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## Working with Rural Employers: An Interagency Partnership

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PREVIOUS  
ARTICLE



ISSUE  
CONTENTS



NEXT  
ARTICLE

## Working with Rural Employers: An Interagency Partnership

### Abstract

Extension professionals are uniquely positioned to help employers understand the needs of families with limited resources and to assist employers in finding ways to hire and retain employees. Oregon State University Extension Service, in conjunction with county partners, organized an employer development program in a small rural community. A large employer event was organized to learn employer needs and create effective partnerships. Through focus group and participant evaluations, employers identified hiring and retention challenges and outlined needed support and services. A program description, reported outcomes, and current ongoing activities will aid other Extension professionals in implementing similar programs.

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## Introduction

Can Extension professionals help employers find ways to hire and retain employees and understand the needs of families with limited resources? Oregon State University Extension Service and county partners organized an employer development program in a small rural community to find out.

When welfare reform legislation passed in 1996, mandating moving adults from welfare to work, it became increasingly important to assist individuals with limited resources to secure and retain paid positions. Industry councils, workforce development teams, and JOBS and JTPA programs recognize that linking potential employees to employers requires some commitment to employer development. Yet these agencies generally have limited time and resources to work with employers, and they typically focus on assisting the individual.

### Employer Focus

Recommended strategies for developing workforce solutions include understanding employers' needs and appealing to employers' economic motives (McPherson, 1999). Many small business owners may not know about economic strategies and supports, such as tax incentives, wage subsidies, and indirect financial incentives like the Earned Income Tax Credit, Medicaid, and Food Stamps.

National surveys indicate that employers seek employees who are reliable and have positive attitudes and strong work ethics, valuing these traits much more than training and flexibility (Monroe, Blalock, & Vlosky, 1999). Employers who have hired former welfare recipients are more willing to hire them again when compared to employers who have never hired them. Ninety-four percent of 500 small employers who had hired former welfare recipients indicated that they would rehire them (Regenstein, Meyer, & Hicks, 1998). Employers reported that welfare recipients possess the desired personal attributes.

### **Extension's Role**

Extension educators are uniquely positioned to help employers understand the needs of families and find ways to address work/family balance and family friendly policies (Corbin, 1998). Extension is well suited to provide this type of education because of its record of collaboration, strong history of conducting community-specific needs assessments, and practice of delivering family and youth programming (Lerner, Bogenschneider, Wilcox, Fitzsimmons, & Hoopfer, 1996).

## **Project Overview**

The Oregon State University Extension Service organized the collaborative Oregon Workforce Development Project in a small rural community to understand employer needs and create effective partnerships.

Project goals were:

- To assess requirements of small business employers and social service agencies in meeting employment needs of adults and families with limited resources in a selected rural county.
- To create effective partnerships with organizations that serve adults with limited resources in job development and retention.
- To recruit small business owners to an event focused on welfare-to-work hiring and retention issues.

Two criteria were used to identify a project site:

1. A rural county with predominantly small businesses and
2. The potential for collaboration with other workforce development agencies.

The project focused on small businesses, because they provide many employment opportunities in rural areas and generally lack human resource departments.

A pilot county was identified with an estimated population of 59,500 and an estimated civilian labor force of 30,197. Unemployment rates in 1998 were 4.9%. Approximately 11% of the adults between the ages of 14 and 72 were economically disadvantaged.

Representatives from the local welfare agency and JOBS program in the county were invited to serve on a task force with Extension representatives. The task force wanted to assist employers who hire or could potentially hire former welfare recipients and to assess employer needs to facilitate linking clients to employers. All agencies involved agreed to provide financial, staff, or material resources to the project.

The task force gathered information on the needs of small business employers and employees. Individual employers, Chambers of Commerce, business and education representatives, and key committees/organizations were contacted to determine if the county had conducted recent surveys or assessments and whether an employer summit would be appropriate. Once employer and employee needs were identified and partnerships were established, the task force concluded that an employer summit was feasible.

All county employers identified from Chamber of Commerce listings (N = 330), regardless of size or service, were invited to an employer/agency event. Targeted employers were visited to personally invite them to the event and to learn their experiences working with adults with limited resources.

The Employer Summit was a 2-hour event that included breakfast, short presentations, focus groups, and resource tables. At the conclusion of the Employer Summit, participants were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the event and make recommendations for further activities. After the event, the task force met to evaluate and plan future activities. All program participants received a letter summarizing the focus group discussions and evaluations.

## **Procedure**

Nineteen small business employers representing service, manufacturing, government, education, and retail sectors joined 21 human service representatives to participate in six focus groups of five-seven participants each, facilitated by agency representatives. Employers represented these sectors:

- Lumber products,

- Manufacturing,
- Retirement/medical,
- Automotive,
- Newspaper,
- University,
- Cosmetic sales, etc.

The human service sector included education (high school, community college, university, educational service district), and the state employment and welfare departments (e.g., JOBS Council). These agencies are employers as well.

Six specific questions about hiring and retention practices and challenges (see Appendix) guided the focus group discussions. The larger group then reconvened to summarize and discuss the issues raised in individual groups. Recorded responses and participant evaluations were compiled and analyzed to determine key issues.

