

New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community: Final Brief

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Introduction

The New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community was established in September 2020 to provide job seekers in New Jersey with a dedicated virtual community to access job search resources, connect with peers, and share materials and tools designed to assist with emotional well-being during the job search. The Community was funded through the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development in response to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic and, as such, was purposefully designed to fully take place in a virtual environment. Operating virtually allowed consistent community access during the many cycles and strains of the pandemic and its associated economic upheaval that resulted in changes to the labor market, job search, networking, and general business practices. The creation of the Community sought to establish a virtual home for job seekers navigating the uncharted territory that was job search in the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as dealing with the trauma of job loss in a period of exacerbated stress and social isolation.

Job Seeker Community hosts sought to create a welcoming, safe environment where job seekers felt supported and validated through the job search process. The Community created a sense of place for job seekers and became a virtual “center” at a time when physical spaces were mostly inaccessible. Community job seeker members indicated that they felt they had a place to go when they had questions or were presented with

challenges in their job search. The value proposition of the Community was to support people in both tangible (resource provision) and intangible (a listening ear) ways. This approach constituted a new model of job search support, one that should be replicated in future times of economic stress.

The Community was built upon the knowledge and expertise with operating job seeker-oriented direct service programs developed by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. From 2015 to 2022, the Heldrich Center operated the New Start Career Network, a program that helped New Jersey residents age 45 and older who had been out of work or underemployed for at least six months (Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 2022). The New Start Career Network shaped the development of the New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community, and, in fact, many New Start members became members of the Community as well. Through the New Start Career Network, researchers and program implementation staff gained knowledge and understanding of the experience and challenges of long-term unemployment before the COVID-19 crisis began. This knowledge laid the groundwork for a focus on well-being in the job search and assisted with the creation of initial Job Seeker Community programming.

Overview of the Job Seeker Community

The Community was hosted on [Mighty Networks](#), an online hosting platform specifically designed for community and course creation. Mighty Networks allows a community administrator to customize its virtual platform without having to build anything from scratch. Mighty Networks maintained the functionality of a social media site, with an active feed of content, as

well as features such as direct and group messaging, an events page, member lists, and learning labs. Overall, the use and navigation of pages created through Mighty Networks was similar to those of popular social media sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn; therefore, its use was often familiar to many. (See Figures 1 and 2 for screenshot images of the Community.)

Figure 1: Screenshot of User Content Feed

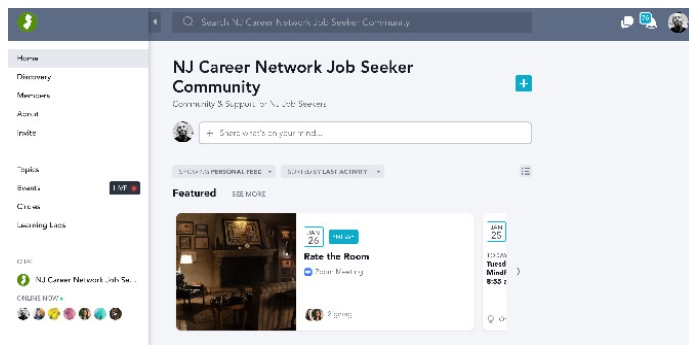
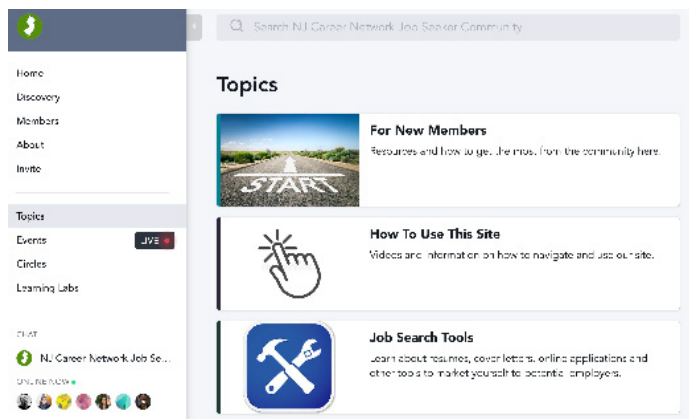


Figure 2: Screenshot of Member Information and Tutorials



Community hosts (Heldrich Center employees) purchased a Mighty Networks subscription and designed the Community's layout and operating processes, including outlining a member onboarding series (including individual welcome messages to every new member), the scheduling and creation of standing events, the development of frequently asked questions and other guidance, the establishment of a code of conduct, and the formation of other operational resources in response to community members' needs. Community hosts also populated the Job Seeker Community with job search and well-being content, by both developing new materials as well as sourcing materials from other job search resources, such as the Heldrich Center's New Start Career Network (Heidkamp, Van Horn, Martin, & Krepcio, 2022).

