# Strategies Used by Employment Service Providers in the Job Development Process:

**Are they consistent with what employers want?**

technical
report

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# Introduction

Historically, the role of job developers employed in the state/federal vocational rehabilitation program and the larger network of community-based rehabilitation programs has been to identify and secure paid employment for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with significant disabilities. Past strategies have included a "carrot and stick" approach, where the carrots are tax incentives and other benefits to employers for hiring people with disabilities, and the stick being compliance with the mandates of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Luecking, 2008). More recently, several authors have recommended that job developers adopt a broader marketing approach to their activities in terms of creating demand for the jobseekers they represent by demonstrating their value to the business by using relationship marketing approaches, and emphasizing the mutual benefits of their partnerships (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999; Luecking, Fabian & Tilson, 2004; Luecking, Cuozzo, & Buchanan, 2006). In the challenging job market of the last couple of years, it is now more important than ever for job developers to be aware of and apply the most effective strategies in their efforts to assist job seekers to secure and maintain jobs.

While there is a growing body of literature generally describing various approaches to job development, there is very little empirical literature reporting on the actual strategies used by job development professionals in their practice. The few available have been limited either by sample size (e.g., Whitley, Kostick & Bush, 2010), focus on one particular consumer group (e.g., mental illness), and/or lack validation of the results in terms of connecting what people say they do to what actually occurs, and then comparing these outcomes to what employers want (e.g., Henry & Lucca, 2004; Blitz & Mechanic, 2006; Whitley et al., 2010). Only one study conducted over 15 years ago (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995) compared the responses of job development professionals regarding their views of their most effective strategies to those of employers, finding wide disparities in terms of approaches employers find most persuasive compared to what job developers actually do.

The purposes of this *Technical Report* are to: a) describe the results of our study of job development/placement professionals' strategies in the employment process; b) compare these results to employer perceptions of the employment process from recent literature; and c) identify implications for job development/placement practice based on this comparison.

# What Job Developers Say about the Employment Process
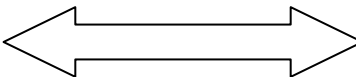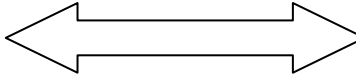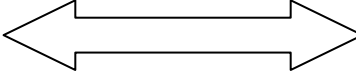
## Methods

To identify the strategies used by Employment Services Providers (ESPs), or job developers, we conducted six two-hour focus groups, with 48 experienced ESPs across the states of New Jersey (n= 22) and Maryland (n=26). The participants, recruited through snowball sampling, worked for non-profit and vocational rehabilitation agencies representing a diverse group of consumers with disabilities. They had been involved in job development for an average of 8.4 years at the time of the focus groups. Using a semi-structured interview guide, the participants were asked to describe their preferred strategies, the strategies they found most effective, and to share examples

of success. The facilitator prompted the participants to elaborate on their responses. The sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by trained graduate students. The transcripts were loaded into the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The authors used an iterative process of coding and recoding to identify the specific strategies used by the participants.

The final step in our analysis was to categorize the practices elicited from the focus groups into sequential "phases" of the job development/placement process: a) Pre-Employment, b) Job Placement/Hiring, and c) Post-Placement. In addition, our sample of ESPs placed considerable emphasis on a category we named "Establishing and Maintaining Relationships with Employers" which cut across all of the phases of the employment process. This categorization allowed us to compare the results of our sample to similar phases of the employment process cited in studies of employers: a) Recruiting, b) Hiring, and c) Advancing (*see Figure 1*).

## Figure 1.

| Job Developers | | Employers |
|---|---|---|
| *Developing and Maintaining Relationships* | | |
| Pre-Employment | | Recruiting |
| Job Placement/Hiring | | Hiring |
| Post-Placement | | Advancing |

## Focus Group Findings

This section describes the strategies identified by the ESPs in our sample across the phases of the job development/placement process. *Table 1* illustrates the most frequently identified strategies derived from the analyses of the focus group transcripts. The next section elaborates on these strategies, providing illustrative quotations drawn from focus group responses.

### Developing and Maintaining Relationships

Many of the strategies that we categorized in this area consisted of identifying local businesses through various events, such as attending Chamber of Commerce meetings or hosting open houses for employers, and then sustaining these connections through, for example, employer recognition events. Job developers described numerous incidences of successful placements that occurred, they felt, as a result of a strong personal relationship established with a local business.

