



Replication Document
for the
Grays Harbor
Employers' Assistance
Project (EAP)

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INTRODUCTION

The workforce system has historically been driven by the dynamics of the supply side, namely, the job seeker. This one-sided focus clearly ignored the demand side, the employers. In July 1999, the Pacific Mountain Private Industry Council (replaced in July 2000 by the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council) in Olympia, Washington took a bold step to shift this paradigm by initiating a pilot project in Thurston County focused on elevating employers to be the primary customer on a project designed to place Welfare-to-Work job seekers.

The concept was simple. If you can meet and maintain the workforce needs of an employer (the demand side) the job seeker (supply side) would be the beneficiary. In partnership with the Thurston County Economic Development Council, Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council (Pacific Mountain) initiated a pilot project designed to support the needs of local employers while promoting the employability of the hardest-to-serve job seeker — job seekers who had received welfare assistance for 30 or more months.

Based on the experiences of the original Thurston County pilot project, in early 2000, Pacific Mountain initiated a second project in neighboring Grays Harbor County, with the Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce. Now in its third year, the Grays Harbor Employer Assistance Project has evolved into a national award-winning model for services to business. This paper documents the evolution.

NARRATIVE

Build the “Demand Side” to Increase Performance

In an effort to expand the workforce penetration into the business community, Pacific Mountain developed this non-traditional model and contracted with a business organization to represent the workforce system to employers. It capitalized on the business organization's credibility with the business community and has completely changed the mindset that workforce programs are the function of the seasoned employment and training professionals.

The Grays Harbor Employer Assistance Project is an innovative partnership between Pacific Mountain, the Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce, and WorkSource Grays Harbor (one-stop system). The project's business representatives and partner staff joined forces to focus on the needs of employers for dependable workers and the need of workers for a job – again, a simple concept. The major paradigm shift, however, occurs because the project, unlike traditional workforce programs focuses on the employers’ needs and sustaining the employer relationship beyond hire.

Prior to this project, the Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce had on-going workforce development goals that ran parallel to the social service agencies in the community. The Chamber was never integrated into the workforce system because the workforce system was focused on the “supply side” of the workforce equation.

The Grays Harbor Employer Assistance Project (EAP) was able to change that perspective and the way business was done between employers and social service agencies by initiating a full partnership between the workforce community and a business organization. The ease with which the Chamber wove this project into the community’s social service agencies to include and serve the appropriate job seekers gives testimony to the need to do things differently. The Chamber has always served the business community, now the entire community benefits from their active leadership in workforce issues.

During the project's planning stages, the Chamber worked closely with the Local Planning Area in Grays Harbor, which is made up of the Executive Council (The community's public/private leadership, and the Consortium which includes all community partners and front line staff). The members of both committees were able to work through the paradigm shift and accept an innovative approach to work with business while addressing their own concerns.

Strong private/public leadership was required in order for a business organization to cross agency boundaries and provide a flexible model of securing employer commitment. As one partner put it, “this is the piece that brings us all together”.

An unprecedented local partnership made the EAP a resounding success in its’ first year of operation, as it became the workforce system’s single point of contact to the business community in Grays Harbor. In July of 2001 the EAP contracted with the Washington State U.I. Claimant Placement Project to serve the most difficult to place claimants. The project focused remained

the same — **Business is the primary customer.** While maintaining their focus on supporting business, they developed strategies to serve the hard to employ job seeker.

By securing employer commitment and full cooperation of all workforce agencies and community partners, the stage was set to achieve their mutual goals. They view the following positive results as a reflection of their joint efforts.

EAP Cumulative Performance

	1st Year	2nd Year
Number of Businesses Registered	135	222
Number of Hires	207	688
Average Wage	\$7.33	\$9.34
Job Retention	80.36%	80.89%
UI Claimant Placement Program (through June 30)		60
Number of Hires		74 *
Job Retention		100%
Grays Harbor County Unemployment Rate		9.5%

**The EAP had expected to place a minimum of 60 job seekers in jobs, however, they were able to exceed that expectation.*

EAP 2001 Awards

February	National Association of Workforce Boards Grand Prize for Outstanding Rural Employment and Training Program
June	John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University awarded the Grays Harbor WorkSource, a One-Stop Innovator for the Employers Assistance Project
September	Washington State Workforce Training and Coordinating Board awarded the Employers Assistance Project for Public/Private Partnership Leadership Award.