At the Job Seeker Community's launch, four Community hosts and seven volunteer facilitators created daily content and were available to answer questions and provide support. Volunteer facilitators ran daily Share

& Support sessions and events related to job search and emotional/mental well-being. The Share & Support sessions, an engagement model often used in the healthcare space (HelpGuide.org, n.d.), offered daily touch points to discuss job search challenges, questions, and concerns, but also served as consistent points of connection, ensuring that a listening ear would be available at least once a day. This service, while seemingly small and routine, offered substantial assistance in a time of extreme social isolation for job seekers in 2020 and 2021. As one Job Seeker Community member noted:

"Thank you very much for the gratitude reminders this week, and thanks for your daily preview. Some days it's the main, if not the only, reason I look forward to logging onto my computer."

The Job Seeker Community offered a new approach to virtual job seeking and networking that was heavily peer and community based. Services offered included, but were not limited to:

- ▶ Meet & Greet sessions;
- ▶ Daily Share & Support job search support and troubleshooting sessions;
- ▶ Weekly Career Clarity group for individuals making a career pivot;
- ▶ Facilitated sessions for networking, testing technology, and other specific job search supports;
- ▶ Community Office Hours for member questions, concerns, and other open discussions;
- ▶ Weekly online yoga, meditation, and mindfulness sessions facilitated by a wellness coach volunteer;
- ▶ Webinars with outside experts on dealing with stress, emotional intelligence and resilience, and job search skills;
- ▶ Lunch & Learn sessions facilitated by volunteers and job seeker members; and
- ▶ Celebrations for members' successes and holiday-related activities.

These events offered an array of resources and outlets for Community members. Community hosts acknowledged that many members were in search of multifaceted support, so a key tenet of the Community was to engage with individuals on a multitude of fronts. This approach also took a holistic view of job seekers as whole people who may be struggling with non-job-search-related issues during their reemployment journey. For these reasons, job seeker members were encouraged to establish a job search routine, to be thoughtful about how they use their time, and to support and encourage each other. One Job Seeker Community member remarked:

“The Community is really a guiding light as I try to establish day-to-day routines and schedule.”

Job seekers in the Community also had the opportunity to practice their job search skills and become more comfortable with virtual technology platforms, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, through activities like

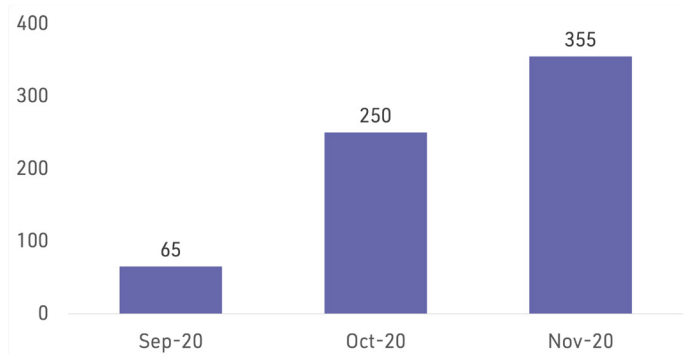
participating in virtual meetings and using specific features, such as whiteboards, virtual backgrounds, etc. In this way, the Community provided practical opportunities for members to test and gain comfort with using the many virtual tools and technologies most often utilized with job search during the pandemic. Members were able to troubleshoot job search issues and challenges in real time, with the support of Community hosts, volunteer facilitators, and other members.

The New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community created a unique, safe space for job seekers to both give and receive support throughout their job search journey. Job search, by its nature, is an isolating, often traumatic process, particularly for mid-career individuals (AARP, n.d.); therefore, the Community offered a safe haven to connect with individuals in similar situations, improve job search skills, receive holistic support, and work through any job search questions and challenges with the support of a community of peers and experts.