## Table 1. Summary of Strategies Used by ESPs in our Sample

### Developing and Maintaining Relationships

**ESPs:**

- Participate in business networks (i.e. Chamber of Commerce)
- Host employer open houses
- Organize employer recognition events
- Maintain electronic database to track employer contacts
- Send thank-you cards and holiday cards
- Maintain contacts with employers after job has ended

| Pre-Employment | Job Placement | Post-Placement |
|---|---|---|
| **ESPs:**<br><br>• Patronize local businesses<br>• Network with former employees<br>• Network with colleagues (including other agencies)<br>• Research the company and conduct informational interviews<br>• Identify shared interests/develop personal connections<br>• Try to meet with CEO or other key personnel (i.e. hiring manager, HR staff)<br>• Learn and use business language<br>• Sell the benefits of hiring people with disabilities<br>• Suggest variety of work experience options (i.e. part-time, shared job, internships)<br>• Provide information on tax credits & financial incentives | **ESPs:**<br><br>• Observe the workplace environment ; Look for positive office culture and diversity<br>• Conduct cold calls; timed appropriately to meet with employers and key personnel<br>• Persist in contacting businesses; wait for staff turnovers<br>• Take a personal approach to employers (ex: complimenting someone on their appearance; search for personal commonalities)<br>• Emphasize employee's support network<br>• Address employer's disability-related concerns and need for disclosure<br>• Assist with accommodations<br>• Present a solution to an identified business need (ex: high turnover)<br>• Prepare employer for job coaches' role<br>• Job develop for generic vs. specific jobs<br>• Provide testimonials<br>• Sell agency & services<br>• Sell person with disability<br>• Look for new businesses<br>• Look for small businesses | **ESPs:**<br><br>• Follow-up/assist with job coaching<br>• Remain accessible and available<br>• Facilitate natural supports<br>• Assist with job termination (if required)<br>• Provide ongoing support for identifying workplace accommodations and supports<br>• Problem solve around employee performance problems |

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3

At times, these personal relationships resulted from initial contacts designed to "educate" local employers about their services, or about disability in general. For the most part, job developers emphasized the interpersonal aspects of their relationships with businesses, such as maintaining constant communication, sending personal notes or holiday cards.

> *"You look at someone's desk, maybe they have a photo on their desk. You look for something you may have in common, and highlight those things. As we all said, it's relationships – it's any person that you can build a relationship with."*

> *"I also start by developing relationships with employers. This is part of what I see as educating the employer. I give them information about working with agencies to get jobs for individuals with disabilities. It's an education process and also to develop the rapport and to get the employer to maintain that relationship for a long time."*

### Pre-employment (Recruiting)

When talking about activities prior to negotiating for a hire, the ESPs tended to focus on how they identify local employers and establish a rapport with them through network development (their own, their agencies', and the job seekers'). When identifying potential jobs or opportunities, employment specialists rely on businesses that previously hired their applicants, and those that appear to have a "diverse" work environment based largely on their personal observations. These job developers pointed to the importance of patronizing community businesses and particularly the importance of developing a personal relationship with an individual who has the authority to hire. They conduct informational interviews in order to learn more about a business and its hiring practices. The ESPs in this sample also emphasized activities in which they engage to prepare the job seekers for work (e.g. resume development, practice interviewing skills, address social/communication skill needs).

> *"I think you have to master a lot. For example, I had a client who wanted to be a truck driver and that is a whole different area. I had to educate myself and understand all the different ways that this truck works and all these different things that I would never imagine knowing anything about. I had to become accustomed to their language."*

> *"One of the things that I think are looked for [in potential employers] is diversity – if they have a diverse staff they are often open to listen to what you have to present."*

> *"Back to strategies, I ask about the position, I let them know who I am. I try to ensure the employers that I won't give them anyone that will cause them any problems. I give them my phone number, I let them know that I'll treat them like a friend; they can call me anytime if there's a problem. I interact with them, so they began to like me. I've had a couple of bad experiences but the person was still willing to accept someone else that I recommend and I think that has a lot to do with me."*

### Job placement (Hiring)

Many ESPs emphasized the importance of identifying key business personnel who serve as "gatekeepers" to employment (e.g. secretaries) and developing a personal rapport with them. The job developers also noted the importance of matching an individual's skills to the demands of a

job as an essential aspect of job placement. Several mentioned that job placement required "selling a person with a disability" by addressing how well the applicant could manage the job demands, or "selling" the services of their agencies to employers ("pre-screened applicants"). Other frequently mentioned strategies included addressing disability-related concerns including assisting with accommodations and supervision of the applicant, as well as gathering and using "testimonials" from other business leaders in the community regarding the value of their agency services. A few mentioned using tax credits as a hiring incentive.

