



**Capacity Building for Chicago Job Development:
An Assessment of Chicago Job Developers' Needs
and Emerging Solutions for Today's Tight Labor Market**

A Community-Driven Research Project
Conducted in Partnership with
Metro Chicago Information Center

May 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) is grateful to its WIA Leader Circle members who together explored capacity-building opportunities at one critical juncture in workforce development: implementation of the Workforce Investment Act. The WIA Leader Circle, convened by CJC from July 2001 to February 2002, is a capacity-building network for community leaders who share a common interest: improving Chicago's workforce development system by strengthening their employment programs and developing an action-oriented project for the broader workforce development community. Their experiences and insights were critical in developing this job development research.

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Thanks also to Paul Sturm whose facilitation expertise helped make the Circle a productive collaboration.

We also wish to acknowledge staff of our research partner, MCIC (Metro Chicago Information Center). Thanks to Mari Gallagher and Robert Frolick whose excellent work and true dedication helped make this project a success.

Acknowledgements are also due to CJC staff who contributed their perspectives throughout this project: Evelyn Diaz, Rose Karasti, Wendy Moylan, Whitney Smith, and CJC's Executive Director Robert Wordlaw. CJC's Director of Marketing & Membership, Vicky Nurre, spearheaded this capacity-building program. Questions and comments about the WIA Leader Circle and this report summary should be directed to her at 312.252.0460 x303 or vicky@cj.net.

We gratefully acknowledge the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation for supporting these efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) retained MCIC (Metro Chicago Information Center) in January of 2002 to conduct a community-driven research effort designed to help workforce development stakeholders understand the practices and needs of Chicago Job Developers in today's challenging labor market. The project design was guided by community-based organizations that comprised the WIA Leaders Circle. CJC convened the Circle to foster a collaborative environment for CBOs committed to developing and implementing new ideas to strengthen their organizations and the local system during an important transitional period in workforce development.

WIA, the Workforce Investment Act, is a 1998 Federal act "to consolidate, coordinate, and improve employment, training, literacy, and vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States, and for other purposes." WIA overhauled the nation's publicly funded job-training system by providing the framework for a new national workforce preparation and employment system designed to meet both the needs of job seekers and businesses. In June 2000, the City of Chicago and 36 contractors began implementing WIA, providing core-and-intensive employment services to dislocated workers and welfare participants.

Given the rising challenges of economic and policy changes, we designed a needs assessment to determine the current state of job development citywide, and to identify tools to help build the capacity of Job Developers — the front-line staff who are key to successfully moving disadvantaged job seekers into the labor market. The methodology for this study included key informant interviews with director-level staff from local providers and national intermediaries, and a focus group with job developers that together identified issues, opinions and trends. These qualitative issues were then quantified through a survey of a broader group of front-line job development staff throughout Chicago.

The results of the study — which represents Phase I of a two-phase effort — will help policy makers identify ways to strengthen employment services delivered within the local workforce development system, and governed by WIA, welfare-to-work and other public policies. The study will also help identify opportunities for training that can advance the field of job development, which may comprise Phase II of CJC's work to build the capacity of Chicago's workforce development system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welfare reform, the Workforce Investment Act, rapid changes in technology, and a tight labor market have generated a new set of pressing challenges and opportunities for workforce development practitioners across the county. Most programmatic responses have focused on the training and case management needs of low-skilled job seekers experiencing the most difficulty entering and staying in the labor market. At the same time, policymakers have instituted increasingly stringent success measures and paperwork requirements. Why? To encourage and quantify more and longer client placements with fewer program dollars. But who is responsible for ensuring that these placements are successfully made? Who uncovers the job openings, recruits the employers, screens the clients, schedules the interviews, and provides case management services for both the employer and the client after placement?

This is the complicated and demanding world of Job Developers. Employers expect them to speak intelligently about industry trends. Clients expect them to empathize with and solve their personal struggles, helping them find daycare options or bus fare, and believing in them when they express a desire to find gainful employment. Executive and Program Directors expect Job Developers to adapt to ever-changing funding requirements, keep detailed paperwork, and to “meet those placement quotas!”

The findings of this study suggest that little focus has been placed on the training and resource needs of the Job Developers themselves — the men and women on the front lines who are tasked with finding employment for the most difficult-to-employ members of our society. Most Job Developers know about and receive very little training. When training does occur, it is typically a one-shot session sponsored by a particular funding source and limited to only those grantees. Some participants in this study expressed frustration at the lack of depth, quantity, frequency and location of funder-sponsored training and of the topics covered in past trainings. At the same time, Job Developers must possess a wide range of skills and the ability to influence a diverse constituency to be effective.

