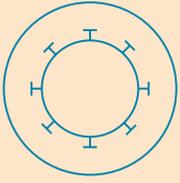


STRATEGICALLY
VIRTUAL



Voices from the Field: Workforce Responses to COVID-19

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FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, work processes were suddenly upended, teams were thrust into remote work arrangements, and service/program entities had to quickly adapt to systems of virtual service delivery. Now, a year-and-a-half later, there are new changes and challenges on the horizon as the public workforce system navigates a transition back to in-office and in-person service delivery, while also continuing to have a presence in a virtual space.

In July 2021, researchers at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey administered a survey to workforce development professionals entitled *Voices from the Field: Workforce Responses to COVID-19* in order to gain a better understanding of the experiences, questions, and concerns of workforce development programs that have had to make transitions to their operations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary goal of this survey was to ascertain

the breadth and depth of the changes, challenges, and lessons learned for managers and frontline service delivery workers as they continue to provide services to job seekers. The survey collected nearly 150 responses from workforce development professionals representing seven states – Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington. The survey was also accompanied by three roundtable discussion sessions that drew approximately 40 participants.

From this feedback, and as presented in this brief, researchers were able to draw key themes and lessons learned, and note the ongoing challenges for workforce development professionals still navigating a great deal of uncertainty. In this brief, researchers offer a few recommendations for the public workforce system to consider in this ongoing time of change and, hopefully, growth.

Overall Themes

The Initial Transition

Many people and organizations struggled to create plans and strategies to adjust to a “new normal” in the face of COVID. During roundtable conversations in the summer of 2021, workforce system staff and managers reflected on their early transitions to virtual service delivery during the spring and summer of 2020.

Local workforce development board leaders and staff, in particular, had to quickly plan for safe service delivery in what was (and in many ways remains) primarily a system centered around physical spaces and in-person meetings, training, and service delivery. Leadership had to quickly ensure that staff had the tools needed to work remotely (laptops, webcams, video conferencing software, etc.) and that staff were knowledgeable enough to use these tools well. This challenge was compounded by a perceived lack of top-down leadership and guidance from federal and state policymakers. As one roundtable participant put it:

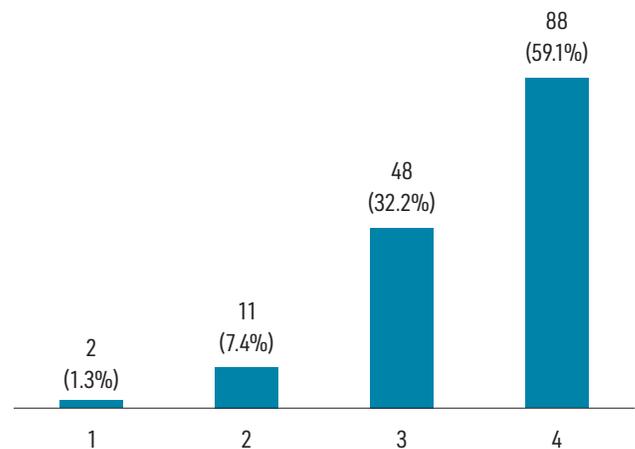
I would like to have not felt alone. I would have liked guidance. I felt like I was trying to figure everything out on my own – that I was trying to figure out how would I equip my staff, what would I equip them with, how am I going to get them training?...I felt like we never got any true guidance or direction from the state. I just felt like we had to figure it out on our own.

Much of the feedback that was collected in the survey and roundtable sessions painted a picture of local workforce professionals making individualized decisions on every aspect of remote teaming and service delivery for their respective areas, in order to simply stay afloat and continue to help customers in need during a time of extreme stress, difficulty, and hardship.

Although the transition to virtual services was, at times, chaotic and isolating for both staff and customers, now that virtual services are here, they are here to stay. Over 90% of survey respondents agreed that virtual services are either “likely” or “very likely” to continue (see Figure 1). As one survey respondent put it, “I think the option of virtual is out of the bag.”

Figure 1: Likelihood Virtual Service Delivery will Continue

On a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 means “not at all likely” and 4 means “very likely,” how likely do you think it is that virtual service delivery will continue? (N=149)



There are a variety of reasons why staff believe virtual services are beneficial to continue, especially virtual meetings for staff and virtual intake processes for job seekers. Convenience of staff is one: many respondents pointed to the benefits of using digital signatures for intake and other paperwork, allowing job seekers to quickly return paperwork without the need to physically visit an office. The convenience to job seekers and career center customers is another big reason for virtual services. The flexibility to continue services for people with disabilities and people with transportation or childcare barriers, who might not be able to physically visit a job center, was also cited as an important reason to continue to have virtual options. That flexibility also extends to being able to continue services during inclement weather (such as heavy snow).

