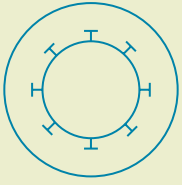


STRATEGICALLY
VIRTUAL



Implementing Job Search Services in a Virtual Environment

July 2021

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FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

RUTGERS

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Introduction

As workforce agencies plan their return to in-person services, it is important to look at what to carry forward and what to leave behind from the past 16+ months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The workforce system needs to consider not only the quality and content of its services, but also how to continue on the virtual journey that began abruptly in March 2020. While virtual was a challenge for many – both job seekers and staff – it was a boon to others, many of whom would not have received job search and career support otherwise. Backtracking to in-person-only services will waste what has been learned during the pandemic and agencies will lose out on **valuable opportunities to serve more people and provide more effective services.**

In *Strategically Virtual: Providing Job Search Support in COVID*, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey laid out a three-tier model for working with individuals who are unemployed. This model emphasizes expanding beyond labor exchange and basic job search skill development, such as résumé writing and interviewing workshops. It encourages the public workforce system to adopt more human-centered, holistic approaches to working with job seekers that center safety, care, community, and coaching as primary service strategies. It also identifies core principles that should underlie the development and delivery of job search support services.

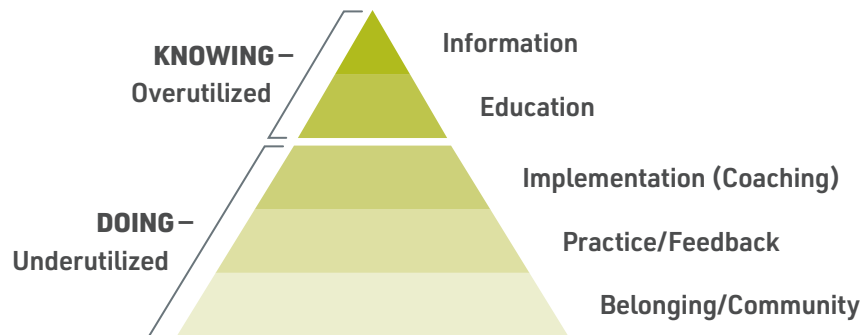
Longer-term, relationship-based approaches are necessary not only to support unemployed people through a months-long or even years-long journey back to work, but also to address the reality that increased work precarity means that many community residents will face additional layoffs or furloughs and will likely need help repeatedly. Lifelong learning needs to embrace that job search is lifelong, too. A system focused on the short term cannot help people adjust to the long-term shifts happening in the labor market.

In this follow-up brief, the Heldrich Center shares strategies for implementing its three-tier model in a virtual environment, using technological tools to reach a broader audience of job seekers and leveraging technology to provide the supports that job seekers most need. The brief also discusses some key shifts in service delivery that agencies should consider to support the core needs of job seekers.

Much of what is discussed in this brief applies to in-person services, too. Regardless of how people access services, they still need to receive the services that are most aligned with their needs. Further, many of the virtual strategies in this brief can complement in-person services. Through effective use of technology, the public workforce system can both supplement in-person services as these become a possibility again, as well as expand services to reach more people who need this help but do not want to go into a physical job center.

Key Shifts in Thinking and Service Delivery

In setting the stage for how technology can be used more effectively with job seekers, it is important to outline some key shifts in assumptions and approach that must take place.



For job seekers to make a successful transition, there are things they need to **know** and **do**. Workforce agencies tend to overemphasize activities that support knowledge and underutilize services that support using that knowledge to take effective action.

Knowing

Job seekers need to understand how they fit into the labor market, how to write a résumé, and how to find job leads. They need education on how to prepare for interviews; how to understand Applicant Tracking Systems; and ways to customize their résumés. **Information** and **education** are important services that workforce organizations provide.

Technology can help agencies target information better, so that job seekers get the information that is most relevant to their issues and concerns, delivered in manageable bites that do not overwhelm people. Educational webinars can be recorded and posted online so that job seekers can stop and take notes, review information they did not catch the first time, and identify questions they may have. And recording and posting presentations can free staff up to provide other services, rather than providing the same live content repeatedly.