Market Demand for Strategic Staff Training

Survey results from a sample of Chicago Job Developers show that the majority of respondents desire training in all areas of the field, including the “ABCs of Job Development.” More than 75% stated that they would attend training sessions that covered the following topics:

- Market sectors, broken out by type;
- Client retention techniques;
- Job search techniques;
- How to develop leads;
- Labor market information; and
- Sales techniques.

How Job Developers assess their skill-sets connect with how they spend their time. In an average week, they spend:

- Eleven hours finding jobs for clients;
- Seven hours enrolling clients into their programs;
- Six hours doing compliance paperwork; and
- Four hours researching or reviewing employer-related information.

In rating their skill-sets, Job Developers claim strong knowledge of job search, communications, and customer service techniques. This is not surprising, considering that Job Developers, their bosses, and other experts identified “people skills” and “sales skills” as the two most important attributes of those in the field.

A Gap in Labor Market Information

Job Developers claim little knowledge of employer and market-related information. For example, one research participant noted, “*We need a skill set that enables us to identify strategic leads and know what sectors to focus on based on changes in the economy.*” Job Developers also report little time in their workday for researching employer or economic trends. In pursuit of job leads, they use what we might call the “Rolodex approach.” This approach primarily relies on a fixed group of employer contacts with whom Job Developers already have a relationship and “tried and true” low-risk methods including job fairs, local marketing, word of mouth, etc. Part of their day is spent calling these contacts on the phone to identify job leads. Once the job leads are identified, they search their client base to see who might best match those openings.

It appears that a gap in market information might discourage some Job Developers from pursuing employment placements in sectors beyond their immediate knowledge or work culture, even if those sectors are experiencing growth or offer positions compatible with client skill-sets. Baseline labor market and employer information might allow Job Developers to more regularly use strategic factors to target employers, such as location, hiring trends, industry growth trends, wage levels, career paths and required skill-sets. Job Developers identify themselves as being good communicators who can find job openings and build lasting relationships with employers with whom they feel comfortable. Perhaps more quantitative training will give them the boost needed to assess their client needs and market opportunities first, then identify the most strategic group of employers to target. This “Strategic Market approach” and the “Rolodex approach” are not incompatible.

The survey included seasoned Job Developers who have survived the inevitable cycles of burnout and that have stayed in the same or similar positions for more than 10 years. It also included new arrivals and mid-level staff who have been in the field for four years or more. Some Job Developers serve a special employer or client niche, like manufacturers, ex-offenders, and the homeless, while others serve a range of employment sectors and client populations, opening their doors without restrictions.

Emerging Job Developer Profile

Job Developers have a variety of backgrounds, experiences and attitudes about the field. Many expressed strong feelings of isolation, rejection and burnout. As one participant stated, “*The hardest thing is to hear ‘no’ all day from employers, and then to find out that the one interview you successfully set up for that day didn’t happen because the client didn’t show up.*” They also expressed strong commitment about their work. For a few, job development is just a job, but most Job Developers are highly motivated to help people and are driven by socio-economic values.

A good number of Job Developers interviewed in this study entered the field without any direction from supervisors about how to approach their day-to-day responsibilities. They were given a desk and a phone — but little else. By contrast, other Job Developers come from agencies that place a strong emphasis on staff training and clearly defined job expectations.

This potpourri of experiences supports our conclusion that the field — at least at a local level — has not developed a common set of professional skill sets and standards. Job development itself lacks a clear and consistent definition.

The good news is that there is great interest among workforce development stakeholders in changing this dynamic. Job Developers and their bosses overwhelmingly expressed interest in a training institute inclusive to all Job Developers, regardless of their funding sources. All decision makers that this study consulted stated that they would consider covering all or some of the costs of training — to the degree that their tight budgets allowed — and that they would permit the training to take place during business hours. They also felt that training opportunities would be enhanced if paired with networking opportunities.

- Seventy-eight percent of Job Developers agree that they would attend a series of workshops on job development issues;
- Sixty percent of Job Developers believe that being a certified job developer would enhance their credibility in the eyes of employers;
- Sixty-eight percent of Job Developers say that completing a certificate program would improve their work performance; and
- Eighty-two percent of Job Developers agree that they would like to receive an electronic newsletter updating them on local and national developments in the field.

