

REPORT
To the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board
Strategic Planning Team

Customer and Key Stakeholder
FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Conducted May 6 and 17, 2010

Conducted by and Report Prepared by
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INTRODUCTION

On May 6th and 17th 2010, Strumpf Associates moderated a total of three focus groups, one comprised of *key stakeholders and partners*, one comprised of *adult jobseeker customers* and one comprised of *business customers*. The focus groups were conducted on behalf of the Montgomery County, Maryland Workforce Investment Board and are 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 groups were 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 groups 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 customers, potential business customers, key partners and stakeholders* of the Workforce Investment Board made up the focus group participants and provided the feedback contained in this report.

Over fifty individuals representing business customers, adult jobseeker customers, and partners were invited to attend the focus groups. Lori Strumpf facilitated each of the focus groups. The facilitator explained in each instance to all participants that their responses would remain anonymous. They were encouraged to be honest and forthright. Each focus group lasted for one and one-half hours. A total of **twenty-five (25) individuals participated across all the focus groups.**

The facilitator led participants in the focus groups 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 customer/partner 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 each focus group.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

There were nine (9) participants in the *business customer* focus group. Seven of the nine businesses had used or were currently using services from the workforce system. Two had not yet used the services and were finding out about them primarily through the focus group. Current businesses users reported hearing about the services from another colleague, past use, or from a presentation made at an event. The business represented small (16 employees) to medium (slightly less than 250 employees) size businesses in the hospitality, association management, government, bio-tech, and technology industries. The services that the business representatives reported using were: training reimbursement (most of the participants); conducting job fairs (one participant); recruiting applicants (1 participant).

The *stakeholder* focus groups had a total of eleven (11) participants. Participants represented several of the workforce programs, including youth, adult (including Health and Human Services customers), dislocated worker, seniors, ex-offenders, and veterans.

There were five (5) participants in the *jobseeker* customer focus group. All of the jobseekers interviewed had participated in some workforce service through a Center or a partner. All of the focus group participants were dislocated workers with work experience and some level of education and credentials. Jobseekers reported hearing about the services by referral from their prior company, referral from a counselor, or word of mouth from a family member or a friend. Jobseekers reported using a variety of services, including attending workshops, attending project management training/certification, and receiving job listings.

SRENGTHS

In each focus group the facilitator asked a question related to what currently works well about the workforce system. Participants identified the following services and processes as working well.

Business:

'For those of you that have used the services, what has worked well?'

- Ability to get reimbursed for training for current workers.
- The process to apply for and receive training reimbursement was described as *efficient and easy* by some and *too burdensome* by others.
- The job fairs. It was reported by the one employer who had used this service that over 3,000 individuals attended.
- Being able to recruit at the center for workers.
- The ability of the centers to deliver on qualified applicants for the job fair and through on site recruitment.
- Reimbursement for training is quick and efficient.
- Staff is helpful.
- Provision of English skills training for current employees on site. The participants that had received this service reported it as *'efficient to set up and effective'*.

The facilitator asked: *'For those of you who have not used the workforce system, what would you expect such a system¹ to do for you?'*

- Pre screening of applicants based on company criteria.
- Reach into a pool of potential workers who may be qualified but not actively looking for work.

Adult Jobseekers:

'What worked well for you with the services you received?'

- Some classes/training/workshops were helpful.
- Some staff was helpful.
- Help in the beginning was helpful. As one participant stated, *'they help you repair your soul, make you feel better; they help you to deal with all that feeling stuff of being laid off'*
- All expressed their appreciation of the services and the training.

Stakeholders:

'What works well for you/your customers with the current workforce system?'

- Partnerships and relationships between people and agencies, many of which have been long standing.
- Montgomery Works staff is responsive. As one participant stated, *'every time I reach out and need something they respond'*.
- *Staff is very helpful to my population and they understand their needs. They work with them on the computer and help them. However, in the five years I have worked with Montgomery Works it still has not resulted in a job for my customers via a linkage from the Maryland Workforce Exchange database or any linkage made through an employer recruitment or other assistance given by the One Stop staff.'* (The focus group participant who made this statement was hesitant to put the part about their customers not getting jobs via the connection with Montgomery Works in the category for improvement because they stated that it could be their customers and not a problem with Montgomery Works)
- Open and receptive to new partners and partnerships.
- Referral process to some partner agencies.
- The opportunity to receive funds and the opportunities provided to customers thru those funds.

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.

Business

The businesses were asked *'for those of you who have used the system what areas don't work as*

¹ The facilitator referred to the workforce system and asked that participants in all the focus groups define it as where ever they received services to help them get training and link to jobs (jobseekers) or where they would look for qualified applicants and training for workers and other HR services (businesses).

well as they could and how might you improve things?’ All the participants were asked to think broader than the services they have experienced, and for those who had not used the system at all to ‘think about if you were going to outsource your HR functions, what would be the key features of the contractor’s workforce/HR services?’

