



Employer Engagement and Job Development During Challenging Times

By David Hoff

For people with disabilities and the staff who support them, the ability to engage businesses and develop employment opportunities has never been more urgently needed. COVID-19 has created two simultaneous challenges: a major increase in the unemployment rate, combined with limitations on meeting with business owners and hiring managers in person.

This publication provides guidance on maintaining an ongoing commitment to the development of employment opportunities for people with disabilities during this challenging time.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, day and employment service providers have had to quickly determine how best to provide supports for people they serve. For many this means transitioning to services and supports that can be provided remotely. This brief is one in a series developed to help community providers continue to provide services to those who are currently working, seeking employment, or engaged in community-based day supports.

During this time, we are all learning how to best support the people we serve. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together to provide services that help people to continue to work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

ICI COVID-19 RESOURCES:
covid19.communityinclusion.org

Starting Point: Maximize Best Practices

Navigating employment services during this pandemic is not about doing things differently as much as about doing what we know works, and doing it better and in a more focused way.

This includes taking the following actions:

Network.

Examine your professional and personal networks (both job developer and job seeker) and make sure they are as expansive as possible. If you have never done a thorough analysis of your organizational contacts (other staff, vendors, board members) and methods for engaging them, now is the time. Work your connections to uncover every possible employment opportunity.

Use person-centered planning for strong job matches.

With so many candidates to choose from, job seekers need to be perceived as a good match for business in terms of both skills and personality. Use person-centered planning to help individuals discover their strengths, abilities, and interests, which can be summarized to make a strong case to prospective employers. And in an environment where employers can more easily replace employees who are not performing to expectation, good job matches are not only important for getting hired, but also for staying employed.

Help candidates be well prepared.

Individuals must learn how to present well to employers, highlight their strengths, and stand out from other job candidates. If you have not previously done so, use strategies and tools such as video resumes and short-term job tryouts.

Systematic analysis of employer needs.

The best job developers use a systematic approach for analysis of employer needs to identify opportunities and the most appropriate job candidate. Review the approach you use (e.g., a list of questions, research methods) to ensure it results in a full analysis of employer needs and is reflective of the current environment. (See the [Employer Presentation Fact Sheet at Employer First Massachusetts](#) for guidelines on employer analysis.)

Make the case.

Job developers (and job seekers) need to bring their “A” game when it comes to making the case for why a candidate should be hired, and how hiring an individual will be an asset to the business. Effective negotiation skills are a critical component of this.

Strategies for Enhancing Job Development

Accommodations and technology.

Get creative in use of accommodations and technology (low tech and high tech) to maximize the performance of the individual and their value to the employer. Review information from the [Job Accommodation Network](#) and [your state's assistive technology project](#) to ensure you are giving full consideration to all potential accommodations and technology (including apps) that can increase the positive view of job candidates.

Use social media effectively.

Social media (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) can help you to understand employer needs, network, and identify opportunities, through both monitoring businesses' social media and using your own professional social media channels. Particularly in an environment where in-person contact is more limited, effective use of social media is critical.

Understand the job market.

It is always important to have an understanding of the current labor market, through use of [Labor Market Information](#), reading local business publications, and similar sources. This is even more essential now to identify areas of the labor market that are hiring as well as those that are not.

Quality post-placement supports.

Day-to-day routines in many businesses have changed, combined with significant economic pressures. Therefore, regular communication with both individuals working and their employers is particularly important. You'll need to be aware of any issues and proactive in responding. This will help ensure individuals maintain their employment, while creating an overall positive impression of your agency as responsive and customer focused.

In addition to emphasizing best practices, there are additional strategies to help you identify employment opportunities, engage businesses, and maintain a focus on employment.

Use "sweeteners" and "hole cards."

