

How to Recruit Candidates for Your Employment Support Professional Positions

By Patricia K. Keul

In 1991 I co-authored an article with Teresa A. Grossi and David W. Test on strategies for hiring and training employment specialists that was published in the Journal of Rehabilitation. Over twenty years later providers of supported and customized employment services still grapple with many of the same issues on how to recruit, interview and hire effective employment support professionals (ESPs). In that first article my colleagues and I focused on the job responsibilities of the ESP (who were called employment specialists or job coaches at that time) and on designing interview questions that address specific job duties required of ESPs. We recommended writing a job description and citing the essential elements of the job description in advertisements and recruitment postings.

We suggested that interview questions be framed to explain the hours of work required (for example that nights and weekends are required). We also stressed that final candidates should be vetted in group interviews conducted with the team of ESPs. Now many years later, I still believe in the importance of using group interviews to validate that potential candidates will embrace the values of your employment services and will in turn become good team members to your existing employment staff.

Clearly it is important that job candidates understand the responsibilities of the ESP and that they embrace these duties. Simply knowing what the job requires does not assure that the candidate you hire will perform well in the new role with your agency. With ever increasing demands of the work force and a difficult economy in which to navigate it is more important than ever, that the candidates you hire come equipped with the “right stuff” to be effective in the role of ESP. The focus of this white paper is recruitment and to improve your recruitment strategies to secure a larger pool of better qualified job candidates for your open positions in your employment services.

Before Recruitment- Understand what you are looking for:

Central to hiring the right person for the job is a complete understanding of the job you need done. Simple as this seems, many providers have not taken the time to really analyze the role of the ESP as a distinct job requiring unique skills and attributes. Often, day support staff or residential staff are “promoted” or moved laterally into the ESP role because their provider-employer believes that the skill sets these professionals exhibited in the day program or residential setting are the same skills that will be valued in the role of the ESP. Usually these “valued skill-sets” include: a good work history with the provider, understanding of the organization's work culture and procedures, and experience with the individuals that the staff will be supporting to find jobs.

While there is nothing wrong with these skill sets, they may not be the most critical qualities of successful ESPs. By themselves, these attributes will not assure success in negotiating and finding jobs in the community or in analyzing and thinking creatively about matching individuals to jobs or creating or carving customized job matches. In addition, experience training and supporting individuals in the residential program or day habilitation center is not analogous to the training challenges ESPs will encounter in competitive jobs with non-disabled co-workers and the general public present. Before recruiting for an ESP provider-employers need to answer these questions.

- What do we know (from prior experience or research) about effective ESPs?
- What are the qualities or attributes that effective ESPs have in common?
- What are professional requirements (degrees, training, licensure, etc.) required for the funding agency for this position?
- How can we design a recruitment strategy and activities that will help us net job candidates with these qualities?

Answering these questions will likely result in a more comprehensive list of attributes and abilities that are shared by most successful ESPs. Recruitment efforts need to address the critical skills and attributes that successful employment specialists embody. These include:

- Sales and negotiation skills needed to land jobs in your local community;
- Creativity and flexibility to collaborate with employers on customized job supports and strategies;
- Clinical skills needed to deliver on-the-job training supports that result in competitive quality and production standards while supervisors, co-workers and the general public are present;
- Belief in value that individuals with substantial disabilities bring to the work force;
- Optimism and the willingness to persevere in the face of obstacles (during the job search or in supporting individual's in challenging job situations.)

Using the answers to the questions previously listed and the attributes cited above, your agency could design a recruitment statement that is targeted to reach the desired candidates. Make sure when you write your recruitment statement that you include the required work hours, work conditions, along with the skills, attributes and professional credentials required. Whether you use the entire statement in recruitment ads or not, the statement will help guide your recruitment efforts and provide a metric with which to measure potential candidates.

Recruitment Strategies:

Gone are the days when provider-employers could place an ad in the local newspaper and for relatively low cost, gain a sufficient number of responses. The cost of classified ads in many markets is no longer affordable. Responses from a younger, more technology-savvy work-force may be will be greater using Internet employment postings versus print venues. Posting all job openings on your agency WEB site is one way to increase traffic to your site and also increase your recruitment pool. A WEB recruitment strategy should include a general posting to encourage respondents to submit inquiries before openings are announced as well a specific posting of current job openings.

Direct recruitment from local university and college programs in special education, psychology, social services, human services and rehabilitation through the degree program as well as through the career placement center is one way to gain access to qualified candidates with advanced training. Whereas, direct recruitment from the local community college system may net qualified candidates who are entry level or are seeking a career change. Other traditional recruitment venues include the local EEOC or Workforce Development Career Centers.

Provider-employers may also consider non-traditional approaches to getting the word out about job opportunities in employment programs. These include posting ads (with the employer's permission) in local business bulletin boards in stores or business sites or electronic bulletin boards. Another strategy to consider is to offer a cash stipend to current employees who refer candidates for hire to your agency. A smaller cash award may be presented when the initial referral results in a job interview and a larger award may be given when a job is offered to the candidate referred by a co-worker. Or one cash award may be offered just when a job offer is made to a candidate referred by a current employee.

Recruitment efforts with the businesses and employers where the provider-employer had placed individuals in supported employment may succeed in surprising ways. The college graduate with a bachelor's degree or even a two-year associates degree may have many other job offers to consider initially or may leave for a better offer soon after gaining experience as an ESP. Whereas, individuals working in competitive industry such as retail, fast food service, manufacturing may possess the desired attributes to the job, however may not have the formal education to be recruited away from

the ESP role and my retain the job longer. In addition, candidates who have experience in competitive industry may bring unique insights about the needs of employers and may be especially proficient in developing jobs and making job site accommodations that meet the needs of employers and employees with disabilities. Make certain that if your agency recruits from your employer base that you have permission to do so from the owners or supervisors of the business to avoid misunderstandings or conflicts of interest with your employers. Membership and presentations to local Rotary Clubs, your local Chamber of Commerce and other civic groups might be a better venue for finding non-traditional employees for your supported and customized employment services.

Recruitment is an On-Going Task:

Turnover in entry-level positions is a reality that all agencies must face. In addition, turnover is greater in positions that are more demanding with respect to working conditions, stress and stamina requirements. Anyone who spends a day with an effective ESP will quickly come away from the experience with renewed respect for the physical and psychological stamina it requires to be flexible, creative, optimistic, and technically skilled simultaneously in all the different work environments ESPs enter every day.

Implementing an “on-again-off again” recruitment strategy wastes valuable time and resources and fails to secure the steady stream of candidates most organizations need for ongoing recruitment for high turnover positions. Running a classified ad in the local newspaper on an ongoing basis is too costly, many electronic employment sites are low cost or free. In addition, using an incentive based referral program may result in a steady stream of candidate referrals with the side benefit of increasing the engagement of current staff in shaping the work force of your organization.

In conclusion, recruitment is a process that your agency needs to address as an on-going task to realize greatest benefits for your efforts. Visit the NCAPSE WEB site for tips on conducting interviews for your job openings in supported employment listed in the white papers section of the WEB site.

References & Additional Resources:

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