> *"I try to let them know I am on their side, I understand their problems and I may have solution for the problems to solve the problems."*

> *"One thing that has helped me is that every time we have a successful placement, we get the testimony from the employer. That testimony from one employer to another is greater than anything that I can say. We can ask them to write something. We even have the technology to record their testimony on a cell phone."*

> *"I believe that it's critical to have a really good job-match – you know your clients, you know what their strengths are, you know what their abilities are and know what their desires for work are. You also know the sites that you work with. You should conduct a job analysis to assess the site to see if that matches the consumer. So that is the key to success."*

### Post-placement (Advancement)

This phase involves follow-up strategies to sustain the job and maintain relationships with the business. Many of the job developers indicated that maintaining relationships with employers was important whether or not the job was a success. Those job developers who represent employees who do not initially disclose a condition, described disclosure as an important aspect of job retention, particularly in relation to performance problems they might anticipate. Other job retention strategies included remaining available should problems develop, identifying on-going accommodation solutions, as well as recommending natural supports.

> *"I usually encourage my individuals to disclose their disabilities to the employers, especially when we talk about seizure disorder. I even have the print out about how to do in case of a seizure."*

> *"I think another way of being a successful job developer is being consistent with your employer in a sense that it's not just placing the consumer there – it's always keeping in touch and speaking with the employer, and getting feedback. Keeping that relationship, I think, is an important goal. For example I had a client that I needed to place in a job. He was having crashes on the job and the manager called me and said, 'Hey, he's having crashes' and I went out there and talked with the consumer to make sure this person is ok, and he went on with the job. His boss was very satisfied with that. What I'm trying to say is that having constant communication with the employer and assuring them that you're going to support this person is really important."*

# What Employers want and what they value in the Job Development process

The first part of this *Technical Report* focused on employment strategies that our sample of ESP frequently used and found most effective. In this section, we compare their responses to what businesses want and value in the employment process in order to see where there are commonalities and where there are differences.

## Methods

We reviewed the current business literature to identify studies of employer perspectives on the employment process for people with disabilities and then identified three that were recent, consistent with our aim, and sufficiently detailed to provide us with good grounds for comparison. The first of these studies, and the one that has probably been most widely cited in the recent job development literature, was a survey conducted of a stratified national sample of U.S. businesses by the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma, 2008). This survey represented almost 2.5 million businesses across 12 industry sectors, such as education, health, technology, manufacturing and so on. The second study we used was a report on a series of focus groups conducted with 40 employers representing a variety of industries (including government and private) across four states in Australia that was designed to elicit feedback regarding their views of the employment process for people with disabilities, and their recommendations for improving it (Waterhouse, Kimberly, Jonas & Glover, 2010). This qualitative study added depth and perspective to the survey responses from the businesses participating in the ODEP survey. Although the study occurred in Australia, the focus group sessions were designed to elicit feedback to the ODEP study described above, supporting the relevance of these employer perspectives to those of businesses in the United States. These studies were the two main sources for drawing our comparisons to our job development sample. The third source, used less frequently, was also a series of focus groups of several Chicago-area businesses conducted by DePaul University (Hernandez & McDonald, 2007) with the focus on employer perceptions of the benefits and costs of hiring and retaining workers with disabilities. This study also provided some depth and illustration of concepts and findings consistent with the ODEP survey responses.

## Findings

*Table 2* presents a summary of the employer responses from each of these three sources combined and categorized according to the three sequential phases of the employment process: Recruiting, Hiring and Advancing. We added, as we did in *Table 1*, an over-arching thematic focus, Developing and Maintaining Relationships, because several of the employer responses, similar to those of the employment service providers, emphasized the importance of developing and maintaining relationships across all three of the phases.

