



EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING REPORTER

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ETR 5/18/20, p. 426 (Courtesy reprint for Robbin and Associates)

Core Services

REEMPLOYMENT COUNSELING COULD CONSIDER HEALTH RISKS

When America returns from the coronavirus shutdowns to business at a broader scale, frontline workforce development professionals, managers and jobseekers themselves will face new job search and reemployment considerations, such as personal health and stress management. A consultant and trainer shares ideas for coping in the coming months.

Larry Robbin, executive director of Robbin and Associates, offered insights for employment and training professionals on returning from the coronavirus pandemic. He discussed the outlooks for the field with ETR a few hours after the Bureau of Labor Statistics released its April Employment Situation report showing that payroll employment fell by 20.5 million and the unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent.

Across the country at the time, many if not most American Job Centers remained physically shuttered, with agencies offering counseling by phone, web-based job search workshops and even online job fairs.

Before the social distancing shutdowns, the workforce development system had been in a period of declining enrollment due to the strong economy. Now, a tidal wave of jobseekers are expected to seek in-person services, once they become available.

Returning to Work

For some, the return to work will be a simple matter of following their employer's recall. For others, their jobs may not come back. And some jobseekers may not be in a position to return to the jobs they held before. Workers with jobs that pose high levels of contact with other people, who have compromised immune systems (or those with household members who have such conditions), may reconsider returning.

Suddenly, decisions are more complicated.

"My framework for all of this is to talk about it as a collective trauma," Robbin said.

Workforce development program staffers are often the "first responders" seeing dislocated workers and other jobseekers. And many customers of the

workforce development system are under-informed about matters such as the local job market, public health and their employment rights, he said.

Robbin suggested that workforce agencies and staff incorporate new considerations in their work to both assist in the reemployment of, and to help protect jobseekers.

Case managers and counselors might take a quick health and safety check with jobseekers. Robbin suggested asking if they know how the coronavirus is transmitted, recognize common symptoms and understand what it means to be asymptomatic; if they understand social distancing; and if they have access to face masks. Jobseekers' answers to these questions should provide a sense of how aware and prepared they are to return to work. Some people may need more in-depth follow-up. Do they know where to seek medical attention if they become sick, or how to get food, prescription medications or care for their children?

This can fold in to more traditional job search discussions.

"Our employment counseling has to involve helping people understand the risk and rewards and work out what is best for them. That's going to look different from individual to individual," Robbin said.

The entry-level job market offers differing levels of risk. A night shift security guard position will likely have low levels of regular contact with the public, lowering risk from the disease. For a hospital orderly position, the opposite is true. But a hospital position may offer better wages and benefits and opportunities for advancement, Robbin explained. While these are decisions that jobseekers need to make for themselves, workforce development professionals can help by encouraging their clients to consider the risks and rewards.

Staged Job Search

Some jobseekers might consider a staged job search strategy, seeking a new job in the immediate future that best matches their health risks, with a plan to keep watching the job market and pursue better opportunities as public health conditions improve.

"This isn't a one-time decision. It is something that can evolve over time," Robbin said, adding that we may be entering a period of job and labor market

turmoil that makes it prudent to put aside traditional career pathway thinking and planning.

“Stop thinking of linear progress ... Always be thinking of where the next streets are coming up, the next intersections, so you can pivot,” he said.

Counselors and case managers could also help jobseekers with work-related personal wellness planning. A counselor might ask a jobseekers to think about what work they will do in new jobs and consider steps to protect themselves from contracting the virus. Partner organizations with better expertise in workplace health and safety could contribute, particularly for agencies that mainly place workers in specific sectors.

Meanwhile, workforce development agencies will need to consider their own infrastructure, staffing and human needs. While Congress increased funding for Dislocated Worker Grants, and the Employment and Training Administration is awarding this money to states, there is no certainty in Washington of further increases in formula funding for the core workforce development programs. And, many states and their local areas face reduced Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act allocations for the upcoming program year due to shifts caused by funding formulas (ETR 5/4/20, p. 404).

Innovative Group Work

“We are shifting from an era where we talked about case management to one where we will talk about caseload management,” Robbin said, suggesting that one way for agencies to handle an increased customer caseload is through “innovative group work.”

Think about organizing job search and networking groups based on demographics, occupations and sectors, and consider whether these groups can be facilitated over virtual meeting technologies, such as Zoom, he recommended. Of course, another concern to remember is that many customer groups face technological and digital literacy barriers to accessing virtual services.

Robbin recommended that workforce development workers become “trauma-aware” and urged program directors to learn more about trauma-informed care. If agencies have an opportunity to in-

crease their staffing, he suggested hiring people who display resilience. In managing a dislocated worker program years ago, Robbin recalled hiring a case manager who had served as a medic in the Vietnam War.

Trauma-Informed Practice

From a management perspective, striking the right balance between displaying a forward-looking outlook and acknowledging the realities of the stressful situation is a difficult but key leadership task. Robbin recalled trying to learn this as a program manager in the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which is perhaps best remembered for the collapse of the Nimitz Freeway in Oakland, Calif., and disruption of a World Series game between the San Francisco Giants and Oakland Athletics.

He suggested that program administrators consider establishing staff-management wellness committees and urged managers to validate the work that frontline staff put in with jobseekers.

Facing economic reopening as well and uncertain and changing job markets, workforce development agencies will need to move forward nimbly, he added.

Consumer products manufacturing and development, particularly in electronics, has been moving from lengthy research and development periods prior to product launch to a model that moves from research and development to launch and then to ongoing review and decisions to refine, abandon or replace products. Workforce development agency may need to speed up their initial implementation of strategies and initiatives, but be ready to change again as needed.

“We have to finally admit that we are in chaos. We don’t know how long chaos will last, or what the next cause of chaos will be. How do you plan for chaos? You do a certain amount of research. You do a certain amount of planning. You launch. But you stay nimble,” Robbin said.

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ETR is published by: MII Publications, P.O. Box 912, College Park, MD. 20741.

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