Technology can facilitate the delivery of well-designed informational and educational interventions and workforce agencies should look carefully at how they use technology

to provide these services. Knowledge is key and technology can provide job seekers with the most relevant, targeted information for their needs.

However, information and education tend to be overutilized as workforce strategies. Job seekers not only need to know the right things to do, they must also be able to put this knowledge into action on a daily basis as they grapple with new information from potential employers and encounter unanticipated challenges and obstacles. Ultimately, success in any individual job search comes from what job seekers do with the knowledge and information they have.

Doing

To bridge the gap between knowledge of job search activities and actual **implementation**, job seekers need **coaching, opportunities for practice and feedback, and a sense of belonging and community** to help them escape the trap of shame and isolation that tends to lead to inaction. As job seekers use new information and knowledge to conduct their searches, they inevitably encounter obstacles, including their own internal mood and motivation to persist at discouraging tasks. While ideally they would receive feedback from recruiters about their performance in the job search, the reality is that most job seekers get little feedback to tell them if they are on the right track or what aspects of their search need to change.

In addition to providing information and education, workforce staff must also consider how they are helping job seekers take action, learn from their experiences, and continue to refine their approach and activities. Effective group support and opportunities to connect with other job seekers to discuss experiences are key. Technology can enhance these strategies, too.

With technology, groups can meet without regard to geographic boundaries so group coaching and practice and feedback sessions become more viable options. Through direct messaging, chat, and text, staff can provide feedback and coaching to job seekers who encounter difficulties or challenges in their job search. Technology can even be used to create a sense of online community and place, as the Heldrich Center discovered through the creation of an online job seeker community using a white-label social

networking platform. Participants have both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities to connect with peers, share concerns, get answers to questions, and receive support.

Finally, making better use of virtual tools is critical to helping job seekers develop and practice the skills they will need to apply to jobs and work in today's virtual environments. Storing documents in Google Drive helps job seekers become more comfortable with cloud-based document storage and editing. Having opportunities to participate in workforce Zoom meetings allows job seekers to learn how to use various features in a safe environment. Workforce programs should consider utilizing the online services used by businesses to provide job seekers with opportunities to practice with tools they will likely need for work.

With these shifts as background and context, below are suggestions for using technology more effectively to support job seekers' core needs.

A Three-tier Model of Support

In the Strategically Virtual three-tier model, support for job seekers is holistic, recognizing that there is more to a successful job search than knowing how to write a résumé or find online job postings. Services should also address key aspects of unemployed people’s experience to build a solid foundation for the job search.

The three tiers of this model include:

- ▶ Safety first, with a focus on physical and psychological safety and security;
- ▶ Foundations for a sustainable job search; and
- ▶ Job search support, including skill development and motivational enhancement.



Supporting Safety and Stability

When people lose their jobs, their first concerns are typically about safety and stability. Most immediately, they are worried about paying their bills, including their rent/mortgage, utilities, food, and health care. During the pandemic, there have been additional issues, such as concerns about contracting COVID and caring for family members in a time of crisis.

Threats to physical safety are only part of the equation, however. Unemployed people also face social and psychological insecurity as job loss means loss of identity, a work community, and the schedules that structured their

days. Shame about their unemployment situation, worries about their qualifications for new work, and concerns about the job search process can also contribute to feeling unsafe.

Brain science shows that threats to physical and psychological safety activate the fight/flight/freeze response and can disrupt the brain’s ability to access higher executive functioning skills such as planning, organizing, memory, managing emotions, initiating tasks, and learning new skills. Trauma and chronic stress interfere with people’s ability to absorb large amounts of information and narrows their attention to finding ways to remove perceived threats. Job seekers caught in the stress mode of fight/flight/freeze find it

more challenging to deal with the complex process of looking for work and to maintain the positive mood necessary to “brand” themselves effectively to potential employers.

Ignoring job seekers’ safety needs can create a shaky foundation for services. Job seekers who are overwhelmed and anxious are less able to absorb new information, learn new skills, or develop and implement job search plans. All job seeker interventions must place safety and security as core needs and recognize that helping people deal with a sense of overwhelm is critical to building a ladder to their ability to participate in other services.