A long-standing strategy in the world of job development is the concept of inherent selling points, sweeteners, and hole cards (Galloway, 1982). Inherent selling points are the core reasons why an employer hires a person with a disability. This is essentially the same reason they hire anyone: the need for a competent employee to meet their business needs, possibly combined with a commitment to diversity. However, additional incentives—"sweeteners" and "hole cards"—can sometimes be useful to encourage a positive hiring decision. These always need to be used thoughtfully to avoid stigmatizing people with disabilities as needing "extras" to get hired. However, during COVID-19, greater emphasis on these may be warranted. Here are ways you can do this:

- ▶ Highlight the availability of the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit and similar tax credits](#).
- ▶ Facilitate job tryouts (candidates trying out a position before the employer makes a hiring decision) and on-the-job training (possibly funded by vocational rehabilitation).
- ▶ Explore temporary employment options.
- ▶ Provide increased levels of job coach support.
- ▶ Help the job seeker pay for equipment or technology that will assist them in doing their job and/or help the business. [PASS plans](#) (a Social Security work incentive) and vocational rehabilitation funding may be able to assist with this.

Help employers to screen candidates.

Right now, employers are likely to be overwhelmed with job candidates. Offer to help them address this issue by identifying potential candidates as an alternative to advertising for positions, possibly in cooperation with other service providers in your area. Such a process requires a clear sense of the qualities an employer looks for in employees and specific qualifications required for positions. Be careful in such a process—your job is to present potentially qualified candidates, not to make the hiring decision on behalf of the employer.

Build and maintain relationships with businesses that aren't hiring.

There are a variety of ways you can work with businesses that don't necessarily involve hiring. Here are some examples:

- ▶ If a business owner tells you they're not hiring now, ask for their assistance in identifying businesses that are hiring.
- ▶ Identify ways to help increase the employer's business (e.g., having your agency use the business as a vendor, encouraging staff and others to patronize the business, etc.).

- ▶ Use your network connections to address a business need (e.g., the employer needs personal protective equipment and through a connection with a medical equipment company, you are able to find a supply).
- ▶ Participate on your agency's business advisory council.
- ▶ Have the business critique your agency's marketing materials.
- ▶ Have staff practice job development with the employer (elevator pitches, employer meetings).
- ▶ Send periodic emails to employers to check in. For example: "Just wanted to check to see how things are going. I know it's a challenging time, but let me know if there is anything we can do." "Saw this article, and thought you might find it of interest." "Congratulations on your daughter graduating from college."
- ▶ Use your agency's social media to highlight businesses that you have relationships with.
- ▶ Offer your services for assistance and employment connections for individuals the business is laying off.

Employer check-in meetings.

The "soft sell" information gathering approach with employers can be an effective strategy. You can take this to the next level by setting up meetings with employers to simply check in regarding the current environment and long-term outlook, and to learn if there are ways you and your agency can be supportive.

Organize business roundtables.

Many agencies find that business advisory councils are effective for building and maintaining employer relationships, expanding networks, and identifying job opportunities. These councils can be particularly useful today in identifying opportunities in the hidden job market and getting a sense of the local labor market picture. If having a business advisory council is not a current priority, conduct a well-facilitated employer forum as a one-time event, possibly in conjunction with other agencies and local business groups. Market the forum as an opportunity to have an open and frank dialogue between service providers and the employer community regarding the current environment, short- and long-term outlook, and how those in attendance can work together and mutually support each other. In these efforts (business advisory councils and employer forums), include businesses you have successfully worked with in the past, as well as newer connections. Conduct these events online to encourage participation.

Keep an Employment First Focus

At a time when external events are particularly challenging, maintaining a commitment to the [core values of Employment First](#)—people with disabilities having jobs fully included in the general workforce as a priority—is more important than ever. It is true that lots of people are out of work, and jobs are more difficult to find. But this does not mean that people with disabilities go to "the back of the line" in terms of whatever opportunities are available – and we must avoid acting as such. People with disabilities can compete for the jobs that are available—and it's important they believe that and are visible in doing so.

After making significant progress over the past two decades in terms of advancing employment of people with disabilities, we must also avoid an attitude that "now is not the time" for employment, as it will be a real step backwards. The current environment is challenging enough, without making it more so. The momentum for Employment First must be maintained.