Designing a Project For a Rural Community

The following information was gathered from surveys, interviews, reports, awards, and statistics of the project staff, coordinator, administrators, developers, employers, and technical support.

Project Hypothesis — The better you serve the business customer, the better you serve your job seeker customer. As employers are encouraged to hire a population with multiple barriers to employment, a strong collaboration between the business community and social

service agencies is essential. The transition to work is quite often stressful and fraught with challenges for the job seeker. In this operating environment, the employer, who is now asked to take on the job seeker identified as the hardest to serve, needs (or can benefit from) a support system for hiring and retaining Welfare-to-Work job seekers.

Project Design — Historically, the Chamber of Commerce has been fully involved in business development activities. The Grays Harbor community has experienced a significant downturn in the economy with the closing of lumber mills and subsequent loss of the fishing industry. This situation has required all community organizations to come together to revive the economy. Business and social service partnerships were forged during that revival effort. Lines of communications between the two were established and open before the establishment of the EAP, however, all entities retained their familiar roles.

The introduction of the EAP was a first in this community. When initially presented as an additional component of the state's Welfare-to-Work program, some social service providers were concerned that the EAP might be taking over some of their turf. While none of these providers served employers as the EAP planned to do, some programs initially felt threatened. In the early phases of the EAP, the Chamber continued to focus on the message that the "business was the primary customer" to emphasize how the EAP was staking out new territory (versus treading on established territory). Many sessions were held to reassure community partners that the project's mission was to assist employers in hiring and retaining their newly employed workers, in conjunction and collaboration with all current community providers of service to job seekers.

The project flow is very direct, providing a quick response to employers, while working collaboratively with partner agencies. The Business Representative recruits local businesses that have or foresee having a job opening. The business is registered in the WebMatch database. Case managers complete the job seeker's registration and give it to the Client Liaison who confirms job readiness and registers the job seeker into the WebMatch database. Prior to hiring, the Business Representative meets with the business to provide information on specific training, tax credits, and support services available to a respective hire. When the business is ready to hire, the Business Representative uses the WebMatch database to match the employer's skill criteria to the job seekers' current accurately reflected skill levels. The matches are referred to the employer who then chooses whether or not to interview. Employers are never pressured to interview job seekers that do not have the necessary skills for the job. Following the interview process, the employer contacts the Business Representative if a referred job seeker is hired. The Business Representative remains the business's one point of contact for all their support of the new hire. The case manager and/or the Client Liaison continues to work with the new hire.

Administrators and staff of this project believe the initial key to successful job retention, which is so important to both the employer and employee, starts with a successful hire. To achieve that, the emphasis on pre-hire and ready to hire activities is critical. Prior to any of these activities, the job seeker has been determined job ready by the case manager. The EAP started serving U.I. Claimant Placement Program job seekers in September of 2001. When working with this new

population, job seekers work directly with the Client Liaison who determines job readiness. The projects implementation process is laid out as follows:

<p>Pre-Hire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The employer is contacted through marketing efforts of the business partner or the Business Representative. ● Employer enrolls in project through the Business Representative. ● Employer identifies skills and experience desired in open positions. ● Business Representative enters business and open positions in the employer database.
<p>Ready To Hire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employer calls single point of contact (EAP) for job seeker database referrals ● Business Representative searches job seeker database for referrals. ● Business Representative confirms the job seeker's availability with the case manager and the job seeker and makes the referral to the employer within 24 hours. ● Employer calls referred job seekers for interviews.
<p>The Hire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employer confirms selection and start date with Business Representative ● Business Representative makes contact with employer within 24 hours of hire and completes any on-the-job training contract and tax incentive or other forms if requested. ● Business Representative then notifies case manager of hire and answers questions. ● Business Representative enters hire in both employer and job seeker database. ● Business Representative continues to work with employer to provide support for retention, problem-solving, and identifying possible areas of concern or support services needed by the new employee. All support service requests are referred to the Client Liaison. ● Client Liaison contacts case manager and follows up to insure needed support services are provided.