Virtual Services to Build Safety and Stability

State and local workforce agencies can use technology in multiple ways to help job seekers feel more safe and secure. Welcoming language that communicates understanding of their situation, anticipation of their specific needs, and a willingness to provide support are key to these communications.

Care should be taken to avoid language that sounds coercive or punishing, which will increase people’s feelings of fear and uncertainty. Many people are mistrustful of unemployment services and are in a heightened state of alert when they receive messages from the government. Language that feels welcoming and human, rather than bureaucratic and official, can help ease job seekers’ concerns.

Messages should also be “chunked” so that they focus on one topic and do not overwhelm job seekers. It is often better to send a series of emails, each focused on a single action or topic, than to send one long email with multiple steps and instructions.

Letting people know that they are not alone and that there are caring people who will help them navigate this challenging time will help them feel more secure and stable.

Virtual strategies that can support safety and stability include:

- ▶ **Create “common applications” that allow job seekers to access services from multiple programs through a single application process.** These can reduce overwhelm and assure people that they will be connected to services to address all of their needs and concerns. For example, [the Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency developed a universal application](#) using Google Forms that allowed people to apply for all services in one application.

- ▶ **In the absence of a common application, add checklists to Unemployment Insurance and workforce services applications where job seekers can indicate the need for information on other services,** such as health care, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), housing assistance, retraining, elder or child care, etc., along with information on how to apply. Systems can be set up to automatically email or text information on these resources to people who are interested. State and local areas could also make direct referrals to services from these lists so that other programs and agencies could reach out to provide assistance.
- ▶ **Use Unemployment Insurance data to segment populations by key labor market characteristics, such as Standard Occupational Classification codes, career stage (early/mid/late career), educational level, and/or length of employment at their previous employer. Then set up email or text welcome campaigns that address the specific needs of these groups using language appropriate for that target audience.** Emails can be scheduled to go out over the course of several days with a focus on a specific service or issue in each email. For example, an email campaign targeted at late-career administrative professionals who have been with a previous employer for 15+ years could focus on connecting them quickly to support for a modern job search, potential skills upgrades, and available resources for older workers. Personalized, customized communications help people feel seen, understood, and safer.
- ▶ **Use Zoom or Google Meet to create “open office hour” sessions where people can drop in to ask questions, share concerns, and get referrals to resources.** With Zoom, job seekers can also participate via audio only and not need access to videoconferencing to participate. These sessions could be customized to the needs of specific worker demographics. For example, open office hours for early career job seekers. During the pandemic, the Heldrich Center’s New Start Career Network ran regular Zoom meetings where job seekers not only shared issues with the job search, but also exchanged advice and ideas for getting answers to their questions about their Unemployment Insurance claims, which was key to reducing their stress. Customized groups can help people see that others like them are in similar situations, reducing the feelings of shame that contribute to people feeling unsafe. Other members of the group share similar concerns, so they are also most likely to have relevant advice and experience to share.

- ▶ **Use texting services such as Remind and TextNow to do well-being check-ins with job seekers and to provide them with information on available resources.** Communicating that someone cares can be key to maintaining mood and motivation and can reduce stress. [More information on using this strategy is here.](#)
- ▶ **Connect people early on to well-being activities, such as yoga and meditation, which are proven to increase feelings of resilience, stability, and calm.** During the pandemic, many organizations, including public libraries, have been offering these services online for free. These can also be opportunities to collaborate with local organizations that may offer these types of services online. Local workforce areas can advertise events to job seekers as part of a whole-person approach to supporting the job search and demonstrating care for the issues job seekers face. The Heldrich Center's online New Jersey Job Seeker Community includes weekly online meditation and yoga sessions, and job seekers consistently report that these sessions have helped them deal more effectively with the stresses of the job search.

Helping Job Seekers Build Foundations for a Sustainable Job Search

When individuals lose their jobs, especially in a pandemic, their lives are thrown into disarray. Often, job seekers develop initial job search habits that do not serve them well and these can lead to haphazard approaches to their job search and a roller coaster of intensity and effort. Job seekers need assistance 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. Help in creating daily agendas and schedules, setting priorities, following through on plans, and connecting with others is key.