Address pandemic issues.

In your interactions with employers, in addition to the standard topics, it is important to acknowledge, ask questions about, and discuss the current situation, including:

- ▶ The economic impact of the pandemic on the organization's business and hiring.
- ▶ Changes in how the business is operating to keep staff and customers safe and healthy.
- ▶ Changes in hiring procedures such as use of phone and video interviews and changes in new employee onboarding.
- ▶ The general challenges the business is dealing with.
- ▶ Ways that your program can assist and help.

Respond to the changing labor market.

A long-term issue in job development for many people with disabilities has been to concentrate primarily on specific sectors of the labor market (e.g., hospitality and retail), to the exclusion of others. Many of these sectors where individuals have traditionally been placed no longer have the same opportunities. These seismic shifts in the labor market are not just temporary, and we are likely to see fundamental shifts in demand among different sectors over the long term. This not only means that it's important to understand how the labor market has changed, but serves as a wake-up call to focus on the entire labor market rather than certain sectors. Focusing on the full labor market

includes employment in the public sector (federal, state, and local government) which is too often overlooked.

Maximize the effectiveness of your processes.

Do you know if the various activities you undertake truly add value and result in expanded employment opportunities for people with disabilities? Are your processes reflective of the realities of the pandemic? Take a look at your approach to employer engagement and job development to ensure you are creating maximum values for your customers (businesses and individuals) in ways that are most efficient and effective. If there was ever a time to re-think “business as usual,” this is it. Quality improvement methods such as [Six Sigma and Lean](#) can help.

Be creative and use every tool available.

Good job developers can analyze a situation and come up with a creative solution that will benefit the business while creating an employment opportunity. Take a full inventory of every tool in your toolbox (good job matches, video resumes, accommodations, assistive technology, job carving, job creation, various sweeteners and hole cards) and determine how these can be used creatively together so that a business sees the value (including the economic value) of hiring an individual.

Be sensitive to the environment businesses are operating in.

The pandemic has been and continues to be extremely challenging for many employers. Be sensitive to their needs, and don't pretend it's “business as usual.” If you are aware that an employer is laying off staff, it is not necessarily a time to ask them about hiring. Also, if an employer is clear that now is not the time to engage with them, it is important to respect that. Tell them you understand and ask if it's all right for you to check in with them in a few months to see how they're doing.

Take an opportunity to shine.

While it is a challenging time for identifying employment opportunities, it is also a time for service providers to shine. If you and the program or agency you work for can demonstrate a high level of understanding, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the employer community, the long-term benefits will be significant for your program—and most importantly, for people with disabilities.

Keep Individuals Focused on Employment

Along with ongoing engagement of employers, it is important to keep job seekers engaged. Acknowledge the realities of the employment environment while helping them maintain a positive view of employment and continuing to work on their job search. Emphasize the following points:

- ▶ Many employers are still hiring.
- ▶ It is important to be well prepared for the opportunities that do exist.
- ▶ Flexibility is important. Shifts in the labor market, with some employers increasing hiring with others decreasing, may result in the need to shift the types of jobs individuals are focused on. Compromises may need to be made in terms of the type of job they are willing to take, hours, and pay.
- ▶ Looking for a job is a job in itself, and this environment requires even more persistence than usual. It may take many hours of job hunting, over weeks or months, to find an appropriate position. Jobs can also open up unexpectedly. Opportunities can appear any time, which will be found through ongoing persistence.
- ▶ Job interviews are more likely to be conducted by phone and video, so it is important to develop skills in being interviewed in that way.
- ▶ Job seekers should have interview questions prepared about how the business is operating during the pandemic in terms of protecting the health and safety of employees.
- ▶ For visits to workplaces, the job seeker will likely need to wear personal protective equipment such as face coverings and practice physical distancing.
- ▶ Consider ways to use the time while not working to improve skills, including through online video instruction and courses, and getting industry-recognized credentials.
- ▶ The economy will eventually improve. Even if employment opportunities are limited now, it is important to maintain skills and interests and to prepare for when more jobs are available.