Despite the likelihood to continue some sort of virtual services, it seems unlikely that the system will radically change in the short term. Many frontline staff and managers expressed a preference for going back to the way things were before COVID-19, at least for some aspects of their jobs. The survey indicated a higher comfort level with providing services (especially one-on-one job seeker services) in an in-person environment. While only 10% of staff reported being “not at all comfortable” or “somewhat comfortable” with virtual services in general, some responses indicated

a lack of comfort in providing services virtually. As one roundtable participant put it, “In-person is so important and it’s really what we focus on here...That in-person, there’s nothing better than that. Nothing beats that.”

The Digital Divide

Many workforce staff are concerned about the digital divide and the lack of access to virtual services. Responses like “not everyone has reliable Internet service” and “our clients are not easily accessed digitally” were fairly frequent in the survey. Some staff themselves reported difficulty accessing Internet services while working from home, as well. Some rural respondents even reported using Wi-Fi hotspots from their phones to be able to work.

Another large concern of staff is the idea of monitoring participants who are accessing services digitally. Responses such as “virtual services are only effective if the person is self-motivated,” and “it was a struggle to keep participants engaged knowing there would not be any repercussion,” point to the difficulty of adapting a system that is more focused on meeting programmatic work and training requirements than in tailoring services to individual needs.

The Need for Self-care and Compassion

The shift to operating in a virtual environment also led many survey respondents to report that their need and appreciation for self-care was now much higher, as the boundaries between home life and work life became blurred while working remotely. When asked how staff had been taking care of themselves in the course of the pandemic, responses like “self-care is not as easy as it looks when the clock never really stops” and “I need to watch my time, so I avoid personal burnout” were common. There appears to be a greater recognition and appreciation for well-being, and the ways in which personal well-being affects all facets of life, including how individuals show up for and perform at work and with other tasks, such as job search.

To that end, a few survey respondents also noted a greater need for understanding and compassion for career center customers and recognition of their well-being. A few respondents were specifically citing the uncertainty and difficulties of the present times and how those factors can affect how people show up to career center appointments and services. One roundtable participant noted:

In the early days of the pandemic, as a case manager, I was becoming more of a life coach and therapist for most of those months. There was an idea that we’re in this together and we’re going to get through this together, so let’s do the best we can.

Seeing into each other’s homes via videoconferencing seems to have increased intimacy and empathy across the system. This has opened up the “whole person” view of job seekers/workforce customers and has taken them out of the context of sterile meetings in workforce system cubicles.

Respondents reported this humanizing effect of interaction as restoring compassion that might have ebbed away during years of emotionally taxing, very personal work. Greater compassion and empathy might lead to better programmatic outcomes, and can certainly work to counter prevailing cultural narratives about Unemployment Insurance compensation abuse, job seekers’ perceived “laziness” or unwillingness to work, and the need to mandate participation. Added context about individual people’s lives can soften judgement and frustration with the inability to gather required paperwork or the need to change or reschedule appointments and meetings. Negative narratives about clients/customers/job seekers are pervasive in the public workforce system. These narratives hamper growth and adaptations to services when customers are largely viewed as unwilling, unmotivated, and undeserving.

Lessons Learned

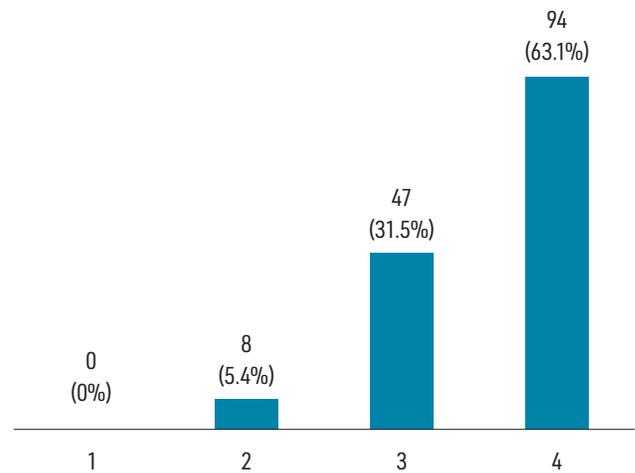
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive suffering and upended the way people live, work, and interact with each other. Almost every person, system, and institution has had to learn lessons along the way, and the public workforce system is no exception. It is important to keep those lessons in mind as they will benefit workforce system staff, customers, and the general public, even after this current crisis.