Project Staffing — The President of the Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce manages the project and is compensated for 5% of his time (although more than 5% of his time has been used in support of this project).

Other staff includes two Business Representatives and a Client Liaison. Business representatives have experience in administration, sales, and have knowledge of the social service community. All staff were interviewed and selected by Chamber of Commerce board members.

The Client Liaison, a drug and alcohol counselor, was loaned from the Grays Harbor Career Transition Center (a WorkSource partner). The staff had an excellent reputation for getting things done while being sensitive to the needs of all parties. All three employees were already known and respected in the community based on previous work and volunteer experience.

Ideal Staff Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strong customer service ● Sales experience selling concepts or people as product rather than material products. ● Marketing strengths. ● Leadership qualities ● Working knowledge and experience with the local business and social sector ● Well-developed trust with community leaders/business.
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Ideal Staff Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to let businesses define their needs and establish how they need things done. ● Ability to personalize services to the needs of individual businesses. ● Ability to interact with both business and job seekers. ● Excellent communication skills. ● Flexible. ● Computer literate.
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As the workload increased, due to the number of employers and job seekers registered, an intern position was created to maintain records and perform a variety of general office duties. This position was filled by a registered job seeker and used as an introduction to work expectations.

WebMatch Database — An effective matching system is critical to the success of the project. Retention is strongly influenced by the accuracy of the referrals. Employers can quickly lose faith in a system that provides inappropriate referrals. The WebMatch database, developed by Pacific Mountain’s administrative staff, has won the support of project staff and employers as exceptionally accurate when matching skills with job requirements.

If the employer is interested, the WebMatch can also search for a near match. A near match would be a job seeker who appears to have the required ability for a particular job, but is not a 100% match (e.g. low math skills). If that job seeker is hired (and that has happened) the Business Representative would help the employer with training options.

All partner staff can refer job ready job seekers. And, in order to meet the business hiring needs, a priority of service was established for job seeker referral. Limited funding was provided to serve job seekers other than welfare referrals.

The database match identifies the welfare job seeker first. If a match is not made with the welfare job seekers, it continues searching the database to include in the following order; low-income adults and dislocated workers. The highest percentage (89%) of hires came from the Welfare-to-Work referrals.

The WebMatch database is unique from most programs. It was designed to serve the business customer, and matches specific hard and soft skills that the employer needs in their workers to the job seeker registration.

The employer database includes:

- Employer contact information
- Brief description of employer, business, processes, products and positions available
- Assessment of desirable skills needed for the available position

The job seeker database includes:

- Job seeker information
- Skills and experience
- Employment goals

Employers accepted this simple “techie” tool because it puts them in charge of whom they interview based on an assessment of job ready skills that they have agreed on.

The job seeker database information is gathered by case managers in the social service agencies and submitted to the Client Liaison to be entered into the database. The Client Liaison position is critical in this process. He/she assists with the timely and accurate gathering of job seeker referrals. The referral process is only as good as the accuracy of the database.

Database Guidelines

- Develop, adopt or adapt tools that serve your business customer.

The following sample employer and job seeker registration forms can be adapted to reflect sector industries, or a business with specific needs:

EMPLOYERS/JOB SEEKERS DATABASE
EMPLOYER REGISTRATION

EMPLOYER INFORMATION				
COMPANY NAME	FED. I.D. #	ADDRESS	PHONE	CONTACT

Position Title: _____ **Wages:** _____

Does your company offer health benefits? Yes No **If yes, when:** _____

Please rate the job readiness skills required for the entry-level position you are entering in the database.

- 1 = not required, but good to have*
- 2 = partially skilled, employer will train*
- 3 = entry level skills required*

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>_____ Willingness to Learn</p> <p>_____ Listening/Understanding</p> <p>_____ Accepting Responsibility</p> <p>_____ Completing Tasks</p> <p>_____ Meeting Deadlines</p> <p>_____ Attention to Details</p> <p>_____ Word Processing</p> <p>_____ Data Entry</p> <p>_____ Spreadsheets</p> <p>_____ Outdoor Work</p> <p>_____ Physical Stamina</p> | <p>_____ Lifting, Balancing, Moving</p> <p>_____ Teamwork</p> <p>_____ Verbal Communication</p> <p>_____ Organizing Records (<i>classifying, filing, processing</i>)</p> <p>_____ Writing Reports, Letters, Memos</p> <p>_____ Customer Service</p> <p>_____ Following Through</p> <p>_____ Precision Work</p> <p>_____ Using Tools</p> <p>_____ Operating Equipment</p> <p>_____ Assembling/Installing</p> |
|--|---|