Working with Businesses Remotely

As a result of the pandemic, meeting and working with businesses in person may not be possible. This means you'll have to become skilled at contacting and meeting with employers remotely.

Identify methods for outreach to businesses.

Determine the best way to outreach to businesses remotely, such as text, email, social media, or phone, and become adept at each.

Become skilled at conducting video meetings.

Become skilled at conducting meetings with employers by video (and work with job seekers to do the same). Coming across professionally on platforms such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, and WebEx is important in creating a positive perception. Use of video can also be much more effective in terms of engaging employers than voice only.

PREPARING FOR VIDEO MEETINGS

- Find out from businesses what platforms they use and are comfortable with.
- Become highly familiar with the video platform you are using. Budget time to try out its various controls and features.
- Check your camera set-up and lighting. Position your camera directly in front of you, not too high and not too low. And make sure your lighting is good. The light should come at you, not from behind you.
- Test your sound with a coworker or friend. If possible, use headphones or a lavalier mic to ensure quality sound that isn't echoey while helping avoid outside noise.
- Have a background that looks professional (solid colors are best).
- Ensure that you have a stable internet connection.
- Dress professionally for meetings.
- Conduct meetings from a space that is quiet and where you will not be interrupted.
- Prior to meetings, make sure you have the correct links and passwords written down, pulled up on your laptop, or visible on your phone for easy access.
- Just before meetings start, place your phone in silent mode and close all windows on your computer that you are not using.

DURING VIDEO MEETINGS

- If using an online link, log on 5 minutes early to make sure you can connect.
- Use best practices for meetings: an atmosphere of inquiry, asking questions, responding to identified needs, and having and sticking to an agenda.
- Remember that a majority of communication is non-verbal. Look directly at the camera (this makes it appear that you are looking other participants in the eye). When listening, nod and smile to show you are engaged. Use hand gestures as appropriate to emphasize points. Be aware of your body language (facial reactions, avoiding looking distracted, etc.), which can be even more apparent on video.
- Take advantage of the features of the platform. For example, you might share your screen to display resumes, PowerPoint slides, or videos of people working. You can also share websites such as [Project Earn](#) and the [Job Accommodation Network](#).
- If appropriate, have job seekers join you during the meeting for an initial introduction, with a formal interview to follow at a later date.
- A typical core activity of meeting with employers is taking a tour of the business. That is not easily accomplished remotely. However, the employer may be willing to share pictures or video of the business online, or even to give you a live tour by walking around with a camera.

To ensure effective video meetings with employers, practice with coworkers, family members, and friends, and offer recommendations for improvement (*"That window behind you is making it hard for me to see your face. Could you move so the light is coming from in front of you?"*).

Identify options for post-placement supports.

During employer meetings, discuss options for providing post-placement supports during the pandemic.

- ▶ Whether the business will allow job coaches to be on site.
- ▶ If job coaches are allowed on site, what the protocol is.
- ▶ How your organization can provide supports to individuals remotely (phone, video chat, etc.), and what would work best with that specific employer.

[See other publications in this series](#) for further information on providing supports to individuals who are working, and provision of employer supports remotely.

RESOURCES

Tax Incentives for Employers

- ▶ [Information on the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and the Disabled Access Credit](#)

PASS Plans and Other Work Incentives

- ▶ [Information from the Social Security Administration](#)
- ▶ [Information from the Ticket to Work Program](#)

Job Development and Employer Resources

- ▶ [EARN - Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Inclusion](#)
- ▶ [Employment First Massachusetts](#) – Variety of information from ICI and links to additional resources on best practices in job development
- ▶ ICI Publication: [Employment Advisory Boards: The Ultimate Community Resource](#)

Video Resumes

- ▶ Information from [Able Opportunities, Inc.](#)
- ▶ [Tips for Creating a Video Resume \(and When You Need One\)](#) (Balance Careers)

Reference

Galloway, C. (1982). Employers as partners: A guide to negotiating jobs for people with disabilities. Edmark Corporation.

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