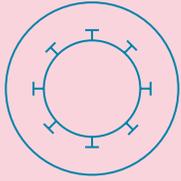


STRATEGICALLY
VIRTUAL



Effective Job Search Support in the Time of COVID

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by Michele Martin



HELDRICH CENTER
FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

RUTGERS

Edward J. Bloustein School
of Planning and Public Policy

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As the nation heads into the second year of the COVID-19 recession and ongoing social crisis, the public workforce system is still grappling with how best to provide effective virtual services to job seekers. National attention has focused predominantly on skills training and how to connect workers to short-term credentials in a virtual environment. There is a need for these services, of course, but a focus on skills training alone leaves vast swathes of the unemployed underserved and unsupported in getting back to work. Only a relatively small percentage of people will access skills training. A much larger number need help and guidance in finding new jobs and those who do receive training will also need these supports. To the extent that virtual job search services exist right now, they remain basic in scope and are often impersonal and transactional. The most common of these services appear to be: online job fairs, labor exchange (which is limited in types of jobs that are promoted), and basic education and support on résumés, interviewing, and online applications.

For the past five years, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development has been providing virtual job search assistance to New Jersey's unemployed and long-term unemployed residents through two programs – one privately funded and operated by the Heldrich Center and another publicly funded through support from the State of New Jersey. As a result, Heldrich Center staff have talked to and interacted with thousands of unemployed workers looking for work both before and during the pandemic. Based on the Heldrich Center's experience in serving unemployed workers, this brief discusses how current job search strategies offered by the public workforce system are insufficient for helping job seekers navigate the current economy. This brief offers and outlines a new model for job search assistance that is more expansive and robust for serving the millions of people out of work today based on center researchers' direct experiences in understanding what works, and what does not work, for diverse groups of the unemployed.

Fundamentally, the center's experience working with job seekers illustrates that there is an urgent need for job search service providers to offer more holistic, comprehensive programming that engages job seekers where they are and provides the supports they need to not only learn new job search skills, but put these skills into practice in a challenging, uncertain environment. Further, with **41.5% of the unemployed now out of work for six months or longer as of February 2021** and more people joining this cohort every day, the Heldrich Center finds that long-term relationship building and engagement are critical to mitigate the negative consequences of extended unemployment and to avoid having people drop out of the labor market altogether.

As outlined in this brief, the Heldrich Center's model incorporates the **most recent findings** on how chronic stress and traumatic experiences negatively affect the brain's executive function – the core skills needed to remember information, plan, organize, initiate tasks, learn new information, and manage emotions. In working closely with

long-term unemployed individuals, the Heldrich Center has seen that executive functioning skills are critical to an effective job search and any interventions used with job seekers.

Further, the model proposed in this brief addresses the need for approaches that emphasize community and relationship building, peer support, development of effective schedules and habits, and ongoing attention to the social and emotional well-being of job seekers. The Heldrich Center finds that these service elements are equally, if not more, important than many skill-building activities typically used to engage job seekers. Without these supports, the center has learned that job seekers are cast adrift and their efforts are often ineffective, leading them to become even more confused, isolated, and discouraged.

To be strategically virtual, it is important to be clear about the types of services and supports that the center has found job seekers need to be successful. An upcoming brief will offer strategies to implement these services virtually.

Understanding the Job Seeker Experience

As noted earlier, for the past five years, the Heldrich Center has provided virtual job search services to New Jersey residents through two programs it operates. The center has also worked closely with the Chief Innovation Office of New Jersey to conduct hundreds of user interviews that have been used to inform the development of an online digital coaching tool to help New Jersey residents with their job search. As part of its program activities, Heldrich Center researchers talk daily with job seekers about their schedules, habits, approaches, mood, and motivation in the search and have learned on an intimate level how people are thinking and feeling at all phases of the job search.

This work has given the Heldrich Center team a deep perspective on how people experience unemployment and the job search, and the challenges that arise the longer a search continues. The center has found that the quick fixes of providing information and webinars are not enough to truly support the majority of job seekers. Heldrich Center researchers have learned that information is typically not the challenge. Too much information, conflicting information, and

understanding how to use information in particular situations are bigger issues. Managing mood and motivation during a long, discouraging period of unemployment are also key concerns.

