

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

getting to know you

A Q&A with Michele Martin

Michele Martin is a senior associate with the New Start Career Network (NSCN), which is based at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Her work assisting long-term unemployed job seekers allows her to engage her background in career development, as well as her interest in helping people work toward their goals.

What is your professional background?

I began working in workforce development in the 1990s. I was a human resources manager for two large apparel manufacturers in Pennsylvania. When the North American Free Trade Agreement came through, those corporations shut down and shipped all of their manufacturing jobs overseas. Through this layoff, I began working with the local Private Industry Council, which was set up to assist people who had lost their jobs. Through a program called Rapid Response, they helped my companies manage the large layoff and to communicate with our workers about the career and job search services that would be available to them. Later, I was hired by this organization to do career and job search workshops for unemployed job seekers who were looking for new careers. In this position, I was working with many different age groups as well as people who were facing barriers to employment. In 1998, I left this organization and started working for myself.

I am certified as a Career Development Facilitator/Instructor and I have done a lot of work with One-Stop Career Centers across the United States, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Most of the time, I'm working with disadvantaged youth populations, TANF recipients, and dislocated workers who have been laid off.



What is your role within NSCN?

My primary responsibility is to look for different ways in which we can provide a variety of services to our job-seeking members. To help meet this need, I host webinars on a range of job search and career-oriented topics and facilitate a Facebook group for our members so they can exchange ideas and ask questions of each other and our volunteer career coaches. Because our members are from all across New Jersey, we try to focus on a lot of virtual services so that we can offer them to the broadest possible group.

I also work on the operational side of NSCN. A big piece of this is matching member job seekers with coaches and then helping facilitate and maintain relationships amongst coaches and between coaches and job seekers. I troubleshoot and problem-solve and if coaches need resources, I support and help them find what they need. I

Getting to Know You: A Q&A with Michele Martin

hold coach training and professional development groups to get the coaches together so that we can share issues that we're seeing with our member job seekers and exchange ideas in an effort to better assist our members. These meetings are a great way to learn from and inform one another about strategies and resources and share that knowledge with the group.

How did you get started with NSCN?

When I first came to NSCN, I started as a volunteer career coach. I had done work at the Heldrich Center in the past on disability employment and stayed in touch with the projects that were being conducted. During the first NSCN coach orientation, it became clear that the coaches were looking for resources and ways to connect with each another. After that initial orientation, I had conversations with Heldrich Center executive director Kathy Krepcio, NSCN director Maria Heidkamp, and former NSCN associate director Chris Lenart about what the coaches were looking for and how I could provide this kind of support to the coaches. I began supporting the coaches, and then when Chris Lenart retired, I took over the job seeker matching and operational tasks.

What draws you toward, and motivates you to do, this kind of work?

My core interest is helping people navigate the transitions of their careers and employment. In particular, I feel we are at an inflection point around what working and careers used to be. Traditionally, the idea was to get a full-time permanent job and there were always enough jobs to go around. Now, we are operating in an economy where full-time, permanent employment is probably the last thing on the list as far as businesses are concerned because they are looking at other employment arrangements.

This new idea of careers and employment can be difficult to understand for people who have been working in a more traditional role and now find themselves looking for a new career. Many questions remain, such as: how do people navigate careers where there are a lot of different possibilities in terms of work arrangements, how do they navigate a career that requires them to change by going into entirely new kinds of work and indus-

tries, how do they respond to those factors, and how do they deal with the mental and emotional side effects that go along with that change? Part of what I do is figure out how to help job seekers make adjustments around these factors and adapt to that environment. There's a real human toll that takes place and the people who are most vulnerable are the ones who are struggling the most with how to access opportunity in this job market.

My motivation for doing this kind of work comes from seeing a population that, according to society's traditional measures of success, has done all the right things, but have now lost their jobs and are unable to find employment. While this is a tough situation, it is intriguing to me because I try to figure out why this is happening and what I can do to help people through it. People are experiencing serious trauma and total loss of identity when they lose a job that they have worked for a long time. There are people who have invested years in this idea of themselves as productive members of the workforce, often in high-status positions, and now find themselves fractured and they don't know who they are or where they fit in. Being in this age group myself, I understand their feelings and want to help.

What makes NSCN different from other organizations?

NSCN is focused on the specific issues that this particular population is facing. I think there are other programs that help people who are unemployed, but they are not as targeted toward the same population as NSCN. For example, we did a webinar on interviewing with younger hiring managers because we know that as older job seekers, this group can experience difficulty getting past that screening process. NSCN is able to be very targeted and focused with strategies to assist older job seekers. NSCN also tries to be responsive to the current issues that members may encounter as they conduct their job search, and how we can help members work around them.

The fact that we have volunteer coaches from all different career areas is something unique to NSCN. We are getting people who are in all different types of industries who volunteer as coaches so they can offer different perspectives that benefit our job seekers. I think that this idea that fellow

citizens want to help these job seekers is unusual. In addition, we get a high degree of commitment from our volunteer coaches. Coaches come to our meetings and share their insights about what they're seeing and how we can provide better services that we offer to job seekers. We have volunteer coaches that do webinars for our members, and they are very involved and engaged.

What do you enjoy most about working with NSCN?

The most rewarding thing is hearing that one of our members has gotten a great new job. That makes me feel like everything that we are doing is worthwhile and that we managed to connect someone with an opportunity and they are happy about it.

I also find it rewarding to see that people are coming to new realizations about themselves after joining NSCN. Often, I will hear from members that they have gotten a lot more clarity about what direction they want to go, what they want to do, and sometimes it isn't what they thought when they first joined NSCN. That's valuable to me. For NSCN members, it's a transitional time and there are many possibilities available to them. Seeing members open themselves up to these new possibilities and be excited about them, despite their uncertainty, is gratifying.

Another part of NSCN that I enjoy is working with Maria and the coaches. Coaches call me with ideas and I'm very open to their input. We talk about it and plant these seeds and try to nurture them, and convert them into new services and ways to help our members.

How do you see NSCN evolving in the future?

At this stage, I feel that we have focused on being clear about who the people we're working with are, what they need, how we can help them, and the lessons learned from the coaching experiences. Now we are moving into the stage where we've established our audience and can focus more on areas where we can be more strategic. We are realizing that we need to put a lot more structure into our communications with members. I'm looking at the research in behavioral economics, psychology, and neuroscience to see how we can better support our members to become more productive

in the way they think about employment and job search. We can now take what we've been learning and figuring out, and then strategically and systematically start to address some of the issues to better serve our members.

A lot of people find that they get to a point in their job search where it doesn't seem like anything they are doing is working. NSCN can help members navigate this transitional period, and although it may feel unsafe and uncertain to break out of that comfort zone, NSCN can help members take the right kinds of actions, stay current and relevant in the job search, put together a plan that is going to be more effective in this job market, and stay focused and committed and working on that plan.

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:

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- > 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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