Basic Skills Required for Position

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| _____ Reading (<i>grade level</i>) | _____ Basic Math (<i>grade level</i>) |
| _____ High school diploma/GED | _____ Valid Drivers License |

Type of Work: _____

Comments (*special requirements*): _____

Does this position require shift work? Yes No

If so, which shift(s)? Day Swing Graveyard

Is this position for full-time employment (32 + hrs./wk.)? Yes No

If no, what would be the average weekly hours? _____

EMPLOYERS/JOB SEEKERS DATA BASE
JOB SEEKER REGISTRATION

- WTW
- WIA
- Other

JOB SEEKER INFORMATION			CASE MANAGER INFORMATION		
NAME	S.S.#	PHONE	OFFICE	NAME	PHONE
(City)					

Please rate the marketable skills of the job seeker you are entering in the database.

- 1 = minimum or no skills*
- 2 = partially skilled, will require supervisory instruction*
- 3 = has training or work related skill*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> _____ Willingness to Learn _____ Listening/Understanding _____ Accepting Responsibility _____ Completing Tasks _____ Meeting Deadlines _____ Attention to Details _____ Word Processing _____ Data Entry _____ Spreadsheets _____ Outdoor Work _____ Physical Stamina | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> _____ Lifting, Balancing, Moving _____ Teamwork _____ Verbal Communication _____ Organizing Records (<i>classifying, filing, processing</i>) _____ Writing Reports, Letters, Memos _____ Customer Service _____ Following Through _____ Precision Work _____ Using Tools _____ Operating Equipment _____ Assembling/Installing |
|---|--|

Job Seekers' Basic Skills

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| _____ Reading (<i>grade level</i>) | _____ Basic Math (<i>grade level</i>) |
| _____ High school diploma/GED | _____ Valid Drivers License |

Present Work Activity:

- CJ Job Search WEX OJT Unsubsidized _____ Hrs/Week

Type of Work: _____

Comments (*general progress and attitude*): _____

Does the job seeker have any transportation issues? Yes No

If yes, please explain. _____

Is job seeker available for shift work? Day Swing Graveyard

Is job seeker available for full-time employment (32 + hrs./wk.)? Yes No

Serving the Business Customer

Business Representatives visit businesses to make individual project presentations. An initial visit to a business involves listening to the customer's needs and concerns, identifying their current and future hiring needs and enrolling the business in the employer database. If the employer has an immediate job opening, the skills and experience needed are identified and the job opening is placed in the database.

Staff listens carefully to customer needs and responds promptly to requests for assistance. They tailor the response to how the customer wishes to do business. If referrals are preferred by e-mail, FAX or in person, the request is followed.

The database is searched for an appropriate match. The match is carefully chosen to insure that it meets all the customer needs. The referral is verified as appropriate by calling the job seeker to determine their interest and desire to be referred to this job opening. This insures that when the business customer receives the referral, all information is valid and the job seeker meets their stated criteria. It is the business choice and responsibility to contact, interview and make the hiring choice.

The willingness to do whatever it takes to serve the employer as the primary customer is the major focus in all operations. The staff operate with a business mentality, and take pride in offering outstanding customer service. Within 24 hours after a new employee begins to work, the Business Representative contacts the business to insure that all is well. Another contact is made again within two weeks or at any time the business requests assistance. This level of customer service is in itself a good marketing tool.

Staff remains consistent in operating like a business with a business focus: including working earlier hours, daily and weekly goal setting and quick response to business needs. Job seekers who "drop in" for assistance are immediately referred to their service provider, the partner agency case managers. A business service at a social service location provides staff with unique challenges in maintaining their focus to serve business.

"Business is our Business" is the project model and cornerstone of the project focus. "I want them (business) to know they can trust me to send them quality referrals who have the skills they want for each job they have available" stated a project Business Representative.