The biggest lesson (within and outside of the workforce system) is that virtual services and training can be done, and done well. Many people made a rough transition to virtual services, but once the logistics were figured out, they found that they could provide high-quality services in a more flexible way. While it is true that not everyone has access to adequate technology, and that more work needs to be done in the area of digital equity, virtual services are working and preferred by many.

Many service providers went from no virtual services, to operating either fully virtually or in a hybrid model. COVID-19 has shown that people and systems are both resilient and adaptable in the face of widespread change. To that end, survey respondents noted their own surprise at their ability to adapt, along with their colleagues' abilities, with one roundtable participant noting, "People are much more adaptable than they think and when we work as a team, we can remove some perceived obstacles." While not familiar with the virtual platforms that are part of daily work life today (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.) prior to March 2020, most survey respondents (approximately 95%) reported that their teams adapted either "well" or "very well" to virtual service delivery (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Local Workforce Professionals' Adaptation to Virtual Service Delivery

On a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 means "not very well" and 4 means "very well," how well do you think your team adapted to virtual service delivery over the past 16 months? (N=149)



While people did adapt, survey and roundtable respondents expressed regret at not having more opportunity to become familiar with different technological tools before COVID-19 forced rapid learning. Many reported learning on the fly and having to dually assist colleagues and customers in navigating the new methods of working and interacting. The diversity of comfort levels and understanding of technology within local offices was frequently noted as a lesson learned in the survey and roundtable sessions. Regarding fellow staff members, one survey respondent remarked, "Veteran staff who had little or no IT experience had the most difficulty transitioning to the changes in services delivered virtually."

As such, the dire need for basic technological training and knowledge led many managers to quickly put together ad hoc training manuals and guides. Moreover, one manager reported:

Staff are at various levels of understanding of technology. I created "how to" instructions for accessing work phones and email accounts from home, accessing files through a VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] tunnel, and signing electronically. I created a doc to explain e-signatures to our customers.

All of these lessons point to the need for professional development to become more of a priority going forward. Many respondents noted that "ongoing staff training is key" to continued, quality virtual service delivery. Managers who had to frantically upskill staff learned the importance of ensuring consistent, proactive staff training.

Other lessons learned are more about the intersection between personal and professional life. As previously mentioned, the ability to virtually meet clients in their living

spaces led to more compassion and understanding. The general upheaval and chaos many people were going through in the early days of the pandemic led to greater empathy, understanding, and patience, as well. As one respondent expressed in the survey, "People need compassion and understanding," especially during times of transition and stress.

The quick switch to at-home work created challenges, too, especially around boundaries and safeguarding time away from work. Many survey and roundtable respondents stated that they had to learn to step away and to create breaks/time away from their computers and phones throughout the day. Designating specific break times, making time to connect with colleagues, having dedicated workspace at home, and not scheduling back-to-back meetings were all noted as important strategies for adjusting to work-from-home life. Dramatic societal and work-life changes coupled with working with people in crisis tested limits and made many respondents realize the value of prioritizing their own well-being to ensure that they could continue to care for others personally and professionally.

Ongoing Concerns

While there are many ways the workforce field has advanced during the pandemic, some causes for concern remain. Instead of addressing the COVID-19 crisis as a unified front, the fractured nature of the public workforce system in the United States has meant that, in many cases, local workforce areas are working in silos with little direction or assistance from either state or federal departments of labor. Peer-to-peer networking, problem solving, and knowledge exchange appear to be happening. However, more unified direction, tools, and guidance provided to local workforce areas from the beginning may have alleviated stress, confusion, and missteps along the way to the transition to virtual services.

Many local workforce areas are currently making the shift from virtual services to a hybrid in-person/virtual model. This is presenting challenges as staff have to shift between modalities multiple times a day. This is especially true with teaching/training when students are both in the classroom

and online. As one roundtable participant stated, "Trying to find a balance between doing individual instruction and whole class instruction" has proven to be challenging for trainers.

Finally, it is worth noting that the performance measures that the workforce system is held to have not changed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Workforce Development Boards are still being measured on the same metrics, sending the message that work should proceed "as usual." What gets measured is what people tend to focus on. The lack of performance measures around customer satisfaction, virtual engagement, and access and equity likely mean that these things are not highly valued when management and frontline staff are engaged in strategic planning or day-to-day operations. There would be value in evaluating performance reporting, with an eye toward increasing system access, efficiency, and equity.

Recommendations

With the transition back to partial or full in-person operations and service delivery presently under way, there continues to be a need for agility, flexibility, and a greater resiliency in the public workforce system. While much was accomplished in terms of remote teaming and virtual service delivery over the past 18 months, the suddenness of the transition would not have been such a shock if the public workforce system had embraced technology and updated its work processes a long time ago. One roundtable participant remarked, "I was amazed at how technologically behind the office was when I first started this job. I did not feel like they were modelling how to use the technology."

