

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

getting to know you

A Q&A with Carl Van Horn

Carl Van Horn, Ph.D. is founding director of the Heldrich Center and a distinguished professor of public policy at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. His career, which spans 40 years, has been focused on workforce, human resources, and employment policy issues with extensive experience in public- and private-sector policymaking. Dr. Van Horn has written over 100 articles and authored or edited 17 books on these topics. In this interview, he speaks about the founding of the Heldrich Center with John J. Heldrich, and the importance of the continuing work of one of the nation's leading academic centers on workforce policy and practice.

Please tell me about the founding of the Heldrich Center, and your role in particular.

John Heldrich met me when I first joined the Rutgers faculty in the late 1970s. I also worked closely with John when I served as director of policy in Governor Florio's office and John was chairing the State Employment and Training Commission. After returning to the university, John sought my advice about developing effective workforce development strategies and asked me to prepare a detailed plan for a national center at Rutgers. Shortly after I submitted that proposal in 1997, John generously donated the funds to launch the Center, which was eventually named for him.

When the Center was under development, I was the chair of the public policy department at the Bloustein School. Initially, I hired Laurie Harrington and Aaron Fichtner who were working with me at the Bloustein School. Laurie is now a senior researcher at the Center. Aaron was the Center's research director for over a decade and is now New Jersey's Commissioner of Labor and Workforce Development. I also hired Bill Tracy, who had



been the director of the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission, as the Center's first executive director.

Where does your passion for this work come from?

I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where my father worked as a foreman in the steel industry. While attending college, I worked at the Homestead Steel Mill during the summers. At that time, the mill employed 35,000 people; today, the mill is gone. The steel industry was one of the first industries in the United States to suffer a massive restructuring and reduction in employment. Witnessing so many friends and neighbors lose the good jobs that they expected to last a lifetime had a profound and lasting impact on me.

While studying for my Ph.D. in political science/public policy in the mid-1970s, I examined the implementation of federal workforce programs designed to address unemployment and worker dislocation. The questions and challenges that ani-

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mated my research 40 years ago are the same ones that motivate my work today.

My public service experiences also greatly contributed to my understanding of public policy development and implementation. I served as a professional staffer on the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress, policy director for the Governor of New Jersey, chair of a national task force on dislocated workers, and chair of the board of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. I am currently an advisor to the Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank's workforce development center.

In what direction do you see the Heldrich Center's work going in the future?

There are at least two themes that will drive our efforts over the next several years. First, we are hoping to develop more effective policies through research and demonstration projects. One example is the New Start Career Network for long-term unemployed workers, which is led by senior researcher Maria Heidkamp. The goals of this project are to experiment with strategies, evaluate them, and then report on how our state and nation can better serve this group of job seekers. Another is the New Jersey Career Assistance Navigator project, led by Laurie Harrington, where we collaborate with the New Jersey Department of Education to help teachers, school counselors, and administrators develop comprehensive college and career-readiness resources for high school students.

A second theme is to apply findings from large-scale data analysis to improve programs and policies. In the past few years, our research team, directed by Bill Mabe, has examined workforce and labor market data and translated their findings so that policymakers are better informed when they set policies and allocate resources. Their work also assists students and job seekers in making more informed decisions about education, training, and careers.

The Center's priorities are driven by our motto: "solutions at work." Through independent research, we develop practical solutions and communicate our findings and recommendations to policymakers, workforce development practitioners, students, workers, and job seekers.

What makes the work done at the Heldrich Center so important in today's job market?

The challenges currently faced by employers, job seekers, students, and families about work and economic change are much greater than they were 25 years ago. It is difficult to navigate the changing nature of work and technological innovation. The Heldrich Center is providing assistance in understanding and responding to these transformations in the labor market.

Where did you get the idea to start the *Work Trends* series and why is it important to the Heldrich Center?

We launched the *Work Trends* series in 1999 in order to gain a better understanding of American workers' views and experiences in a rapidly changing labor market. The core concept was to conduct nationally representative surveys of workers and to explore their views on work, the economy, and public policy. Since then, we've completed over 30 *Work Trends* reports. For the past 10 years, I was fortunate to collaborate with one of the nation's leading survey researchers, professor Cliff Zukin of Rutgers.

The *Work Trends* series has received wide media attention in the United States and throughout the world. It has influenced policymakers, educators, journalists, and scholars. Our surveys chronicling the impact of the Great Recession on American workers received the Policy Impact Award from the American Association for Public Opinion Research in 2013. The *Work Trends* series helped establish the reputation of the Heldrich Center as an important source of insightful, independent research.

Were there any projects that you feel were especially impactful?

We've had significant impacts on the way that policymakers and the public understand the labor market and workforce programs. For example, our research on the experiences of recent college graduates during the Great Recession was among the first to document the serious financial implications of growing student debt. Our research led to direct conversations with the White House, members of Congress, the Governors of the Federal Reserve Bank, and the National Governors Association.

The Heldrich Center's research on the impact of the Great Recession raised awareness that even though the economy was improving, millions of people were still struggling to find good jobs. Research on policies and programs that will increase employment for adults with disabilities, led by executive director Kathy Krepcio, also has had a significant, positive impact.

What inspires you to continue doing this work every day?

My entire professional career has been devoted to using research and analysis to develop more effective strategies to improve opportunities for students, workers, and job seekers. Knowing that the Heldrich Center continues to make positive contributions to our nation, state, and fellow citizens is a powerful motivation for me.

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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