Virtual Services to Build Sustainable Foundations

- ▶ **Identify and disrupt "bad" habits and suggest healthier habits.** Use email drip campaigns to educate job seekers about job search strategies and habits that impede success and suggest better strategies to pursue. Drip campaigns allow the scheduling of automated emails that can go out over the course of several days.
- ▶ **Conduct daily and/or weekly virtual check-in meetings.** Job seekers benefit from regular accountability opportunities to discuss their goals and progress, and to address any challenges in achieving their goals. Research shows that public commitment to goals increases the likelihood that people will achieve them. Videoconferencing makes it easy and convenient to facilitate these kinds of meetings. They can be as simple as a casual morning check-in where job seekers can share the three things they want to accomplish that day and the progress they made the day before, using breakout rooms if the group is large. Or they can be more complex, such as creating [Mastermind Groups](#) where job seekers work together weekly in groups of four to go through a more structured check-in process.
- ▶ **Create Google Drive folders to share with job seekers that include document templates for the search.** These can include résumé and LinkedIn profile templates, job search organizing templates, contact logs, email templates, etc. It is even possible to create [calendar templates using Google Sheets](#), which can provide job seekers with sample daily/weekly agendas to organize their activities and identify tasks. Maintaining these resources in Google Drive allows them to be easily shared across geographic boundaries and ensures that job seekers are accessing the most up-to-date information. It also gives job seekers practice in using Google Drive.
- ▶ **Create online events for job seekers to work on focused tasks.** For example, the Heldrich Center has sponsored virtual pop-up [Pomodoro](#) events where job seekers log on to a Zoom meeting to work on individual tasks for 25 focused minutes. Each person announces the task they will work on and then everyone (including the facilitator) works on their task. Members report that working as a group in this way keeps them more focused on the task and allows them to accomplish more in the 25 minutes of work. This also allows members to experience a strategy that is a useful routine for them to develop in the job search.

Helping Job Seekers Develop Skills for the Job Search

Most job seekers need help with job search skills. Education about how to develop a job search plan, how to write and customize a résumé, how to interview, etc. is important. Equally important are opportunities to practice new skills and receive actionable feedback that people can use to improve their performance. Workforce agencies should consider how to both provide quality, customized educational content as well as ongoing opportunities for practice and feedback.

One major advantage of providing education in a virtual environment is that geography does not matter. Experts from around the nation can be engaged to conduct webinars on a variety of job search topics open to people throughout the state, and these webinars can be recorded and shared with all job seekers. This broadens the opportunities for quality content geared toward specific populations and issues. It can also free staff to focus on facilitating sessions centered on practice and feedback rather than on delivering content repeatedly.

Workforce agencies should also consider how they can curate and share quality job search educational content rather than developing their own materials. There are thousands of excellent videos and articles on job search that agencies could identify, organize, and share with job seekers.

Virtual Services to Build Job Search Skills

- ▶ **Use the flipped workshop approach to design virtual sessions for job seekers.** This approach is based on the flipped classroom educational model where participants review educational materials outside the classroom and then use class time for questions, feedback, skills application, and practice. Job seekers can review recorded webinars either produced by workforce staff or curated materials from job search experts. They can then attend a Zoom session where discussion focuses on questions they have after reviewing the materials and how they would apply the information they have learned to their own job search.
- ▶ **Use Zoom or other videoconferencing software to run practice and feedback sessions.** For example, with the rise of virtual interviewing, the Heldrich Center now runs “Rate the Room” sessions for job seekers where they can

get feedback on lighting, camera position, background, etc. to improve their virtual interviewing appearance. Other sessions have focused on “Practicing Your Pitch,” where job seekers practice their 30-second elevator pitch and receive feedback from coaches and peers. Live résumé and LinkedIn reviews where job seekers volunteer to share their résumé or LinkedIn profile with a group to get feedback as part of an online session have also been effective. Not only do individuals learn from the feedback they receive, they also learn from feedback that other job seekers get during the sessions.