Technological tools and platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect, and DocuSign have largely been available for many years. But the public workforce system persisted as a predominantly paper-based system. Moreover, many of the barriers associated with in-person customer participation, namely child care and transportation, which have been noted as barriers for years, could have been more proactively addressed with the adoption of virtual service delivery a long time ago. But the public workforce system persisted as an in-person, face-to-face-only system. This rigidity should not continue. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a large-scale rethinking and retooling, the lessons of which should not be quickly forgotten, no matter the desire or propensity to just "go back to how things used to be." For all of these reasons, there is a need to build back a more agile and resilient public workforce system. Agility and resilience can go hand in hand if there is both motivation and innovation to go beyond "what was done" and place more emphasis on "what could be."

The system made sudden adaptations, which deserve to be commended, but now is the time to make strategic adaptations. State and local service providers should ask critical questions such as:

- ▶ Is technology the problem? Or is it how staff are using the technology?
- ▶ What technologies best support what staff want to do?
- ▶ Does the public workforce system have the right staff in place? And do they have the right skills?

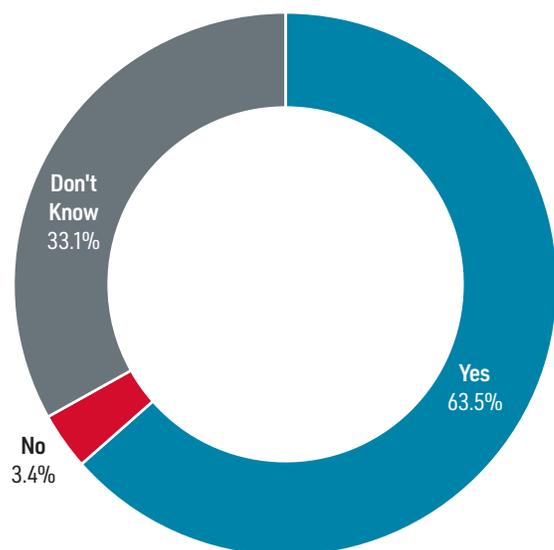
- ▶ How do staff use technology more effectively to serve people who prefer it, so that staff can be freed up to support customers that need in-person services?
- ▶ Are staff, and the public workforce system more broadly, prioritizing their own comfort and programs over the needs of job seekers?

For more information on critical conversations and questions to be asking, reference the Heldrich Center's webinar [Strategically Virtual: Supporting Job Seekers in the Time of Covid](#).

Moreover, forward thinking and strategic planning are needed to bring greater resilience to the system overall. At the local, county, state, and federal levels, workforce professionals should be planning for multiple futures in the event that there is a need to be fully virtual again. As seen in Figure 3, survey results show that a majority of local workforce areas are making contingency plans for additional shutdowns, which is promising. It is recommended that this kind of strategic planning for multiple futures becomes universal and that any plans derived from such planning are shared amongst all staff.

Figure 3: Planning for the Need to be Fully Virtual Again

Are there plans in place should there be more shutdowns and a need to be fully virtual again? (N=148)



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about operational, systematic, and fundamental changes to the public workforce system, many of which have been for the betterment of staff and customers alike. In terms of staff operations, many respondents to the Heldrich Center's survey recounted the benefits of virtual work, which serve to reduce the stresses of commuting, offer greater flexibility, and impart the same quality of services with the accompanying comforts of executing a virtual model of remote teaming and remote service delivery. In terms of service delivery, many survey respondents noted that reduced barriers to participation led to higher customer participation rates, increased engagement with customers during non-traditional business hours, greater ease of collecting personally identifiable information and documentation, and more. These changes might not have occurred without the dire necessity that the pandemic created, but overall demonstrate the public workforce system's adaptation to be relevant and compete in a more technological age.

While great strides have been made in the adoption of virtual services, there appears to be a pressing desire to return to the familiarity of the way things were done before the pandemic while also balancing the systems of virtual service that have been created in the past 18 months. A majority of local workforce areas are operating hybrid work models and slowly reopening to the public with in-person service appointments. While there is a need for an in-person presence, the public workforce system could consider the ways dual in-person and virtual operations can serve different populations and how the services within each delivery method could be optimized, maximized, and the reach expanded.

Moving forward, the public workforce system and other service providers in the field must consider the ways to more permanently incorporate the advancements of the past year-and-a-half, and continue to build upon those technological advancements, all in a strategic effort to enhance service delivery and cast a wider net of support for those in 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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