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Strengthening Our Partnering Efforts to Aid Rural, Low-Income Families by Listening to Employer Experiences

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Strengthening Our Partnering Efforts to Aid Rural, Low-Income Families by Listening to Employer Experiences

Abstract

Interviews with rural employers were conducted at two points in time to examine employer needs, hiring practices, attitudes about low-income job applicants, and activities with county workforce development organizations. Employer perspectives were consistent over time and emphasized how employees with limited resources appeared unprepared for the workforce. Intangible characteristics, such as work ethic, attendance, attitude, and appearance, matter. When rural employers, social service agencies, and Extension collaborate in helping adults and families with limited resources, more relevant training programs are possible.

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Extension has a rich history of working with displaced agricultural workers and limited resource families to help them achieve and maintain financial self-sufficiency. Extension also has assisted small-, micro-, and home-business owners and worked with rural communities on economic and community development (Lasley & Korsching, 1984; Roper & Davis, 2000; Taylor, 1989). Working with the business community, Extension has contributed to family-friendly policies and targeted employees through brownbag seminars on topics such as child and elder care, stress management, and money management issues (Corbin, 1998).

The Oregon State University Extension Service initiated a collaborative project, the Oregon Workforce Development Project, which sought to understand employer needs and create effective partnerships in a rural county. One goal was to assess the expectations and experiences of rural, small business employers regarding employment needs of adults with limited resources. Because rural employers are accustomed to personal contact within a small-town context, a qualitative methodology was employed. Our intent was to gain a rich understanding of employer experiences and to apply their expertise in developing and strengthening programs and partnerships aiding low-income families. Using the design and analysis methods suggested by Berg (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), we interviewed employers over two points in time.

In cooperation with the county Chamber of Commerce, we recruited employers representing different sectors of the economy. All employers contacted initially by phone agreed to participate. Conducted at the employer's site, interviews included questions on employer hiring and retention needs, the marketability of employees with limited resources, county partnership efforts, and

assessment of current programs serving low-income employees and their families. During second interviews, the same questions were posed and employers were asked to assess any changes since initial interviews.

Our sample size (N = 20) was determined when no new information was replicated in the earlier interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants represented 53% of major employers in a rural county with a population of 61,720 when interviews were first conducted in 1999 and a population of 63,450 when second interviews occurred in 2002. Unemployment rates were 5.3% in 1999 and increased to 6.3% by 2002. The county contains a significant Hispanic and migrant population. Major employers include small businesses, manufacturing, and education. Smaller communities in the county still struggle with a declining timber economy.

Interviews first occurred in 1999, 2 years after Congress passed The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Because changes occurred in how federal programs assisted families in need, including increased expectations that welfare recipients seek and obtain employment, we felt that employers would have insights regarding hiring and retaining employees entering the workforce. Three years later, we interviewed employers (N = 18) to see how business perspectives and experiences may have remained the same or changed during a period of economic decline.

Employers predominantly were located in two larger communities within the county and represented the following businesses: restaurants (n = 4), assisted living facilities (n = 2), manufacturing (n = 4), groceries/markets (n = 4), education (n = 1) and other (n = 5). One manufacturing employer and one retail sales employer were unavailable for second interviews.

Indicative of small businesses in rural areas, there was some turnover in the personnel who made hiring decisions (n = 7). Regardless of personnel changes, we were able to gain critical information regarding employment trends and experiences specific to the company and found consistency in attitudes and perceptions across interviews. Interviews were analyzed and coded across both waves of data and themes emerged that focused on candidate pools, employer experiences with employees, and community partnerships. Initial and second interviews were also analyzed by company to assess change over time.

Results

Rural employers shared their perspectives on job applicants and their working relationships, if any, with county organizations serving families with limited resources. Because we interviewed employers during strong economic times and again when economic conditions were less favorable, we were able to gain a broad perspective as to employer hiring practices, attitudes about low-income job applicants, and activities with county agencies and organizations.

Size and Quality of Candidate Pool

When employers were initially interviewed, they appeared satisfied with the size of candidate pools and felt that there was little need to advertise for positions. Some employers indicated that the large candidate pool did not imply quality. One restaurant owner stated that "only 10% of 300 applicants had the potential to be hired." Many employers generally indicated that most of the applicants lacked qualifications and were ill prepared when interviewing for positions. Employer comments particularly focused on the lack of candidates with specific job skills e.g., nurses for assisted living facilities) and their unprofessional attire and personal presentation when meeting employers and picking up applications. One employer explained, "Many of them when they come in for applications the way they are dressed, I wouldn't hire them anyway."

During second interviews, employers were less positive about their hiring needs. One employer reported a hiring freeze, and many others explained that they were fully staffed and/or not hiring. When positions did become available, employers reported large numbers of applicants. One employer exclaimed that she had candidates "applying left and right."

Frequent employer comments regarding the quality and depth of candidate pools indicated that there were little differences across time. For most, the size of candidate pools was strong, yet it was the suitability of applicants that was of most concern. Employers were also aware that they were unable to attract many candidates who would have been more suitable for positions because of wages. One employer explained, "The pay scale is minimum wage and most people can't support a family on that so there is always an issue getting those people in here and keeping them."