Job loss, especially in the midst of a global pandemic and economic meltdown, is a crisis situation for every job seeker who experiences it. Crises shake people to their core, uprooting what is "normal" and challenging each person's sense of safety, security, identity, and priorities. Next to the death of a loved one, losing one's livelihood is one of the most stressful and upsetting situations people can encounter.

Many people experiencing job loss erupt into a frenzy of activity, frantically revising résumés, applying to any posting that seems closely related to their background or experience, and desperately asking contacts for job leads. Job seekers have collapsed, overwhelmed with fear, anxiety, and even shame at losing work. Most struggle with a loss of structure in their daily schedules, the loss of a work community, and confusion about their next steps.

The Emotional Roller-coaster of Job Loss and Job Search

In the initial stages, there is usually a focus on obtaining unemployment insurance and addressing safety and security issues such as health care, housing, and food. As long as people are consumed with getting some degree of safety and stability in their lives, their ability to engage in a meaningful, effective job search will be compromised. Their attention will be drawn repeatedly to their security needs and most of their energy will be expended on finding stability in an uncertain time.

As they adjust to a “new normal,” job seekers begin to look for work in a more sustained way, usually by haunting online job boards, endlessly revising their résumés, and submitting online applications with little awareness of how Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) actually work. In the application process, they face new challenges – behavioral and personality assessments integrated into online applications, the need to customize applications to get past the ATS, and applications that time out if they take too long to complete.

Job seekers may network, but many do so ineffectively, focusing primarily on trying to get leads rather than on building relationships or using contacts to help them get more information about target companies. Some are fortunate

enough to get interviews and move into the next phase of determining how to present themselves effectively to potential employers. Many end up on an endless cycle of submitting online applications and hearing nothing, which leaves them confused, worried, and discouraged about their prospects. The longer this cycle continues, the more likely they are to lose self-esteem and confidence, and the greater the toll on their mental, emotional, and social well-being. Most had expected they would find employment relatively quickly and when this doesn't happen, they lose motivation and struggle with how to adapt to a situation they didn't expect.

As they wrestle with these challenges, they receive conflicting advice and ideas for how to proceed. This increases their confusion and frustration. The one word most job seekers use to describe their experience is “overwhelmed” and this usually leads to withdrawal, isolation, and feelings of shame that they aren't more “motivated” and “productive.” They find themselves on a roller-coaster of effort where periods of more focused activity give way to stretches of being distracted by other life activities or experiencing themselves as stuck and immobilized by their search. Maintaining motivation and the “positive attitude” necessary to sell themselves to potential employers become ongoing problems that fuel additional anxiety and fear.

Toward a More Comprehensive Model of Support

The COVID-19 recession, the long-term impacts of social isolation, and the general uncertainty of the current environment have all exacerbated what was already a difficult situation for unemployed people. It's hard enough to look for work in “normal” times. The COVID-19 environment is decidedly **not** normal and predicting when jobs will come back and where to direct job search efforts during a pandemic adds another layer of challenge.

With over 40% of the unemployed already out of work for six months or longer and many more at risk, it's essential that workforce development programs and professionals look to embrace a more systemic, holistic service model that considers not only the job search skill-building component, but the many other factors that affect the job search

experience, as well. The longer people are out of work, the more likely there will be negative impacts on employability. **Some research** indicates that long-term unemployment can change key personality traits, such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, all of which can affect future employment.

Traditional publicly funded workforce services such as résumé and interviewing workshops and labor exchange services are necessary, but the Heldrich Center has learned that they are not sufficient to provide the support job seekers need. The job search is something that ultimately job seekers must do for themselves and they need support for ongoing, daily action in a confusing and constantly shifting environment.

Principles of Effective Intervention

In working with unemployed job seekers over the past five years, Heldrich Center researchers have found it important to embrace several critical underlying principles:

Work in a Real-World Context

Fundamentally, the problems people are currently facing in the job market are about a collapse in demand. There are not enough jobs for the people who want them and there is no clear path to seeing when and how jobs might return. Further, many jobs that are available pay low wages and carry unprecedented health risks. Job seekers must make difficult choices that require them to balance their need for income with their concerns about their own health and the health of the people around them. While some job seekers will be able to find employment and support should be provided to help them get back to work as quickly as possible, it is important to also be clear that even the most skilled, most well-prepared job seeker may still not find employment for some time. A primary goal, then, is finding ways to help people feel engaged, supported, and connected during what is likely to be a long process. Helping them to find purpose and belonging during challenging times is as important as teaching them how to create a résumé.