Membership

The Job Seeker Community launched to the public in September 2020 and saw a steady climb in the number of members in the first few months as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community Total Membership by Month, September to November 2020



The Community consistently expanded its membership throughout all of 2021 through Fall 2022. The ebbs and flows associated with membership increases were correlated to the waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the cycles of unemployment and reemployment that stemmed from the pandemic’s flows, members would cycle in and out of the Community, often finding a job and then losing that job within a few weeks or months. Many members had either been displaced by the pandemic and did not have a company or industry to return to, or were long-term unemployed before the pandemic. It was not uncommon for members to be seeking a career change (as evidenced by the popularity of Career Clarity sessions) and to be uncertain about their next moves. Additionally, members reported having physical and mental health challenges that were difficult to address during the job search, especially without access to medical insurance coverage. Community hosts believe that these factors could all be reasons why members would fall in and out of employment. Figure 4 offers a heat map of Community membership.

Figure 4: Heat Map, New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community Membership, 2020 to 2023

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
2020									65	185	105	93
2021	116	64	42	33	33	47	30	10	10	22	20	9
2022	28	21	66	34	24	41	26	22	18	23	23	17
2023	24	17	10									

Community Outreach and Operations

The Community was socialized with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the One-Stop Career Centers in New Jersey, the New Jersey Office of Innovation, and the New Jersey State Library. Community hosts also connected with existing job seeker support groups, such as the Professional Service Groups in New Jersey, to extend the reach of the Community to as many people as possible. Most member referrals came by word of mouth, with active members sharing the resource with their respective communities and with individuals in similar situations.

During the first four months of the Community’s operation (September to December 2020), the Community hosted 70 events. Throughout 2021, on average, the Community was hosting 45 events per month. This intensive event schedule constituted a specific holistic and person-centric approach to supporting job seekers and the job search process. Community hosts made a point of bringing people together virtually as frequently as possible to provide a social experience during the peak days of the pandemic when in-person socialization was less possible.

Anecdotally, Community hosts found that social gatherings, including meetings, webinars, and Share & Support sessions, greatly affected, and likely benefited, members’ job search outlook on a given day. While sometimes brief, these moments of positivity in difficult times were significant and valuable.

The Community was able to track key metrics such as member return rate. While the statistics fluctuated throughout the lifespan of the Job Seeker Community, during the time of intensive activity in 2020 to 2022, the Community consistently rated at or above Mighty Networks’ 70% “exceptional” 30-day member retention rate. In this way, the Community saw consistent engagement with members as they became familiar with the Community and its services.

At the time of its closure in 2023, the Job Seeker Community had 1,278 members. Community hosts believe this number does not fully capture the number of members who cycled through services and deleted their accounts upon landing positions.

Lessons Learned

In operating the New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community from 2020 to 2023, the Heldrich Center team derived a series of lessons learned. The Community constituted a reimagined service delivery mechanism that blended the constructs of a social network with more traditional job search supports. From this unique model of service, the Heldrich Center has identified the following key effective practices:

Holding space for peer support and connection during the COVID-19 pandemic was impactful.

The pandemic marked a period of intense uncertainty and isolation for many. This struggle was particularly pronounced for the job seeker population at that time. By creating a virtual community in a time of need, members were able to hold on to pieces of normalcy, such as keeping a schedule and having virtual events to look

forward to, as well as the opportunity to connect with other individuals navigating the same circumstances of job search. The intangible benefits of peer support, and minimizing the isolation of job search, were significant outcomes that Community hosts noted over the course of the Community's three years of operation. As one Job Seeker Community member noted:

"I think of it (the Community) as a safety net in case I fall down."

Job search is a process with many highs and lows; therefore, the Community functioned as a constant source of support throughout members' reemployment journeys. Members shared their interview stories and progress updates, and routinely celebrated peers' accomplishments when they landed new positions. The comradery created amongst peers was a significant value to the Community and was undoubtedly a factor in member engagement and retention.

Moreover, it should be noted that members reported deriving great value from engaging in the services the Community had to offer. As one Job Seeker Community member shared:

"I am so grateful for groups like this during such difficult times."

Creating a safe space that emulated a social network site helped decrease stigma and allowed people to be more open.