Perceptions of Potential Employees with Limited Resources

When asked specifically about their experiences with job candidates, all employers indicated that they had hired individuals who were transitioning into positions after welfare reform and subsequent time limitations for aid. Their experiences varied and changed little over time. Some found employees "eager to work" because "they tend to be more hungry and want a stable job." One employer remarked that "some of the employees from families with limited resources are more diligent." She also indicated that single women, often the heads of low-income households, were "actually stronger candidates because they are more driven due to the changes in their lives."

Other employers were less positive about experiences with low-income employees. Employers frequently noted the lack of work ethic, poor attendance, childcare and/or transportation problems, weak interpersonal skills, and inappropriate dress or hygiene among employees. The most often expressed observation concerned employee work ethic, with similar responses during both interviews.

Employers described how employees were often late or absent, failed to notify employers when missing work, or were unable to maintain a strong work orientation over time. The employer at a manufacturing company reported that "90 percent of the terminations that we do are attendance violations." Another employer from a restaurant mentioned that some of his employees "don't know how to work because their families are failing in preparing them to be good workers." Employers particularly elaborated on the lack of work ethic among younger employees, with some noting that these problems were not specific to low-income workers. As one restaurant owner explained, "They [employees] don't do extra and try to excel . . . they do what they are told, nothing more."

Effective Partnering with County Agencies and Organizations

Most employers in initial interviews indicated that they were not aware of agencies or organizations that could assist them in finding viable candidates for their organizations or in supporting employees and their families. In some cases, employers were aware of other county organizations or agencies but refrained from using their services because they had not found the services useful or were unsure as to how they could be specifically helped. Several employers mentioned using high school career centers and seemed impressed, for the most part, by the community partnerships they developed. They also commented positively on the "Certificate of Employability," a regional program that certifies that high school students have completed an educational series that emphasizes interpersonal and work skills.

When asked about any changes they had seen in terms of the preparation, marketability, and retention of low-income job candidates and how county organizations may have stimulated positive outcomes, most employers responded similarly. For example, one employer indicated that he was active in participating in certain job activities initiated through the local JOBS program but observed that he had "not noticed a lot of change." Two employers did mention during second interviews that candidates with limited resources appeared to be more eager to work and had received help with their resumes, applications, and interviewing skills. One employer mentioned specifically that her candidate pool in 2002 seemed to have higher aspirations as they were working harder at getting jobs during hard economic times.

Regardless of county economic shifts, the overall perspective among the majority of employers appeared to remain stable over time. Employers emphasized how their applicant pools and employees with limited resources appeared unprepared for work. As one employer commented, "They don't have the work ethic and they are not trying to get out there to better themselves." One employer offered a rare and different perspective on the changes she had observed over the course of interviews. She observed that the shift in time had little to do with improved applicant pools but rather a change in her hiring expectations. She stated that,

My standards have gone down since the interview three years ago, I could care less if you interview in shorts or whatever. If you are going to do a good job for me, I don't care what you wear or what you look like. I guess I'm not as judgmental as I used to be. Now I am really looking inside the person and if they are wanting a job and if they care.

Conclusions

Our experience with an employer breakfast summit in one rural county convinced us that rural employers and the social service agencies that assist people to move into the workforce were not in touch with each other (Bowman, Manoogian, & Driscoll, 2002). The outcomes from the summit and both sets of employer interviews were shared with the workforce development team members and resulted in more relevant programs. For example, an experiential training program was created in which potential employees who have had difficulties securing employment learn to run a copy/print shop and develop skills to prepare them for office jobs.

Rural employers want employability skills rather than particular qualifications. Intangible characteristics, such as attendance, work ethic, attitude, and appearance, matter in entry-level positions (Wilson & Stewart, 2000). Employers liked the *Certificate of Employability* program. In this program, wallet-sized certificates signed by the school principal are issued to students whose teachers evaluate them in the categories of personal management, teamwork, problem solving, and communication <<http://www.mwec.org/instructors/certificate-employability.php>>. Currently, a new employability "soft skills" assessment program has been developed in this county for the local Enterprise Youth Council. This program evaluates a person's strengths and weaknesses and provides suggestions for improvement.

Assisting the working poor and their families in rural areas requires a strategy that includes employers. Because they are likely to know when an employee is having problems that affect job performance, employers in small businesses can benefit from existing Extension programs that could aid employee retention in such areas as transportation and childcare assistance, the Earned

Income Tax Credit, or Medicaid (Rupured, Koonce, & Bales, 2002). Some small-business employers will hire a new employee rather than support an existing employee. Others, however, may invest in an employee to reduce turnover and improve productivity, particularly when unemployment rates are low and rehiring costs are high.

Extension has a key role in the development of educational opportunities and materials for both limited resource families and employers in rural areas (Rupured, Koonce, & Bales, 2002). Current and future niches include: teaching basic living skills to the unemployed; assisting the newly or sporadically employed who lack intangible skills and resources to remain employed; working with employers; and bridging the gap between employer and employee (workforce education for both limited resource adults and young adults).

The rural poor are faced with structural challenges that inhibit employability and earnings (Whitener, Weber, & Duncan, 2001). Extension programs can play a role in educating rural employers in such areas as cultural diversity and family-friendly policies as well as bring the needs of rural employers to the agencies and educational organizations that provide workforce education. When we work with individuals, families, and agencies, but overlook small rural employers, we miss the opportunity to bridge the gap between employer and employee needs in rural communities.

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