Customer Service Guidelines — Develop a positive customer service reputation by:

- Contacting employers within 24 hours following a new hire

- Making another contact with employers within two weeks of a new hire
- Responding promptly when a customer requests assistance
- Sending notes of appreciation and congratulation for business participation and awards
- Maintain a willingness to do "whatever it takes to meet business needs"
- Tailor responses to requests to individual business preferences
- Be prepared for constant change with the ability to adapt daily

Business Leadership

The fact that the Chamber of Commerce spearheaded the project had positive effects on outcomes. The project was perceived as having a business perspective because the Chamber works on behalf of business interests. Project personnel have access to businesses in order to market the project.

The Grays Harbor Chamber has a very progressive executive team and a forward thinking board. The business leadership's clearly defined goals and mission for making the project work secured the partner's confidence and buy-in. This acceptance didn't happen overnight. However, over several months of planning it was clear the partners recognized the Chamber strengths and ultimately were comfortable with their role of working toward a collaborative system with the Chamber.

The EAP is fully recognized in the Chamber's mission statement "To make Grays Harbor a better place to live, visit and transact business."

EAP staff attends all Chamber activities including Business After Hours, Business Before Hours, board meetings and community events. This provides the staff with ready access to the business community and has contributed to their reputation as business people. The Chamber holds weekly EAP staff meetings and the staff attend weekly WorkSource (one-stop) meetings.

Although Chamber membership is not required to access the project, Chamber membership has increased with the project's exposure in the community. This is viewed as a win for the Chamber and a win for its membership.

Leadership requires risk takers with vision, influence, and credibility to achieve the outcomes of this project. They must have a strong commitment to both the business and the social service issues of the community. It takes time to educate both the business community and the community agencies to a new service delivery approach, and that requires the right messenger.

Leadership Guidelines

- Experienced at reaching goals
- Ability to effectively communicate the vision, values, and strategy so staff and partners can incorporate them into their work activities
- Focused management, but not a micro manager
- Retain the concept of business being the primary customer
- Leadership must be trusted and respected
- Flexible and open to change
- Ability to work with technical advisors from both business and social service community
- Willing to take a risk
- Encourages staff leadership

Partnerships

Other Community Partners — In addition to Pacific Mountain and the Chamber of Commerce as the major operational partners, the project couldn't succeed without the support and participation of the following WorkSource partners:

- Grays Harbor Career Transition Center
- Coastal Community Action Council Community Jobs
- Educational Service District #113 (2 offices)
- Employment Security
- Grays Harbor College
- Grays Harbor Economic Development Council
- Harbor Against Substance Abuse (HASA)
- Pacific Mountain Job Development and Training Department
- Quinault Indian Nation
- SCA Pacific
- State Division of Child Support
- State Division of Social and Health Services (WorkFirst/Welfare-to-Work)
- State Veteran Services
- State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Vocations Unlimited/Goodwill Industries
- Work Opportunity Recruitment Company (WORC)

These partners were invited to discuss the EAP project development at community wide meetings prior to the official project startup. Planning occurred over a period of four months.

The Grays Harbor Career Transition Center provided the staff for the Client Liaison position. Working with over 60 case managers, the Client Liaison provided a valuable link to existing community programs that would provide the referrals for the job seeker database.

Partners who were involved from the start in the planning were committed to the project's success. They agreed to enter their job-ready job seekers in the database and be available to provide job retention resources in a timely manner. Program staff from all partners understood the complimentary nature of the programs. Planning meetings allowed plenty of time for all issues to be discussed, concerns to be addressed, and the cooperative nature of the project to be fully developed. As a result, a partnership was developed to refer job seekers, and lines of communication were established that allowed job seeker support services to occur promptly.

Within a year, the EAP moved to co-locate with the WorkSource (one-stop) to be more clearly seen as a participating partner in the workforce system. The move facilitated easier communication with case managers for referrals to the job seeker database and support services for new hires. The WorkSource, which has historically served the job seeker, requires the EAP staff to reinforce how their customer base is different from the other service providers. The staff posted a runner with "Business is Our Business" around the entire EAP office space within the WorkSource. It has been very important to remind partners' staff why the EAP is there.