Work with an Equity Lens

As part of operating in a real-world context, it is important to recognize how racial and gender equity issues affect job seeker experience. Individuals from marginalized groups do not have the same labor market outcomes, even with the same levels of education and experience. Strategies that work for men and white people will not work in the same ways for women, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Any work needs to recognize and actively incorporate this knowledge into the interventions that are used and workforce development staff must actively work with job seekers to identify how these issues may affect their career and job search plans.

Work with the Whole Person

People are not just their job search. Other aspects of their lives affect their sense of safety and stability, which, in turn, affects their ability to engage in an effective search. In addition, so much of the job search is out of the control of the individual. Acknowledging that there are other parts of life where a job seeker can feel a greater sense of stability and

progress and helping them to address these other aspects can increase feelings of confidence, self-efficacy, and well-being that can then be leveraged for the job search.

Work in Community with a Focus on Building Relationships

People in crisis tend to turn inward and become more solitary just at the time when they most need more social support. This is exacerbated by the social distancing measures required to contain COVID-19. Isolation and loneliness have negative impacts on overall well-being, as well as on people's ability to present themselves well in the job search. The Heldrich Center has found that providing support in ways that bolster a sense of community and belonging contributes to mental and emotional well-being and helps people persist during the search. The center also learned that special attention should be paid to creating community, not just by providing services in a group setting but by providing opportunities for people to work together, and to build deeper connections and trust. These aspects are a critical aspect of this support.

Trauma Informed

Many job seekers have experienced trauma in the form of abuse, neglect, discrimination, grief, and violence. Unemployment and the stressors involved can be their own form of trauma. Trauma-informed supports recognize the negative impact that trauma may have on people and their ability to engage with their job search activities effectively. Trauma-informed interactions emphasize job seeker strengths, collaborative working relationships, and the creation of safe, trusting spaces for job seekers to do their work. They create an environment where job seekers feel empowered to act in their own best interests and they recognize that many job search behaviors that seem self-defeating to outsiders may actually be responses to trauma that need to be greeted with care and compassion.

Support Executive Function

When people are stressed, especially if they have a history of trauma, their executive function can suffer. They can become more forgetful, have greater difficulty focusing on tasks, and are more likely to procrastinate or even give up because they feel overwhelmed. It can become more challenging for them to process information, create plans, and deal with obstacles and challenges in taking action. As the Heldrich Center has worked with job seekers, researchers have realized that it is important to understand how stress is affecting job seekers'

brains; therefore, it is important to provide job seekers with the support and resources that help them make plans and execute those plans in times of stress.

High Touch/High Tech

In a socially distanced, COVID-19 environment, workforce development programs and professionals must become strategic about how technology and human interactions are used to support job seekers. "High touch" is not just about deciding when and how human intervention is going to be the most helpful to job seekers. It's also about how both human interactions and technology use can convey warmth, care, and compassion. "High tech" considers how the features of different technologies can be leveraged in human-centered ways while considering the limitations on access to technology that job seekers may be experiencing.

Information to Support Effective Decision-making

Job seekers need information to make effective decisions about their career futures. This information must be actionable and presented in context so that job seekers understand how to use it to make the best decisions for themselves. It should also be presented in digestible chunks so that it doesn't overwhelm already stressed people. **Researchers have found** that financial stressors can have a profound impact on mental "bandwidth," which is the ability to attend to information and use it to make effective choices. Understanding this, it is important to find ways to put information in context and explicitly show job seekers how to use this information in decision-making.

A New Three-tier Model of Job Search Support

With these principles in mind, Heldrich Center researchers have developed a model of support that focuses on the whole person and on helping people manage the factors that affect their job search experience.

The model starts from the bottom with addressing physical and psychological safety needs. Next, it is important to address the need for healthy habits and structures that

support the daily activities necessary to execute a job search. Only when those things are in place can the need to develop job search skills and maintain ongoing motivation be addressed. Job seekers need help with all three tiers. The Heldrich Center's current programs for unemployed individuals are guided by providing support in each area.