There is a certain stigma and shame associated with job search (Krug, Drasch, & Jungbauer-Gans, 2019). Many individuals often feel vulnerable and exposed in job search, which ironically is a time that often requires the most support. Community hosts purposefully designed the Community to be a safe space, a supportive environment devoid of judgment or shame for one's employment status. The Community served as a middle ground virtual platform that walked the line between being a truly personal social network platform, like Facebook, and an entirely professional network platform, like LinkedIn. In this way, members could discuss their job search without their friends and families (as

one would see on Facebook) and professional former colleagues and peers (as one would see on LinkedIn) knowing the details of their job search journey.

This allowed for needed socialization and well-being support without fear of attached stigma or negative impacts on job search prospects (which would not have been possible in a more public setting). As one Job Seeker Community member noted:

"As I participate in these Zoom calls, I find I am more relaxed, and hopefully more professional."

Redefining success in job search was important to create little wins on an individual's reemployment journey.

In the job search process, it is common for individuals to only define success as landing a new job. This narrow frame of success often presents challenges for people who then feel that they are failing every day that they are not employed. This negative cycle can all too quickly fester to create an unhealthy job search journey. Many job seekers experience cycles of rejection and discouragement, which, in turn, make it harder to find their next employment opportunity. The Community took a holistic approach to job seeker support, addressing the fundamentals of job search tactics, but also tending to the mental and emotional toll that job search can take on an individual. In this dual approach method, job seekers were supported on multiple fronts and their holistic needs were at least acknowledged, if not fully addressed. As one Job Seeker Community member noted:

"It's been a great resource, providing daily affirmation and inspiration as I continue to look for my next opportunity."

Upon landing their next opportunity, one Job Seeker Community member shared:

"I plan to stay connected to [the] New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community and will encourage others to not give up."

Recommendations for Future Work in this Arena

The Heldrich Center believes this high-tech, high-touch model of service was impactful and made a difference in individuals' reemployment journeys, based on anecdotal evidence from members' direct feedback. Should this model of service be replicated in the future, provided here are a few considerations in the development of a job seeker community.

The Pervasive Power of Stigma

Job search shame and stigma are powerful forces that should be more directly addressed in supporting individuals' reemployment journeys. Without a safe and neutral place to process the emotional journey of the job search, people can fall into negative thinking and struggle with mental well-being as well as with executive functioning tasks and cognition. This, in turn, can hamper the job search as job seekers become less motivated and less effective at looking for work. For these reasons, job search support services, inclusive of public, private, and nonprofit services, should consider how to incorporate more holistic supportive services into their job seeker-oriented service models.

Staff-intensive Model of Service

This model of service requires dedicated support to operationalize, sustain, and grow a community. Staffing needs for a virtual community will look different than staffing needs for a traditional, in-person model of support, and consideration should be given to this while planning the development and operationalization of such a community. Job Seeker Community hosts believe that it is important to have hosts or moderators consistently available to answer technical questions, create content, and to ensure a welcoming space for all. Volunteers can do some or all of this work; however, due to the "always open" nature of virtual programming, staff and/or volunteers will likely need to be regularly and frequently

engaged with community operations. Acknowledging that this is a staff-intensive model of service is critical in the design and operation of any future programming that builds upon the New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community model.

Non-linear Job Search Process

The Job Seeker Community experience showed that job search is rarely a linear process. The shifting nature of work and an increasing gig/contract workforce, combined with individual job seekers' circumstances that make it difficult to hold down a job consistently, often led to cycles of becoming unemployed or underemployed, or engaging with contract work on an inconsistent basis. Through the Community, it was also often found that many job seekers had a lack of clarity about what kind of work they were seeking. All of these factors necessitate a service model different from the traditional provision of job search assistance and tools (such as résumé writing, job search help, interview assistance, etc.). While traditional tools and skills remain important during the job search, additional tools, such as assistance navigating temporary and/or contract work, tools and resources geared toward support to retain employment, and assistance with a continued job search while employed are all necessary in today's job market. Tools and resources focused on the non-linear job search were popular among Community members and were created in response to the expressed needs of job seeker members.

Conclusion

While the New Jersey Career Network Job Seeker Community has come to an end, the Heldrich Center believes this model of high-touch, virtually based services could be replicated and scaled to continue to support job seekers. For future periods of disruption to the traditional models of service for job seekers, as well as to modernize and operate in a more virtual

environment, a virtual hub for job seekers to connect, learn, and support each other should be considered by local and state departments of labor, and other organizations that support individuals who are unemployed and that address workforce needs.

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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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