## Table 2. Employer Perspectives on the Employment Process

| Developing and Maintaining Relationships | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Employers want:** <br> • Information/clarity about scope of agencies' services, supports <br> • Information on the benefits to the business' bottom line <br> • Attract broader customer base <br> • Meet the needs of growing global and diverse markets <br> • Recognition as being socially responsible <br> • Education, preparation and training (informal learning) that is timely with focus on real workplace activities <br> • Access to experts and trusted, credible sources of information/data related to disability employment (i.e. cost of accommodations, the laws/equal opportunities, tax incentives) | | |
| **Recruiting** | **Hiring** | **Advancing** |
| **Employers value:** <br><br> • Attaining visible top management commitment <br> • Demonstrating how applicants add value to the business <br> • Using testimonials to document performance <br> • Demonstrate how the applicant will adding value to the bottom line | **Employers value:** <br><br> • Evidence of applicant performance <br> • Testimonials from other senior personnel regarding hiring issues <br> • Employees with previous work experience <br> • Disclosure information that is credible and linked to accommodations and performance <br> • 3rd Party assistance / support (e.g., job accommodations, customized solutions) <br> • Hiring solutions, not hiring needs | **Employers value:** <br><br> • Assistance with performance appraisals & assessments <br> • Follow-up communication <br> • Coaching and support for supervisors <br> • Reducing staff turnover <br> • Return on investment <br> • Information/resources on disability policies and accommodations |

The next section provides a narrative comparison between the strategies reported by the job developers in our sample to the practices that were valued by the employers in the previously cited employer studies. The findings are presented according to the phases of the employment process identified by employers: a) relationship building, b) recruiting, c) hiring, and d) post-placement.

### Developing and Maintaining Relationships

A central theme emerging from the employer studies that we reviewed was that building relationships with businesses were based on two key elements: trust and credibility. Our job development sample mentioned the importance of trust in some of the illustrative quotations. Credibility - doing what you say you are going to do and doing it well - was implicit in some of their strategies, but it was not explicitly stated. It is clear from our review of the employer studies that trust and credibility form the basis for demonstrating how a job applicant, or the agency the job developer represents, adds value to the business. As employers participating in both of the focus group studies we reviewed indicated, building relationships with businesses means addressing the bottom line, that is, showing how working with a disability employment organization saves time or money, or improves business operations or products. In the ODEP

study (Domzal et al., 2008), employers said that they wanted evidence of the potential value of a relationship, suggesting that ESPs quantify the Return on Investment benefits of the relationship. None of the job developers in our sample identified these fundamental attributes of a business relationship.

## Recruiting

According to the employers surveyed in the ODEP study (Domzal et al., 2008), as in the employer focus group studies we reviewed, the most persuasive recruitment strategy is demonstrating how the applicants represented by ESPs (or the ESP' services) address business' bottom line. In fact, more than 80% of the respondents to the survey endorsed this approach as the most valuable. Employers often point out that recruitment costs time and money (Waterhouse et al., 2010) –suggesting that ESPs can save employers time and money by presenting applicants who address a specific business need. Thus, a positive benefit/cost ratio is what drives the hiring process, rendering disability or disability stereotypes irrelevant (Hernandez & McDonald, 2007).

Our ESP sample did not directly identify recruitment strategies reflecting business' core needs and values. Instead, they emphasized, "using business language," but not specifying to what purpose. They talked about "identifying personal connections with employers" as a means of "getting in the door."  Some in our ESP sample indicated that their recruitment strategies were based on either "selling the applicant with a disability" or "selling the idea of tax credits and other incentives." The former approach might work in an appeal to charity, but certainly not as a response to addressing a business bottom line need. In fact, the "selling disability" approach often results in a typical employer response noted in the ODEP study (Domzal et al., 2008): "we don't have any jobs that people with disabilities can do!" The same stereotype can result from job developers in our sample who suggested that a "good" recruitment strategy was to "suggest how applicants or candidates with disabilities could be accommodated through part-time or shared jobs, or through internships." These approaches focus on the applicant's needs, not those of the businesses.

Using tax incentives as a recruitment strategy was mentioned by the ODEP sample of employers as a potentially useful approach. However, primarily the largest companies identified it as a beneficial recruitment strategy (Domzal et al., 2008). As suggested in the employer focus group studies, small companies either are not interested, or find the effort involved in securing these incentives well beyond the value of the applicant to the business.

## Hiring

Employers' hiring decisions are based on demand-side factors. Businesses need a reason to hire anyone, that is, show how the applicant saves time, money, or improves products or services. As employers in one study pointed out, "the decision to employ is essentially a business decision…the employer must be confident that the individual will generate more for the business than it costs to employ him or her. This is the fundamental equation" (Waterhouse et al., 2010). Further, many of the respondents in the ODEP survey (Domzal et al., 2008) prefer that the equation be quantified. While a few of the job developers in our sample suggested strategies that were consistent with this approach, such as "present a solution to an identified business need," the majority of their responses indicated that they viewed the hiring process from a supply side (the perspective of the individual with a disability) rather than from a demand side (the perspective of the business). Evidence of the former were strategies, such as "emphasize the

employee's support network" and "look for a good match between consumer's skills and the job." Rather than trying to identify a job that may be a good fit for an individual applicant, employers in our studies want job developers to understand their business needs and to propose how an applicant presents a hiring solution to address them.