2. Foundations for a Sustainable Job Search

When people experience a crisis, the structures and schedules their lives were built on are thrown into disarray. In normal times, job seekers lose their work community, their work schedules, and the job duties and tasks that gave structure to their days. Losing a job during a global pandemic only exacerbates these disruptions, adding even more uncertainty to the mix. Everyone is struggling with finding the foundations that will support well-being at this time, and unemployed people are even more challenged here.

Job seekers need help in creating new, sustainable patterns and schedules that they can build on for success. In particular, these foundations need to help people deal with ongoing stress, reduce isolation, and help them feel some sense of control and progress in their lives. Fundamentally, they need help in:

- ▶ **Developing skills in psychological flexibility so they can respond, rather than react, to their circumstances.** Crisis situations tend to cause people to shut down and cling to old ways, making it harder for them to adapt and cope.
- ▶ **Setting priorities based in real-world expectations about their job search,** including helping them to develop self-knowledge about how they fit into the current job market.
- ▶ **Finding and participating in a safe, sustainable social system of support.**
- ▶ **Creating appropriate goals and plans for various possible scenarios.** Job seekers tend to focus on a single plan, when uncertainty requires multiple plans that take into account a range of possible outcomes.
- ▶ **Creating new schedules and job search work practices.** Job seekers need guidance and support in identifying high-priority activities and creating daily schedules that help them stay focused on these priorities.
- ▶ **Identifying and integrating daily and weekly practices that support well-being and learning.**

These structures should be individualized to the needs and issues each person faces. What works for one person may not work for someone else. Without strong foundational habits and schedules, people can flounder, which can affect their physical and psychological safety needs and create difficulties in learning new job search skills and remaining motivated to engage with their job search. When motivation wanes, there will be a need to re-evaluate these foundational issues.

3. Job Search Support

Research on job search interventions indicates that job seekers need help with both developing **new job search skills**, as well as **assistance in enhancing their motivation** to use those skills in a job search.

Job search skill development includes educating people about the tools and strategies of conducting an effective search – how to write and customize an effective résumé, how to find job leads, how to build relationships for networking, how to interview, etc. It also includes opportunities to practice these skills and receive targeted, actionable feedback for improvement.

Job seekers also need up-to-date, comprehensive information about the constant changes in hiring practices and work arrangements (e.g., W-2 vs. 1099) so they can develop effective plans and access multiple opportunities.

In conjunction with developing job search skills, job seekers also need to pay attention to and receive support in maintaining their motivation. This is particularly important in today's economic situation where the lack of available work means that most job seekers are facing a long, slow process to obtain employment. Motivational enhancement includes interventions to:

- ▶ **Boost job seeker self-efficacy** – their sense that they have control over their lives.
- ▶ **Encourage proactive** rather than passive approaches.
- ▶ **Promote appropriate goal setting**, particularly setting smaller goals that will lead to employment (e.g., making three new contacts per week or submitting five job applications each week).
- ▶ **Enlist social support for the job search.**
- ▶ **Manage stress and rejection.**

It is not enough to educate people about the components of the job search. Work with job seekers must also include ongoing support for the motivational aspects of job search to ensure that people are able to persist through discouraging times, so they don't drop out altogether. They also need safe spaces to practice the new skills they are learning and to get specific, actionable feedback for improvement.

Conclusion

As today's unemployed workers navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 recession, long-term unemployment, and ongoing social isolation, there is a unique opportunity for the public workforce system, in collaboration with community organizations, to think differently about the supports and services provided to people in job search. The Heldrich Center's experience to date serving unemployed job seekers shows that transactional, short-term supports such as labor exchange and job search workshops are not enough to effectively help people through a long, arduous journey back to employment, especially in an environment

where hiring is complicated and situations change quickly. As Heldrich Center researchers have learned in their work with unemployed New Jersey residents, more extensive, long-term, and holistic supports are necessary to both help people connect to work and to mitigate the negative impacts of long-term unemployment. In order to meet the needs of unemployed job seekers, the workforce development system must focus on developing collaborative partnerships and more expansive support services as well as exploring how to provide these services in a virtual environment so that the maximum number of people can receive the help they need.

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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

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