- ▶ **Conduct virtual résumé and LinkedIn review sessions with volunteers.** Workforce agencies can engage volunteers from the local business community to conduct résumé and LinkedIn profile reviews via Zoom’s breakout room option. Job seekers submit résumés or LinkedIn profiles for volunteers to review ahead of time and then they meet with the volunteer for a 30-minute discussion about the feedback. The Heldrich Center has used this model to schedule up to six career coaches for two-hour blocks of time with each coach able to meet with four job seekers in breakout rooms. Both volunteers and job seekers find this convenient and effective.
- ▶ **Conduct virtual question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions with panelists on job search-related topics.** Job seekers have many questions about all aspects of the job search and they benefit from having a forum for asking these questions. Virtual Q&A sessions with recruiters, for example, can provide job seekers with an opportunity to better understand the recruitment process. Job seekers can submit questions ahead of time during the registration process. They can also use the chat feature in videoconferencing or even be allowed to unmute themselves to ask questions. These sessions can be recorded and used later, as well.
- ▶ **Design and deliver job search micro classes via text or email.** Micro learning can be targeted – how to answer the top five interview questions, for example – and delivered in bite-sized chunks that are more manageable for overwhelmed job seekers. Daily lessons can cover a single topic or action and can be automated to be delivered to email addresses or smartphones.

Managing Ongoing Mood and Motivation

One of the most challenging aspects of the job search for most people is managing their ongoing mood and motivation, especially if the search persists beyond a couple of months. Dealing with ongoing rejection, complex application processes, recruiters who “ghost” them, and the “black hole” of Applicant Tracking Systems makes it more difficult to engage in daily job search activities. Job seekers lose confidence and begin to question their ability to ever find work. Low moods and challenges with motivation have been exacerbated by the pandemic, months of social isolation, and the stress and trauma of caring for or losing loved ones.

Research from the Great Recession on emotional well-being during periods of mass unemployment indicates that job seekers feel particularly sad and discouraged when engaging in job search activities and these feelings of sadness increase the longer they are unemployed. The amount of time spent on the search itself declines the longer people are out of work, in part because of low moods. Indeed, other **research shows** that the procrastination common among job seekers is not a time management issue but a way of managing their moods by turning away from activities that make them feel negatively about themselves and their circumstances.

Mood and motivational issues are not signs of laziness or people not wanting to go back to work. They are byproducts of a long, discouraging, and dispiriting pursuit of the next job. The Heldrich Center’s **research with dislocated workers** as well as feedback received from job seekers in the center’s programs indicate that mood and motivation are significant challenges for people and they require compassion and support to overcome.

Workforce agencies should recognize and validate the “emotional roller coaster” of the job search and provide resources and services to help people manage these issues. Again, virtual strategies offer multiple opportunities to leverage limited staff resources while upgrading services.

Virtual Services to Help Job Seekers Manage Mood and Motivation

► **Conduct, record, and share webinars on the emotional aspects of the job search.** The New Start Career Network, one of the programs operated by the Heldrich Center, has conducted numerous webinars on various topics related to emotional well-being and managing mood and motivation.

These webinars have been recorded and organized into a **roadmap for well-being in the job search**, which is regularly promoted to job seekers. Individual sessions for dealing with different aspects of well-being are also shared with job seekers facing particular challenges. Explicitly identifying, normalizing, and discussing emotional challenges as part of the search reduces shame and helps job seekers plan for and address emotional setbacks.

- **Provide virtual programming that allows job seekers to share their mood and motivational challenges and the strategies they use to manage these issues.** Peer support is key to managing the stresses of the job search. Zoom breakout rooms offer opportunities for small groups to discuss emotional aspects of the search and share their experiences and ideas. Virtual meetings can be devoted entirely to mood and motivational issues or these topics can be integrated into other virtual services. Social networking platforms – for example, Facebook or a white-label network like **Mighty Networks** – can provide additional ways for people to reach out and to support one another through posts and direct messaging.
- **Monitor engagement in activities and conduct outreach to participants to check in.** Often the roller coaster of emotions leads to a roller coaster of engagement. Job seekers become discouraged and disengage from the job search. Agencies can use text, email, and direct messaging/chat to check in with job seekers and see how they are doing. They can use this check-in to offer support, inspiration, and encouragement to reengage with the search while also acknowledging the emotional challenges.
- **Partner with other agencies and organizations to offer virtual well-being workshops and activities.** During the height of the pandemic, the Heldrich Center worked with the **Mental Health Association in New Jersey** to offer a six-week, hands-on emotional resilience workshop via Zoom. The center also sponsored a **month-long focus on well-being in its online New Jersey Job Seeker Community**, with daily virtual activities facilitated by outside experts, as well as members of the community. As mentioned previously, virtual yoga and meditation are offered weekly in the New Jersey Job Seeker Community and a volunteer coach also facilitates a group focused on dealing with the negative self-talk that develops during the job search. Feedback from job seekers who subsequently found employment indicates that these activities were critical to keeping them motivated and engaged during the search.