Job Developers suggest that integration and cohesion among their peers might reduce the otherwise secretive and territorial nature of the business. They expressed interest in exchanging information and job leads with their peers when it serves the best interests of their clients. Yet, at the same time, they also expressed uncertainty about how this would impact their own organizational performance measures in the eyes of those who control the purse strings.

More seasoned Job Developers crave a framework for discussion and debate about larger workforce development issues so that they can develop a vision, voice and agenda that speak persuasively to experts, policy makers, funders, employers and job-seeking clients. Standardized training is seen as an important step in strengthening leadership and professionalism in the field, and building the capacity of Job Developers to get more people gainfully employed.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONCLUSION

The major finding from this report is the need for standardized training opportunities for Chicago-area Job Developers — the exploration of which constitutes Phase II of CJC’s capacity-building work.

Long-term Strategy

One approach would be to create a training institute. By attending this institute, Job Developers will be able to learn new skills, exchange best practices in an organized setting, and interact with other Job Developers. They will be able to attend specialized training to understand specific market sectors or increase their expertise in retention skills. A training institute will increase the general knowledge and capacity of Job Developers while standardizing the field so more staff would continue to work in the field. As a result, there will be a lower burnout rate among Job Developers.

Short-term Opportunities

While developing a training institute is a long-term initiative, there are other opportunities for other efforts in the short-term. An electronic newsletter of local employer and economic trends, promising practices and job developer profiles will encourage interaction and lower the sense of isolation felt now by Job Developers. A series of workshops and an annual conference featuring such essentials as sector trends and retention techniques will begin to address Job Developers’ immediate needs. Another opportunity will be increased interactions between employers and/or business groups with Job Developers.

This needs assessment of Job Developers is part of a larger effort to implement a strategic plan linking job development to community development. While this project focused on the needs of front-line staff, more research is needed to look at the other side of the equation — the needs of employers and ways to further community development impact.

Surveying the needs of Chicago-area employers is the first step in engaging businesses in a dialogue about job development. Local directors and front-line staff are eager to understand and meet the changing needs of employers, increase placement in hard-to-reach market sectors and establish strong relationships between themselves and the local business community. Quality placements, offering living wages and upward career paths, are by their nature more difficult to develop. Job Developers want to make quality placements but need more employer and market-related information to correctly match people with available jobs. Job Developers need more depth to successfully train, coach and mentor potential employees for the rigors of post entry-level jobs. Job Developers also want to know what the typical expectations of employers are in dealing with potential employees and with Job Developers. This exchange of information might also lead to greater understanding of the needs of employers, particularly in helping job seekers retain positions.

Job Developers are looking for a diverse group of strategic partners to help coordinate these efforts. Job Developers are already committed to multiple stakeholders: their own organizations, funders, job seekers and employers). They are looking for help to increase the visibility of workforce development programs through coordinated marketing campaigns. This is another opportunity to increase the capacity of Job Developers by helping them gain a stronger presence in these turbulent economic times.

The world of Job Developers is difficult and complex. Many Job Developers are excellent, committed staff members, yet they have a continuous need to update their skills. This is the case even with seasoned veterans, who are looking to strengthen the voice, effectiveness and professionalism of the field. This study suggests that establishing a venue for ongoing, standardized training is seen as an important first step.

About MCIC

MCIC (Metro Chicago Information Center) is an independent, not-for-profit research and consulting organization founded in 1990 with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the McCormick Tribune Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, and the United Way of Chicago. MCIC was founded to collect and provide data to meet the information and marketing needs of organizations concerned with public policy issues, community needs, and the quality of life. MCIC locates, develops and collects information and consults with organizations on the use of data for proposals, planning, and decision-making.

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Founded in 1981, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) is an organization that works with its members to ensure access to employment and career advancement opportunities for people in poverty. With 18 original members, CJC has grown to include 100 community-based organizations (CBOs), civic groups, businesses and individuals committed to helping disadvantaged Chicagoans gain access to the education and training they need to enter the labor market, secure stable employment at a living wage, and pursue sustainable careers.

CJC pursues its mission through advocacy, applied research, public education and capacity-building initiatives focused on influencing the development or reform of public policies and programs. Our efforts are grounded in the perspectives of our members, who contribute their expertise as direct service practitioners, advocates, researchers and employers. CJC's work is also guided by the results of demonstration projects that test innovative solutions to pressing employment problems. By organizing members and other interested parties around workforce development, welfare reform, economic and community development issues, CJC fosters dialogue and cooperative strategies that effect change.



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