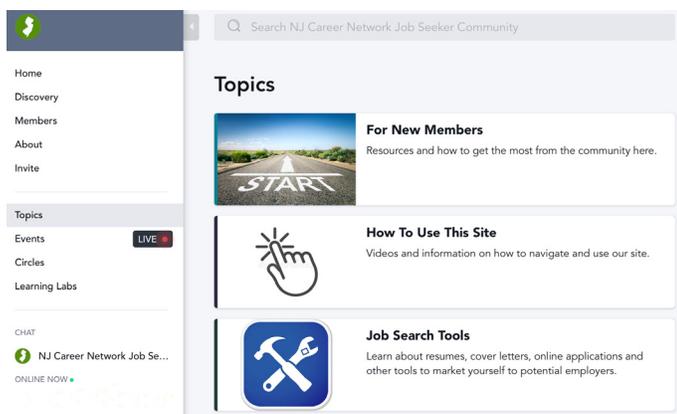
The primary goal of the NJCN Job Seeker Community was to create a safe virtual space for job seekers, akin to a virtual community, unlike any other program or service available in New Jersey at the time. The approach to working with job seekers constituted a radically different manner of interacting with job seekers to assess their needs, listen to their concerns, understand their challenges, and offer support and resources to address the job seeker as a whole person. In this way, the community takes a decidedly human-centered, whole-person approach to job seeker interaction, directly and purposefully acknowledging that job seekers are more than their job search and that connecting with job seekers and their needs, beyond the job search, can help them persist when things are difficult.

For these reasons, emphasis was placed on fostering an environment for virtual connection and community, and to instill a sense of belonging. From the beginning, the community was created to offer a safe space for similarly situated individuals to get together, share their experiences, and provide help and support to one another. Moreover, in doing this, another goal of the community was to empower members, unemployed individuals, to help others in a time when it was easy to feel helpless, alone, and powerless. From direct experience as well as the extensive body of research on the psychological effects of unemployment, the community creators aimed to foster a more shared communal experience of unemployment in an effort to allay the all-too-common stress, worry, and overwhelm that often present within the first few months of job search.

NJCN Job Seeker Community Approaches and Activities

The community’s operation is centered first and foremost on community building, namely the creation of a safe and welcoming environment for people to ask questions, share their vulnerabilities and challenges, give and get support from others, and more. To ensure the safety of all community members and to establish a place where people feel comfortable showing their vulnerabilities, researchers created [user guidelines](#) and a code of conduct and behavior that emphasized the community’s human-centered design. While these guidelines have not needed to be enforced often, they helped to set the stage and tone for what the community would become.

Figure 3: Screenshot of member information and tutorials

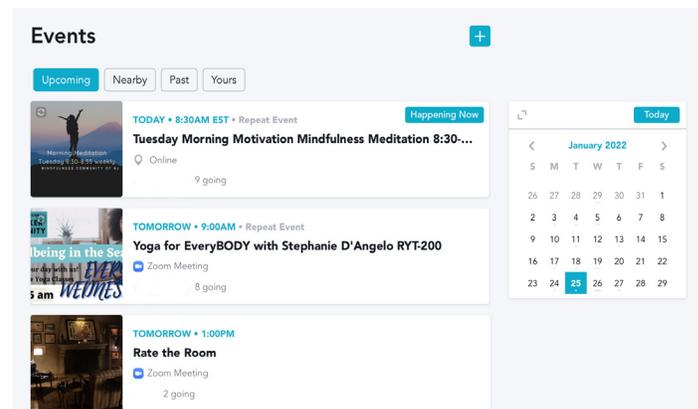


The Mighty Networks platform functions in much the same way as Facebook and other social networking sites – users can contribute content, post to their timeline, and comment on and “cheer” each other’s posts. In this way, job seekers can directly bring to the forefront what is most important to them. Additionally, network hosts regularly conduct satisfaction and check-in surveys and hear directly from community members during live virtual events about what programming would be most helpful to them. Members have, and continue to, run their own niche groups and activities within the broader network. While job leads are vetted by and shared by both hosts and members, this community does not function as a job board. The emphasis is much more on the community and support aspects than on directly linking job seekers to specific jobs.