Leveraging Technology at the State Level to Improve Services

One of the primary benefits of using technology is that workforce agencies can provide services across geographic boundaries. This reduces redundancy and frees local staff for more coaching, feedback, and customized supports.

In an ideal world, states would partner with local workforce boards to develop a comprehensive suite of virtual services for job seekers across the state, including:

- ▶ **Messaging campaigns customized to the needs of specific demographic groups and career stages** developed at the state level and then customized with local resources.
- ▶ **Educational webinars on different aspects of the job search.** Rather than individual workforce areas each providing their own versions of virtual workshops on résumés, interviewing, etc., these can be organized as statewide events with local areas and then coordinating more hands-on, follow-up sessions to help job seekers implement what they learned in the webinars. This

approach would also allow states to provide more webinars customized to the specific needs and issues of people at different career stages and in different industries.

- ▶ **Document templates, job search checklists, daily and weekly agendas, and other tools that help job seekers stay organized and focused on the right activities organized at the state level** and shared via Google Drive. Local areas can contribute their best resources and tools that address various career stages and industry/occupational differences.

In a virtual world, states can identify the highest quality workshop presenters and have them present to everyone in the state, not just to a specific local area. They can offer programming – coaching, job search accountability groups, etc. – that might not have enough participation locally to warrant the program. When offered statewide, however, participation can be increased and services made available that might not otherwise be offered.

Tips for Moving Forward

As workforce agencies look to the next phase of virtual services, now is the time to build on the skills and experiences they have developed in the past year-and-a-half to expand and refine offerings that will support job seekers in the areas where they most need help. Information is not enough. Job seekers need coaching and motivational support, especially those who are long-term unemployed and most likely to be discouraged about the job search.

Workforce organizations interested in providing virtual services as discussed in this brief should consider the following tips:

- ▶ **Consider who is most likely to want and benefit from virtual services and learn about their needs and preferences.** White-collar workers, younger workers, people with transportation or childcare challenges, and people with disabilities are key groups that reported that virtual services have been helpful during the pandemic. Utilize surveys and focus groups to learn more about their experiences and how virtual services could be refined and expanded.
- ▶ **Prioritize activities that support safety and structure, the first two tiers of the support model.** Job seekers are challenged to absorb education and new information when they feel unsafe and lack structure and certainty. Providing them with quality support in helping them feel less stressed and more in control of their activities builds capacity for them to learn new things and manage mood and motivation.
- ▶ **Train staff in the three-tier model and the importance of providing support to job seekers in all of these areas.** Education and training in **trauma-informed workforce development**, career coaching skills, and effective group facilitation in virtual settings will also be helpful.
- ▶ **Start small.** Identify a few strategies to experiment with and run them as pilots. Learn from the experiences and then apply what you learned to refine and offer on a larger scale. Look for ways to tweak current services to better reflect the three tiers of support. For example, rewrite emails to convey a more welcoming tone or split long emails into shorter campaigns that people can more easily digest.
- ▶ **Leverage strengths.** Use staff who are most comfortable with and proficient in using online tools. Identify and use the best current digital assets, such as recorded webinars or online tools. Target audiences that are most enthusiastic about using online services. As you look for opportunities, consider what you can best build on to create success.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a unexpected and unprecedented opportunity for workforce agencies to expand virtual services in ways that were never considered prior to 2020. As the system begins to move into a new phase, the most forward-thinking agencies will look at how they can build on these experiences to expand services to new job seeker groups and complement the in-person services they have traditionally provided.

Acknowledgments

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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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