Partner Guidelines

- Understand that employer needs drive the work of the Employer Assistance Project
- Take the time to plan
- Without partners, you will not have performance
- Don't let status quo mentality prevail. Change happens by recognizing the value of a good idea.
- Give all partners time to accept the change
- Identify your business community needs
- Never get comfortable
- Know your business neighbors
- Maintain the focus on meeting business needs

Job Retention

The referral and subsequent hiring of the right person for the job is the number one job retention guarantee. The business representative focuses on the employer needs, uses the database to

match employer needs to job seeker skills, and verifies with the job seeker whether they are interested in interviewing for the available position. Verification with the job seeker prior to referral insures that the employer's time in scheduling interviews and offering employment is worthwhile. This process sets the stage for the employer to retain that employee. These pre-hire steps are critical and rewarding.

EAP staff provide retention services to the employer in the form of intervention or "whatever it takes to make it work". Case managers are notified and are ready to address problems that may arise. Although not always successful, intervention to prevent job loss was successful often enough to receive a positive evaluation from employers. Employers frequently try to address problems in traditional ways, rather than notifying staff for intervention. When project staff is notified of a problem, intervention is possible, which can increase job retention. Staff determined that frequent contact, both formal and casual provides the employer with an opportunity to address issues before they become serious.

Job Retention Guidelines

- Listen carefully to business hiring needs
- Identify the optimal match from the database
- Confirm job seeker interest in interviewing
- Notify case manager of job referral
- Offer job retention services to employers
- Verify single point of contact for all employer retention needs
- Contact the employer on the hire date, and one and two weeks later
- Confirm retention services in all conversations with the employer
- Contact the case manager to work with the employee immediately when retention concerns arise
- Provide regular follow-up with the employer to ensure all issues are addressed

Marketing

Staff attends all Chamber of Commerce functions to network and market the services to employers. They focus on discussing the individual business interests, hiring needs and retention issues rather than the project needs.

Project updates are regularly included in the Chamber President's column in the local newspaper and staff are invited to report on the project's progress at all Chamber board meetings.

With this level of business orientation, the staff has easy access to the employer community and opportunities to establish contact with those in need of hiring additional employees. In the first three months of operation, they contacted 100 businesses and enrolled 70. They continued to add an average of 6-10 new employers to the project database each month during the first year.

Marketing materials were developed that focus on serving the needs of the business community. Desirable outcomes were addressed from the employer point of view. A project brochure which outlines services, affiliations and community partners along with key contact data, effectively markets the project services. Even FAX cover sheets describe project services. Thank you letters were sent after initial visits and each job order.

The concept of business appreciating business was followed consistently. Before long, the business network was working and businesses began referring other community businesses to the project. Neighboring communities began to call for referrals.

Marketing Guidelines

- The most effective marketing is “one on one” customer service
- Develop materials which address business as the customer
- Add business functions to all printed materials sent to businesses including the business FAX referral sheets
- Use a variety of media available including newspaper, business showcases, etc.
- Attend all business partner functions with a focus on business needs rather than project needs

History

The evolution of the Thurston County Pilot Project — Welfare-to-Work created the opportunity to thoroughly examine the traditional approaches of serving the hard to employ. Administrators at Pacific Mountain set out to explore new partnerships with employers. In collaboration with the Thurston County Economic Development Council, Pacific Mountain sponsored two employer breakfasts to introduce the employer community to the complex issues involved in transitioning individuals from welfare to work. A simple matching tool was presented. Business showed a strong interest in the challenge. Based on their response, Pacific Mountain sought funding to initiate a project whose primary customer was the employer.

In July 1999, Pacific Mountain received one of four grants from the State of Washington Department of Trade and Economic Development, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, to

pilot an Employer Assistance Project (EAP) in Thurston County with a business partner (the Economic Development Council). Prior to this grant, no other programs existed solely to support employers hiring Welfare-to-Work job seekers. The EAP attempted to explore the best ways to serve business as a partner in Welfare-to-Work. Since then the EAP has been evaluated and documented by its project developers and independent evaluators.

Shifting the focus from job seeker to employer required a huge change, with conscious attention paid to how best to serve the primary customer - **the employer**.

