

PROMISING PRACTICES



Collaboration is key for employment outcomes

Life Skills in St. Louis, Missouri, joins with other organizations to resolve job market barriers for people with developmental disabilities

Through community-based employment services, organizations around the country work to improve the employment environment for people with developmental disabilities. Because people with developmental disabilities face an alarmingly high rate of unemployment, they find themselves in a low-income cycle of poverty, making them more likely to be dependent on governmental support. Traditional job development techniques, such as job carving, are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of people on a long waiting list for work in this formidable job market.

One method that has proven effective relies on employment organizations putting their competitive natures aside and working collaboratively for the overall benefit of people with developmental disabilities.

Along with other St. Louis area organizations, Life Skills is committed to resolving these socioeconomic and job market barriers for people with developmental disabilities. The organizations' combined dedication resulted in a program design and a new position that incorporate the skills of a marketing executive and the compassion of a social worker. The person in this new position, dubbed a corporate marketer, works to increase the number of people with developmental disabilities in competitive employment by identifying, educating, and recruiting businesses to employ these individuals. Although these responsibilities may seem like the standard duties of a job developer, the corporate marketer's level of community engagement is at a much higher level -- this individual acts as a "rainmaker" for the field of employment services.

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Putting out the good word: Information about the Promising Practices series

We are offering a series of short articles on a variety of promising practices that CARF surveyors have observed during surveys from 2004 to the present. There is no particular order that we follow in presenting this series of short reports. The purpose is not to rate one organization over another, but to encourage U.S. and Canadian community providers to dialogue with one another and to encourage creative solutions to individual service designs and organizational business practices and thereby achieve effective and positive results in each organization's community.

Although there are indeed a number of ways to approach conformance to a standard, what makes organizations given an

Most important, the corporate marketer sells the benefits of hiring any person with a developmental disability, not just those served by Life Skills, which helps create a unique environment of collaboration. Although employed by Life Skills, the corporate marketer is a regional position, generously funded by the United Way of Greater St. Louis and the Developmental Disabilities Resource Board of St. Charles Missouri (a local funder of services). This position benefits seven supported employment organizations and in effect creates a network hub, joining the business community, neighborhood school districts, and state and local referral organizations with employment service providers.

This collaboration allows a shift in approach, with job creation happening first. Because the corporate marketer and the network are not solely focused on the particular individuals in job development at each of the participating agencies, there is no need to wait for a perfect match or make significant adjustments to the positions or the job candidates' skill sets while hoping for a lasting fit. In addition, the pool of candidates is now spread across a major suburban county, covering a large portion of metropolitan St. Louis. An employer can be very specific regarding job requirements, yet still remain open to traditional job development techniques (i.e., carving), and the network is able to identify the best match across all organizations.

Along with the corporate marketer position, Life Skills created a Business Advisory Council, which further advances the mission of finding competitive employment for individuals with developmental disabilities by defining training needs to promote inclusion in the workforce. The council also helps determine the needs of each employer and how the collaborating partners can meet those needs.

As a result of these efforts, the Life Skills' corporate marketer has assisted close to 50 individuals in securing competitive jobs in the local business community since the inception of the program in 2008. The majority of these jobs has been outside of the traditional janitorial and food service industries, which have been common employment tracks for people with developmental disabilities.

In addition, this cooperative effort has resulted in several new initiatives across the region, including:

- Soft skills training classes.
- Monthly job developer meetings that facilitate information sharing across agencies.
- Development of an awareness video featuring individuals working across the region.
- Recruitment of a Missouri Business Leadership Network (MOBLN) board member to represent the collaboration.

exemplary rating stand out is their professional and strategic response to an observed service or business need, always designed with input from their stakeholders and based on those individuals' quality expectations.

We hope you enjoy the series. We encourage you to contact the identified representative in the article to get more information about their services.

Promising Practices issues now archived online!

Do you remember a past article that you'd like to forward on to a colleague? Did you just join Promising Practices and want to see issues we covered in the past? Well, now you can! Find archived issues online at carf.org/ecspromisingpractices and follow links to past issues. Past issues are categorized by topic so you can easily find articles of interest.

For more information about this unique cooperative effort, please contact Life Skills Vice President of Programs Thomas Bay, tbay@lifeskills-stl.org and visit the Like Skills website at www.lifeskills-stl.org.

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