Another issue to address in hiring solutions is disclosure. Our job development sample grappled with what, when, and how much to tell regarding an individual's disability. Employers often emphasize the importance of not concealing an individual's disability or accommodation need, but framing it in terms how an accommodation enhances productivity or improves performance (Waterhouse, et al., 2010). This approach avoids, as one employer in the Waterhouse et al. study (2010) study stated, "promoting a special person for a special job," but instead emphasizes a "win-win" outcome.

### Career Advancement

Career advancement and job retention solutions are not often addressed in the job development literature, nor were they adequately addressed by our sample. But it is obviously an essential element of the employment process. Long-term employees add value to the company by reducing turnover costs, maintaining useful experience and expertise, avoiding costs of re-training new employees, and so on. Career advancement of employees with disabilities also has the potential to expand a business' customer base by suggesting new products or offering diverse approaches to delivering services (Domzal et al., 2008; Waterhouse et al., 2010). These issues directly address value added approaches to business and reflect maximizing return on investment. Job developers who promote retention and career advancement also maintain relationships with businesses and employers.

The job developers in our sample tended to view job retention strategies from a supply side (individual employee) rather than a demand side (adding value) approach. For example, strategies that identified for job retention included, "having constant communication" with the employer regarding the individual's performance, or "providing ongoing support" to the employee. While these may be important interventions, employers in our studies want to know how these services benefit them and maximize the employee's value to the business operation.

## Conclusion and Implications

The bottom line is the bottom line. Businesses view the employment process from a cost/benefit or value-added approach. Our comparison between the responses of the focus groups of job developers and the employer studies we reviewed underscores the disparities between what employers want and need and what employment service providers are doing. Unfortunately, these disparities are not that different from those identified in a comparison study of job developers' perceptions to those of employers conducted more than 15 years ago (Fabian, et al., 1995). While current literature in the field has stressed the importance of demand-side approaches to job development, and building effective relationships with businesses, our study shows there is still a long way to go.

The following implications address each of the disparities between what employment service providers in our study said they are doing, and what employers in the studies we reviewed said they prefer. The recommendations correspond to each of the phases of the employment process.

1.  **Relationship Building:**
    Focus on Trust and Credibility. In order to develop and maintain strong relationships with employers, job developers need to establish trust and credibility. To do so, job developers need to identify the primary needs of their employer customers and present themselves as credible sources of information and hiring assistance. That is, job developers must do what they promise and offer useful information throughout the process. It is essential that job developers be aware of how their performance and that of the job seekers they represent will help build relationships, and understand that ongoing relationships are cemented when they add value to the business.

2.  **Recruitment:**
    Focus on Adding Value. Job developers must maximize and expand their relationships with employers and business to learn more about the specific needs of these businesses, rather than trying to "sell" the concept of hiring people with disabilities. Building strategic relationships can increase the visibility of the employment service provider as a valued recruitment resource with specific answers to business hiring needs.

3.  **Hiring Solutions:**
    Demand-side Interventions. Especially during one of the most serious business recessions in over half a century, job developers need to focus on stimulating demand, not "selling disability." Presenting applicants as a hiring solution to a business need enhances credibility, documents interest in the enterprise, and increases the respect employers have for job developers as 'trusted brokers'.

4.  **Career Advancement:**
    Maximizing Employee Benefits to the Business. Job retention and career advancement are important considerations in the employment process. These strategies reduce business costs, decrease turn-over, and even open doors to other applicants represented by job developers. Job developers who understand that post-placement service to employers is an element of "customer service" will solidify relationships in the long run. In the short run, this type of attentiveness enables the job developers to be consultants to employers in the job retention and job advancement process.


We recognize that the focus group participant selection and the size of the sample of job developers who participated raise issues about the limitations of this study as well as the generalization of our findings to a broader or national sample of job developers. Nevertheless, our sample included seasoned job developers who can be presumed to have a wealth of experience that is representative of the general practice of job development with people with disabilities. Based on their responses and the available literature on employer hiring perspectives, we were able to compare their respective views and draw inferences about improving job development practice. We suggest further inquiry into the distinctions between supply side and demand side perspectives so that we can further identify and refine those activities that yield increased employment and career success for people with disabilities.

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