

## John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

**getting to know you****A Q&A with Art Baer**

*Art Baer is a New Start Career Network (NSCN) volunteer career coach, who also serves as NSCN's employer outreach coordinator. In this role, he helps NSCN expand its network of employer partners with the goal of helping NSCN job seekers. His background includes recruitment and career services. He is a three-time Rutgers University graduate.*

**Please tell me about your professional background before joining NSCN.**

Most of my professional career was spent in the outplacement industry, also known as career transition. The business was geared toward working with people who were downsized out of various organizations and helping them through their transitions. Most of the time, this meant providing them assistance in finding another job; however, some individuals considered other career options like entrepreneurship, career change, consultancy, and sometimes retirement, and there were programs to help them as well. This type of work was about getting the person to a place that would best serve their needs. Over the years, my roles evolved. I started out providing direct services to our clients, then worked in business development, lastly in regional management. I worked in the industry for about 25 years before retiring nearly 4 years ago.

For me, it took a long time to realize that this was my life's work. When I first became interested in this field, I was in my early 20s, and at that point outplacement was a fledgling industry that was geared more toward helping senior, older executives who were displaced. It had not yet transformed into the industry that it is now where most big companies offer outplacement services to all of their employees during a downsizing. As a



20-something-year-old who wanted to work with older, displaced executives, I did not have a lot of credibility. I had to gain experience to get myself into a position where I could be a contender for a job in the industry.

To gain relevant experience and build my background, I worked as a director of career services at Mercer County Community College and earlier as a recruiter placing industrial engineers. These positions were satisfying and meaningful in their own right, but were also part of a larger career plan that allowed me to get into the position that I ultimately did. The combination of my diverse background, coupled with the growth of the outplacement industry into offering services to a wider range of people in organizations, worked out well for my career.

### **What sparked you to realize this was your life's work?**

Coming out of school as an English major, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I have a Master's degree in education with a focus on instructional technology because I thought I wanted to go into educational film. That didn't work out, so I started thinking about what I might be good at and what I really liked to do. At that time, I read anything that was available on vocational choice and how people choose their career path. There was a book called *Working* by journalist Studs Terkel, where he interviewed people in various professions and occupations about what they did and I thought it was the greatest book I ever read. It confirmed for me then that I was interested in what people do, and I still have this same interest today. I enjoy talking to people about their work life and what they do because I'm truly interested in it. Being exposed to the idea of different occupations and the reasons why people do what they do, why they like or dislike what they do, resonated with me in a personal way. I'm thankful that I came to know what I wanted to do and achieved it through a process that worked well for me — this gave me a good, successful, and satisfying career. And picking up an MBA along the way proved very useful.

### **What made you want to volunteer your time with NSCN? What is your role within NSCN?**

I had thought about what I wanted to do in retirement for some time before retiring. Part of what drove me to retire was ensuring I'd have enough time and energy to travel extensively with my wife, but I also knew I'd need some activities that were meaningful. I knew I wanted to do volunteerism as a significant part of my retired life. I got trained as a literacy coach and I also work with seniors who need help with some basic financial requirements like balancing a checkbook and paying bills. I read an article in the *Star Ledger* that was written by Phil Murphy about long-term unemployment and NSCN, and I thought it sounded good. I did some research on the organization and signed up to become a volunteer career coach. Through the coaching orientation, I got a sense of the infrastructure that was created for NSCN and was very impressed with it. So, not only was it a good cause, but it was being done in a thoughtful, planned way that for me and my background

made a lot of sense. I started out with NSCN as a volunteer career coach, and gravitated to the role I currently have, which is employer outreach coordinator. Everyone who's looking for a job wants to be considered, and I am personally interested in trying to generate a willingness among specific employers to consider NSCN member job seekers. Maria Heidkamp, the director of NSCN, was interested in my idea of working with employers, and, since this was around the time of the first NSCN job fair, I spent a lot of time speaking to employers who would attend. Since that time, I've been looking for employers who fit that category of being willing to give consideration to NSCN member job seekers on an ongoing basis.

Part of my employer outreach effort is to work with organizations and find out if they are willing to consider NSCN job seekers, or to get a process in place to make this happen. This has been challenging because it requires not only finding a willing champion within an organization, but that person must be able to work through whatever recruiting systems are already in place.

### **How does this work tie in with your background?**

It was a simple transition to go into this role because my background gives me credibility, I have many contacts in my network, and I am familiar with the New Jersey marketplace. In my role, I am not looking for a series of one-time transactions. Instead, I really want to build some continuity and sustainability with a group of employers and create a willingness to consider NSCN job seekers so they are at least getting a "look." Companies will hire people best suited to their job openings, but I want to get our people "in the mix." I believe in NSCN and my goal is to have employers also become supporters of our effort.

### **Do you feel that NSCN is positively affecting its job seeker members?**

The people I've talked to are appreciative of the services that we offer and find them valuable, particularly the members who are using our volunteer career coaches. In my opinion, NSCN is a well-run service, at no cost to an individual, that provides them with a lot of support. The job search process can be a lonely, frustrating, difficult time for a job seeker. Even with the support of a spouse or good

friend, as supportive as they may be, having somebody who is neutral and has your best interest at heart and gives you feedback that's meaningful and advice that's helpful, is really beneficial. The job search process takes time — searching, applying, and waiting. Not hearing feedback from employers when you are going through the process is difficult and extremely discouraging. Having a support system or having someone who can listen is incredibly beneficial to the job seeker, and that's part of what a NSCN volunteer career coach provides.

I feel good to be a part of this organization. I'm impressed with the structure of NSCN, and the commitment to continually improve it for the benefit of the job seekers. I do think that NSCN provides a valuable service. Our volunteers' concern is genuine, the commitment is real, and there are real professionals who are coaching the job seekers. It truly means something to the volunteers, and that plays out in how they help the members.

### About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization 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 policy-making 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 also 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:

- > Disability Employment
- > Education and Training
- > Unemployment and Reemployment
- > U.S. Labor Market and Industry
- > Workforce Policy and Practice
- > Work Trends Surveys

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