## **Results**

### **Challenges Facing Businesses**

Rural employers identified employer - employee relationships, employee retention, and inadequate applicant pools as their primary challenges. Appropriate attire, attendance, flexibility, commitment, and being a team player were major concerns. One employer said employees may have the skills, but they lack the motivation, and building motivation takes time. Another employer underscored the need for employee counseling, but indicated that most small businesses are unable to provide it. Employers mentioned difficulties with communication and coordination of work schedules.

Employers spoke of the effort and expense of training employees. Small businesses are unable to offer high salaries and have little time to implement retention efforts. Barriers for employees included transportation and childcare, reflecting current national research (Blank, 1997; Seccombe, 1999).

### **Challenges in Retention**

Retention challenges included inadequate financial resources of employer, inadequate interpersonal skills of employees, poor physical and mental health of employees, and other characteristics of employees, such as job-hopping. Employers also identified difficulties in providing flexible work environments and expressed an interest in offering formalized retention programs relating to childcare or other benefits.

### **Employer Services**

Rural employers identified the services they provide that help employees overcome employment obstacles, including cross training of employees, youth mentoring, team problem solving, personal counseling, telecommuting, wellness programs, extensive benefits packages, and awards and recognition to their employees. These employers, however, would like to offer more services, such as health care benefits, childcare, transportation assistance, counseling, better wages and bonuses, mentoring, and information and referral programs. These services are not offered due to limitations of size and resources.

### **Awareness of Community Services**

Participants were asked about their knowledge regarding county services and agencies that could help with hiring and retention of employees. In general, most employers were unaware of services. They listed some of the services they knew about, but typical comments included: "not much," "know existence, but not how to access," "quite a bit--have had to personally research."

### **Employer Needs**

When asked what kinds of support services would help in employing a productive workforce, participants mentioned the need for education for both employers and employees. Offering training to new employers and employees; increasing linkages with existing services, such as schools and job fairs; providing employee assistance programs; pooling employer resources; and networking were suggested. Based on a "certificate of employability" program for high school students in this community, employers suggested a similar certificate program for adults.

### **Hiring Experiences**

Employers were asked about their hiring experiences with employees with limited income and/or minimal work history. They indicated that most entry-level jobs had high turnover rates and that hiring strategies had "mixed results." Extensive employee reference checks were cited as the most successful strategy for ensuring a good hire. They recognized that in many cases their vacant positions had little to offer in terms of advancement.

## **Evaluation**

Evaluations were collected from the small business representatives present at the summit. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the lowest rating, employer participants (N=17) rated the breakfast summit overall as "very good" (rating of 4.1). The most useful component of the event was the resources provided by agencies (rating of 3.8). Attendees thought the "roundtables" (focus groups) were effective in generating discussion concerning hiring and retention issues (rating of 3.4). Participants also thought the featured presenters provided new and pertinent information (rating of 3.4).

Three top issues were identified by participants:

- a. Employers want to pool their resources to meet identified needs,
- b. Employers would like more frequent meetings and opportunities to discuss employment issues, and
- c. Employers would like employees to have training on the development and implementation of a "work ethic."

Because these evaluations were completed after the focus groups and the ensuing discussion, the identification of these issues were affected by the process.

### **Project Outcomes**

After the employer summit, the task force met to discuss the next steps for employer service development. An advisory committee of employers addressing common needs, challenges, and issues was formed. The Business Services Planning Team met monthly in 1999-2001, with a core group of eight local businesses and an additional 20 that receive monthly feedback from the Team.

As a result, a Work Ethics workshop was developed and presented to local businesses and clients of the county one-stop career center. This workshop continues to be requested and offered. Other employer training workshops were delivered locally, instead of regionally, at employer request. Enhanced partnerships with local Chambers of Commerce resulted in increased communication and an initiative to assist new businesses with recruitment and orientation of employees.

The downturn in the economy resulted in fewer requests from the business community for hiring needs assistance and more requests for assistance to employers who were discharging employees. The director of the county career center noted in March 2002 that there is an increased connection between local businesses and career center partner agencies.

### **Project Implications for Extension**

This project was focused on one rural community and serves as a model for other rural workforce development efforts. Extension can act as a catalyst to bring together all who are concerned with the employability and stability of individuals in families with limited resources. Interagency and business collaboration and communication can be enhanced.

Extension can draw attention to employee issues in rural areas where economic hardship is a reality. Changes to the welfare system and economic recessions bring added challenges to the economic lives of families. Because many rural areas lack adequate employment opportunities, transportation systems, childcare facilities, and private sector support systems, families leaving welfare may continue to experience hardship. These issues need focused and timely attention.

A focus on needs assessment of employers brings needed information to agencies that serve families who struggle. Through assessment and evaluation, Extension can provide agencies and employers alike with input that can enhance, redirect, and create services for employees.

Extension can play a unique role in communities regarding workforce issues. In this case, the project acted as a catalyst to address workforce issues, employed collaborative and inclusive strategies, and established community partnerships.

This type of project brings all players who influence the well being of families with limited resources together. What better role for Extension?

### **Appendix: Focus Group Questions**

1. What are the top three challenges you face in running your business?
2. What are your current challenges regarding retention of employees?
3. What services do you currently offer to help employees?
4. What services would you like to offer to help employees?

5. What kinds of support services would be helpful to you in employing a productive workforce?
6. What are your hiring experiences with employees with limited income and/or minimal work history?

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