There is a “high touch” feel of the network, with the goal of creating an environment where everyone feels comfortable. This starts with the welcome process; every new member is individually sent a welcome message by a staff member, which is followed by information on how to navigate the site and what to expect from the community. Additionally, a community member volunteers to hold a weekly orientation session where new members can get to know one another and ask questions they may have about the community.

The community itself is active – new content and resources are shared daily. A number of recurring and special events happen every week, including Share and Support meetings between three and five times a week, hosted by volunteer facilitators. These meetings either have special topics (e.g., dealing with ageism in the workplace, mock interviewing, etc.) or are a free-flowing space where job seekers can talk about their job search and lives in general and ask questions they may have. This peer-to-peer support system was modeled after similar groups in the healthcare space. Additionally, “Rate the Room” sessions were introduced to assist with proper lighting, backgrounds, etc. and “Pop Up Pomodoros” help provide a focused work time and space for members. In the words of one job seeker member, “Each day, the New Jersey Career Network presents a number of Zoom calls by career development professionals that focus on the many issues facing those that are job searching and the skills needed for success.”

Figure 4: Screenshot of upcoming NJCN events feed



There is also a focus on well-being during the job search and a number of events are targeted toward providing supports in this area. These events include a “Compassion for the Job Seeker” series, where participants practice self-compassion and positive self-talk. There is regular and recurring programming around gentle yoga and secular meditation, practices that many job seekers reported have led to reduced

stress during their job search. In addition, the community features special events that are focused on well-being, such as the **“Restoring Aliveness” series** and webinars featuring experts on healing after trauma. Other social events, such as an annual holiday party, crafting sessions, and book and movie discussions have been initiated by both hosts and members.

NJCN Job Seeker Community Observations

Both Heldrich Center researchers and volunteer community members and coaches serve the function of hosts of the NJCN Job Seeker Community. Through that experience, it became clear to community hosts that job seekers were desperate to share their stories and experiences and to connect with others who are or were going through the same thing. One job seeker member shared, “It’s great to know that there are other people in the support groups who experience the same feeling I do and aren’t afraid to share that with me.”

A key benefit of the Mighty Networks platform is that the information shared is not indexable by search engines and less likely to be seen by employers, so job seekers can more freely share concerns and questions than on other social media or job search platforms. In this way, the community provides some of the aspects of LinkedIn (i.e., connecting with others in the context of job search, asking questions/ accessing resources about job search) with the more social presence aspects of a social network like Facebook. Because of the shame and stigma often associated with job search, many people might not be comfortable discussing their search on either LinkedIn (for fear of negative implications during the hiring process) or Facebook (because of the perceived shame of being unemployed.) The NJCN Job Seeker Community offers a “third space” where job seekers can be seen and heard and access real-time supports.

Often job seekers report feeling “lost” and not knowing where to begin a job search, or where to go next if they have been engaged in an extended job search. Virtual sharing,

connection, community support, and shared resources appear to lessen that feeling and add clarity and a sense of direction to the job search. NJCN Job Seeker Community hosts believe these aspects of the community help job seekers get into the right frame of mind and are foundational to a successful job search for those who have been struggling and feeling lost. To this end, one member commented:

It’s a great place to land and check-in with like-minded individuals. It’s also a great source of support. Whenever I’m feeling low and unproductive, these guys pick me up, dust me off, and encourage me to get back in the game.

Without this sense of direction, job search stress increases. It is important to acknowledge this stress, and address it, along with all of the other issues in addition to job search issues that people are facing. Heldrich Center researchers believe that addressing job search holistically, and accounting for mood, motivation, physical and mental health, caregiving responsibilities, financial stress, and other day-to-day concerns is a better approach to job search. Often these stresses take away from cognitive function and the ability to successfully conduct a job search. Mitigating the negative effects of these can lead to much better outcomes. When the online community approach is successful, it helps connect members to the resources they need so that they can find employment and either leave the community or return as volunteer moderators or mentors.

Lessons Learned

The NJCN Job Seeker Community was built as a tool for job seekers, but also as an evolving and flexible experience that Heldrich Center researchers could make changes and improvements to while being actively used, with the dual goals of providing the best possible experience for job seekers while also gaining important insights into replicable practices. Through this experience, several important lessons stand out:

- ▶ **Community matters.** Members reported, and researchers observed, that bonding and networking with people who could help one another in the job search process was beneficial. As other researchers have noted (see [A Crisis of Long-term Unemployment is Looming in the U.S.](#)), job seekers often have trouble connecting with family and former colleagues about their current situation due to shame and stigma. Being in a community of others who are similarly situated helps ease that stigma and allows for more open conversation and connection.