The original pilot in Thurston County provided significant challenges. It was not always easy for a service provider who had traditionally served the job seeker to accept change, especially when they didn't initiate the project, or for a business organization to risk their reputation with their business customers.

The lessons learned came very quickly as the pilot project struggled with a delayed start, limited funding, and organizational procedures. Five months into the pilot, Pacific Mountain initiated a second project in Grays Harbor.

Challenges and lessons learned from the Thurston County pilot project

— The following remarks are taken from the independent evaluators report at the close of the Thurston County pilot project in June of 2000.

All project partners consistently and clearly identified project achievements, shortcomings and setbacks; yet none would characterize the project as a complete failure or success. The truth about the project is somewhere in between. Data collected in the final quarter demonstrate strong partnership commitment to the project's goals, yet partners continued to be hampered by ongoing deficiencies related to project startup, funding, and organization.

The following challenges continued to impact the implementation and coordination for the entire length of the pilot project.

- ✓ **Partners with different philosophies:** Both Pacific Mountain and the Economic Development Council administrators and staff admitted there was a disconnect between both organizations. Partners spoke confidently from their own areas of expertise and knowledge, but never consistently demonstrated an understanding of the other partner's perspective. The project was not able to develop the partnership to fully assimilate the needs of both organizations.
- ✓ **Staffing:** The EAP was understaffed from its inception, leaving some project elements that were critical to the project underserved. In addition, the lack of a project manager was a major handicap to the project's overall implementation and operation. Without that position to unify all partners, reminding and prodding them toward the project's goals, the partners continued to operate as separate

organizations and mindsets; committed to their own work, but increasingly difficult to communicate or empathize with the other.

- ✓ **Job matching: “WebMatch”** an effective matching system was developed for the project Eligible job seekers registered in the WebMatch database were matched to the registered employers skills criteria. Project partners at the beginning of the project identified the importance of caseworkers in selecting job seekers for the database, however caseworkers were not involved in the planning of the project and job seeker registration got off to a slow start. The job seeker flow was never established to the partner’s expectations and at the end of the project, a system of coordination with the case managers was still being defined.
- ✓ **Maintaining the vision:** It proved difficult to maintain the “demand side” business focus the delays in the project startup and implementation contributed to concern about the project’s ability to meet performance timelines. Employer/Job Seeker matching efforts were relaxed to meet the goals of the project, and what started out as “Demand side” (business focused) slipped back to “supply side” (job seeker focused). It was just easier
- ✓ **Roles and responsibility:** Roles were developed during the pilot that were not in the original proposal and overlapped responsibilities of other staff. Differences in personal style and project approach in the last quarter lead to increasing staff conflicts and project difficulties, and eroded any collaborative attempt to achieve project goals.
- ✓ **Job Readiness:** The quality of job seekers first enrolled in the project was uncertain at best. Several job seekers were prematurely or inappropriately enrolled at the beginning of the project. In spite of the fact that, as the project progressed, there was a clearer identification of job ready job seekers and their qualification, the early failures of the project to “match” employer needs was difficult to overcome.
- ✓ **Communications:** Be honest about your experience and disagreements. Despite its difficulties, this project maintained open communications. Issues were discussed without personal judgments.
- ✓ **Organization:** Projects require clear organizational structure and adequate staffing. This eliminates confusion. One agency assuming the coordination, hiring and supervision works best for ensuring that project roles are clearly defined and project goals are met. Sharing of these responsibilities proved to be ineffective. A paradigm shift requires clarity from the beginning so that the focus on service to the employer does not become diluted.

In spite of their experience, the majority of project partners believed that the goal of the model was worth sustaining.

Grays Harbor Project — It is important to note, that in this case, it took a strong commitment from the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council to go ahead with the Grays Harbor project. But it was seen as a necessary project shift to provide the means of collaboration between business and social service partners and worth the effort.

