

REPORT
To the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board
Strategic Planning Team

Business Customer
FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Conducted April 9, 2010

Conducted by and Report Prepared by
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INTRODUCTION

On April 9, 2010, Strumpf Associates moderated a focus group comprised of *businesses customers*. The focus group was conducted on behalf of the Montgomery County, Maryland Workforce Investment Board and is being conducted as part of a strategic planning process that the organization is engaging in between now and the summer of 2010. The organization has a Strategic Planning Team charged with developing a strategic action plan meant to take the organization through the next three years. Part of the process is to conduct an environmental analysis. Data for the environmental analysis includes customer, partner, and stakeholder feedback on their expectations for and satisfaction with services.

Focus groups are a qualitative research methodology used to collect information. The method allows for more in-depth reporting by participants than a paper and pencil survey. The focus group was not designed to reach a consensus among the participants. They are designed to collect information from each participant to identify trends.

COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The focus group consisted of individuals who were invited to participate. The staff of the Workforce Investment Board identified and invited participants based on criteria provided by Strumpf Associates. Representatives of *current and past business customer* of the Workforce Investment Board made up the focus group participants and provided the feedback contained in this report.

Over twenty individuals representing business were invited to attend focus groups. Lori Strumpf facilitated the focus group. The facilitator explained in each instance to all participants that their responses would remain anonymous. They were encouraged to be honest and forthright. The focus group lasted for one and one-half hours.

The facilitator led participants in the focus group through a formal and sequenced set of questions. The purpose of the focus group was to identify what the customers' value about the services they receive from the workforce system and what they expect from workforce system in the future. The key focus questions included:

- What, in your opinion, does the system currently do well,
- What, in your opinion, could the system do better,
- How could services be improved, and
- What are future services that will meet business needs?

The facilitator used probes around each question to clarify what each participant was saying. Their opinions provide insights on how to develop quality services and how to position the Workforce Board and system over the next several years. This summary only includes items that had general agreement (not necessarily a consensus) within the focus group.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The business customer satisfaction focus group had two (2) participants. Participants represented small businesses (i.e., 99 employees or less). The industry sectors represented included IT and medical devices. Business participants reported hearing about the workforce system through direct outreach (e.g., received a flyer on the summer program in the mail/email); and through prior knowledge of the system and participating on the workforce board. One participant called the youth center when they had a job opening after having seen marketing material. They were directed to the website to post their job.

The participating businesses had used the system in one or more of the following ways:

- Hosted a summer intern.
- Participated in job fairs.
- Participated in the 'program' by talking to jobseekers.
- Used the system to try to hire for job openings/post jobs.

SRENGTHS

In the focus group, the facilitator asked, '*What works well about the services you are receiving/have received from the workforce system*'. Participants identified the following services and processes as working well.

- The staff is friendly,
- Job Fairs are well organized, and
- The opportunity provided to be a mentor to a young person.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Participants in the focus groups were asked '*what does the workforce system not do so well and how might you improve things?*' The following are not necessarily in priority order.

Areas that don't work as well as they could:

- Staff attitude. One employer reported that it seemed as if the staff '*could care less*' and did not listen to the employers needs. The staff seems focused on their own issues, not those of employers.
- Processes are not user friendly. For example, one employer reported that they were sent to the web site to post a job order and the website was not easy to follow.
- Volume of applicants for entry level was not as much as expected. In the summer experience the employer reported not being allowed to look at resumes. They reported being presented with 2 or 3 candidates to interview but only at the time that the program '*wanted us to interview*', rather than at a time convenient for the employer. The other employer who has listed jobs for hiring purposes also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the applicants and the low numbers.
- Timeliness. One employer stated that it took too long to get referrals from the system for applicants to interview. This employer stated that either '*there is a lack of understanding of how business operates and the quickness with which we need to hire or the system does not have a ready supply, in either case, it did not met my needs.*'

- Screening. Neither employer wanted the system to conduct extensive skills/competencies screening. However, one employer noted that many of the applicants sent did not have *'even the basic requirements asked for in the job description'*, i.e. some experience, or the basic education requirement. One employer stated that they had asked for the intern to have some basic experience working in a lab and the person they were sent did not have that. The employer expressed an understanding that they were a worksite and that part of the responsibility was to provide training to the youth worker; however, this employer stated that they spent too much time having to go over the basics and for a small firm having someone without even basic understanding of their very specialized workplace did not meet their needs.

One employer described having posted a job order and that there were hundreds of resumes in response; however the employer received less than 10 referrals (screened) from the staff and the employer did not hire from any of those referred. The employer reported that they *'never had a face to face with any staff, the staff interacted with the jobseeker and sent them to me'*. The other employer stated, *'I did not want a lot of screening but I did have three or four general criteria. Staff did not seem to be able to screen for that. I expected a larger pool to select from and expected it more quickly'*

- Matching. One employer reported posting a job opening with specific educational requirements and many of the referrals did not meet that minimum. The employer stated that *'it was like the staff did not have time to read the posting'*. This employer reported the following: *'Our experience was that we set out qualifications for one part of our business and the staff did not match potential employees with those qualifications, but as it happened, we had other jobs that the employees we were presented with were good for'*, e.g. staff were presenting applicants for one job and they were poorly matched for the staff recommended position; however the employer found that they were qualified for another area of the company.
- The system does not provide *'ease of understanding'* of the programs available to employers.
- The staff in the system does not seem to understand business operations. One employer described a scenario where the staff *'just showed up with some officials'* one day to take pictures and expected the employer to be available and ready to participate, with no scheduled appointment or preparation or asking about when it might be convenient for the employer. This employer also noted that training to be a worksite supervisor appeared to be conducted at a time convenient for the program and not for the employer.
- Paperwork does not work. One participant described how the paperwork to participate was overwhelming, that there were too many forms.
- There is not much *'real'* follow-up with the business customer. Both business representatives reported that there is no ongoing and systemic check in on *'what else does your company need from us'*. For the summer experience the employer reported that the follow-up visits by staff were good and that the staff was pleasant and polite.
- One employer stated that part of the program they were engaged in *'seemed chaotic at times, like a bunch of sheep without a shepherd'*

The facilitator asked the employer who had participated in the summer experience if they would do it again. The employer answered, *'I loved the intern, so yes because I loved the kid, not because the program makes it easy to be involved. However, I needed someone that had some experience or training in lab safety because I spent too much time training'*.

Suggested improvements:

- Provide on-line access for employers and an easy to understand process on-line about services and how to use them.
- Listen to the employers and refer applicants that have the basic qualifications requested. .
- Be more attuned to businesses and their needs, have *'staff who come to my door and visit me'*
- Increase outreach to employers.

FUTURE SERVICES

The facilitator asked what services might you like in the future.

- Informational services, such as information on Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), templates, etc.
- Recruitment specialist who know industry sectors.
- A more open attitude to employers, *'not make us have to work so hard to get services'*.

The Strategic Planning Team will use these inputs to assist with the development of strategic goals and strategies for action over the next three to five years. Over the next few months, the Team will solicit feedback from other customer groups and stakeholders as part of the planning process.