"I am so grateful for groups like this during such difficult times."

-NJCN Job Seeker Community Member

- ▶ **Safety matters.** As previously mentioned, job seekers can feel vulnerable and be subject to shame and stigma. People need to feel that they are in a safe environment to open up, be vulnerable, and admit what they need help with or what they don't know, in order to be successful moving forward. Safety and community are interconnected and equally important.

- ▶ **Connection matters.** The NJCN Job Seeker Community has shown that sharing what is otherwise a lonely experience with others in similar situations can be beneficial, regardless of industry, experience level, or educational level.

"I've hit a rut these last couple of Wednesdays and NJCN has helped me to recharge to finish the week strong."

-NJCN Job Seeker Community Member

- ▶ **Being part of something that matters.** Members of the community and the community itself offers purpose, and something to do during the day. Community members serve as accountability buddies while the community provides accountability measures for those struggling with motivation and follow-through.

"The job search can be an overwhelming undertaking, especially when combined with the current political/social milieu and pandemic. The New Jersey Job Seeker Community provides the much needed support for the whole person."

-NJCN Job Seeker Community Member

As previously mentioned, the NJCN Job Seeker Community is not limited to only job search-related content and conversations, and takes a whole-person approach to job search. Community members have collectively shared hobbies, bonded over difficult caregiving situations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and helped each other identify resources for accessing affordable health insurance. Community hosts and Heldrich Center researchers believe that this open approach allows job seekers to feel more connected in a job search process that is being increasingly automated and detached. This approach also allows hosts, facilitators, and coaches to have a better understanding of each job seeker, to lead with a more empathetic tone, and to convey more compassion.

Replicability and Scalability

Heldrich Center researchers are hopeful that programs like this can be duplicated, customized, and implemented in other states and with other groups. Researchers believe that the key to successfully establishing a community like the NJCN Job Seeker Community is to identify the right staff members who have both the skills and capacity to get the community running and to establish the right tone from the beginning. Some flexibility and the ability to “learn as you go” is required to ensure that the community is best serving its members.

Such communities are not just beneficial in a job search context. The pandemic promoted changes in thinking, interacting, and service delivery that can be expanded upon and scaled up to meet the continuing needs of job seekers, not just direct job search, but everything from housing and food assistance to connections with broader support networks and physical and mental health services.

This community also shows that virtual programming can be effective. It is important to note that the NJCN Job Seeker Community was designed to be entirely virtual from the beginning; this was not an in-person experience that was shifted to a virtual space. Researchers believe that this intentionality helped the community become successful.

As has been stated previously in this brief, resources, time, and effort should be put toward addressing the needs of the whole person, not just job search needs. Other life issues and roadblocks often slow down job search progress, and taking the context of a person’s life into account and establishing a baseline level of stability and security can lead to a more effective job search and a quicker return to work.

Conclusion

This novel approach to job seeker interaction and support has been shown to work. Many community members (including those who had previously been long-term unemployed) have cycled out of the community and found jobs. Of those who have found jobs, many have expressed gratitude to the community for the support along the way and have credited that support with helping them meet their employment goals. For these reasons, researchers believe that this endeavor could be replicated, in whole or in part, if job seeker service providers are willing to rethink service delivery and what job seekers may need in their reemployment journeys.

As such, operating the NJCN Job Seeker Community has illuminated many lessons about what constitutes job seeker supports and how many obstacles can get in the way of executing a successful job search. It has also shown that virtual programming can be beneficial to job seekers and that having a supportive online community can help with the job search process, as well as with the psychological and emotional toll of experiencing unemployment, particularly unemployment during a global pandemic. The NJCN Job Seeker Community is a dramatic departure from what is commonly understood to be job seeker services, the lessons of which hold great value for how the public workforce system or any job seeker service provider could rethink and revamp service provision for the future.

Acknowledgments

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- ▶ Career and Technical Education
- ▶ Data Collection and Analysis
- ▶ Disability Employment
- ▶ Job Seekers in Transition
- ▶ Program Evaluation
- ▶ Trend Analysis

Learn more: www.heldrich.rutgers.edu