The lessons learned from the pilot project insured the success of the Grays Harbor Chamber. The honest communication in the pilot project left no doubt as to what the issues were. The Chambers success confirmed the following:

- Don't lose the "Demand Side" focus.
- Staff need to be co-located to facilitate collaboration and communications.
- Project staff need to be supervised by a business organization.
- Maintaining a single point of contact for business is appreciated by employers.
- A good hire is much more than a good placement - it's a good match.
- A good match is the best insurance of retention.
- A good match is the result of matching the employers' skill needs with the accurately reflected skills of the job seeker
- The database is only as good as the accurate and current data it contains.
- Businesses appreciate supportive services for employees struggling to retain their jobs.
- The Business Representative needs to stay clearly focused on employer needs and cannot effectively serve both employer and job seeker needs.
- A job seeker liaison position is needed to maintain communication with case managers, enroll and maintain job seeker information in the database, and insures that job seeker supportive services are provided.
- Open and collaborative communications with social service case managers results in timely referrals of job seekers to the database and access to retention resources for the new employee.
- Pre-Hire and Ready to Hire activities are key activities for job retention.
- Regular follow-up with employers helps to insure that all retention issues are addressed.
- Processes need to be simple and easy so that the project can respond quickly.
- Businesses define your (projects) success by how well you grow with meeting their needs.
- Businesses are hungry for an employer advocate.
- Job seekers must be job ready before they are entered into database.

Signs of Success in Grays Harbor — Some of the signs that the project is working for the business community include:

- Business now refers fellow businesses to the project
- Businesses express appreciation for taking into consideration their specific business needs
- Businesses return to the project for referrals for more than one job
- Job retention rates are good
- Media expresses interest in success stories
- Project business representatives are invited to business forums, job fairs, and business showcases by Rotary; Lions, Economic Development Council, etc.
- Businesses seek advice on hiring and retention needs
- Database of employers using the project increases on a regular basis
- Project is recognized with awards by business community
- Businesses adjust working conditions so employees can take care of barriers or issues that cannot be addressed after working hours

Signs the project is working for the partner social service community:

- Case managers promptly refer job ready job seekers and provide job seeker information updates on a regular basis.
- Case managers respond promptly to calls regarding retention issues
- Social service agencies understand and appreciate the need for project focus of the employer
- Welfare-to-Work programs' rate of employment for job seekers increases
- Partner agencies refer employers to the EAP, they have become the EAP's advocates with the business community
- “Territories” disappear

Additional signs that the Employer Assistance Project is successful in the Grays Harbor community:

- The project manager is called to the table to assist with employment issues at partner agencies.
- The project manager holds a position of esteem at the Local Area Planning Network (providers who plan and oversee resources for WtW/TANF).
- The project manager is able to communicate employer needs to the greater social service community.

- Over 600 employers enrolled in the first two years of operations.
- 82% employment retention rate.

Funding

The Thurston County pilot project was under-funded. The amount requested was based on serving a small number of employers, and the support the project needed was not anticipated. Halfway through the project additional funds were received for the business partner's marketing representative. However, this position came too late to be effective.

The Grays Harbor project funding has been tenuous to say the least. The project was initially funded for only three months. Since that time, it has received short-term funding (ranging from one to six months in duration each time) from a variety of sources. Due to the phenomenal success of the Grays Harbor project, Pacific Mountain continues to be committed to obtaining both short and long-term funding for this project.

Adaptations

This project model has been modified for use in Grays Harbor by the Chamber to include the local Washington State Unemployment Insurance Job seeker Claimant Project. It has been very successful in serving individuals receiving U.I. benefits and to date, the number of hires far exceeded plan goals with a 100% retention rate.

It is also being designed to work with adults with disabilities, and youth with disabilities transition out of High school.

Regardless of any adaptations, the project principles remain the same – **Business is the primary customer.**

Keys to Replications

How to get started:

- Find the local organization that business trusts.
- Find the strength in the community
- Find the strength in the partners
- Design the project to meet the expectations/demands of local employers, not the job seeker programs. The programs will see the value in the design when their job seekers are hired.

Identify:

- Leadership/Partnership
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Customer flow
- Funding

Conclusion

Gray's Harbor businesses clearly voted with their feet for the Employer Assistance Project. Over 600 of them returned to use the services to hire and retain new employees. Credibility has been established; relationships have been developed; and doors have been opened for additional collaboration.

For programs to succeed when serving the hard to employ, services for the job supplier — the employer — are essential. Employers' needs, once clearly identified, should be addressed from a business perspective, working with a business community partner. The Employer Assistance Project, which operates like a business, **can** effectively serve the business needs and ultimately the entire community.

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