Areas that don’t work as well as they could and suggested improvements/key features:

- The cap on the salary level for an individual to be able to receive training and for the company to be reimbursed should be higher. Participants reported it at \$85,000 or less and thought it should be up to a salary of \$100,000 to qualify for training reimbursement.
- Soft skills should qualify for training reimbursement and they do not.
- The process is not always clear on how training reimbursements work and what training will be reimbursed. One participant reported that their company tried to use the training reimbursement system a few years ago and were often disqualified from being reimbursed. What qualified and what did not was not clearly explained. This company stopped using the workforce system.
- Applications for training reimbursement should be on line.
- Too much paperwork at the front end to apply for the training reimbursement program.
- Too much lead time is required to apply to qualify a training program. One participant described how their employees find something they are interested in and it may be occurring within 2 weeks, yet it takes as long as 6 weeks to apply and to get approval for a training course.
- Develop a better understanding of how business works. One participant reported that due to the lead time to get training courses approved, they had gotten employees to think ahead for what training they might want. The requests were submitted. However, once the training got closer, the business itself did not have the required funds for all the training to support their part of the training costs so they could not provide all the ‘approved’ training to all the employees. Staff of the workforce system then explained to the business that ‘*this money was put aside for you and now you are not using it and that is not good for us*’. The focus group participant reported that they felt that in the next year their ‘*wrist was being slapped*’ for not using all the money the year before by not receiving training reimbursement approvals.
- More space would have improved the job fair.
- More awareness. Both users and non users in the focus group asked if there was a web site. Most of the focus group participants expressed surprise at hearing (from the focus group discussion) that other services, such as job fairs, recruitments, assessments, etc., were services that the system offered employers. They only reported knowing about the initial service they initiated receiving. All of the focus group participants reported that none of the staff they dealt with ever explained/promoted/mentioned any other service offerings beyond the requested service.

Stakeholders

Areas that don't work as well as they could and suggested improvements:

- *Staff is responsive but I still do not see results for my customers, meaning help in getting my customers jobs.*
- *My customers say it is not a place they want to go to (applied to youth and to ex offenders).*
- The center is not youth friendly.
- The youth program is not designed to support the most disconnected youth . There is too much paperwork and youth get lost by the time they have to fill out all the paperwork, if they even have the required documentation.
- It was reported that some of the front end people are rude and not friendly, not customer service oriented.
- The staff is not as culturally competent as is required given the diversity of the community. There is little to no multi-lingual ability in the center(s). It was reported that leadership has been willing to work to grow the cultural competence of staff.
- *Customers expect us to do too much for them.* One participant explained that this meant that the customer expected the staff of the one stop/programs to help them find jobs.
- Knowledge about veterans and their spouses having priority of service does not seem to be as well known as it should be among all the staff.
- One of the classes has two parts; however a customer can only register for one part at a time. The consequence is that by the time the customer is eligible to register for part two, they end up having to wait 2 weeks because the next one (right after) is already full. The group agreed that this was not good customer service.
- Not enough referrals are being made to support services in general and to the food bank in particular. Focus group participants wondered if all staff is knowledgeable about the partners and the support services they offer. Many noted, for instance, that they did not know that a partnership between the food bank and Montgomery Works existed.
- There are not enough classes at the college to fill the need.
- One participant reported that they were never trained on the computer system in terms of helping customers do a resume or to enter data, stating that *'I have had to figure it out on my own.'*
- More focused training for specific segments of population. Try training workshops to meet specific needs of older works, youth, and professionals who have been recently laid off due to the economy.

The facilitator asked the stakeholders to fill in the blank, *'if only [there was the following for our customers] and if only [there were the following innovations in the system].'*

- *'If only customers could register on line for classes and did not have to physically come to the center.*
- *If only we knew more about each other as partners.*
- *If only there was a data base on each of the partners, what they do, how to gain access for customers.*
- *If only we simply knew who all the partners were.*

- *If only there were more resources to increase capacity for services.* The facilitator asked if it was only a capacity issue or did new services also need to be developed from a best practices/innovation lens. All of the participants thought all the necessary services were ‘out there’ just need more of them.
- *If only there were job developers in the system to help make the connection for job seekers from services to jobs.*
- *If only all the case managers knew the support services and were more informative to the customers about what is available and how to access.*
- *If only the business representatives spent more time at the centers and brought employers to the centers.*
- *If only everyone (e.g., staff) knew how to use the computer systems.*
- *If only we were coordinated in some way to all be at the table to examine potential funding opportunities and how to go after them together.*
- *If only there was more attention paid to various language and cultural competency issues.*
- *If only the many processes that customers go thru were streamlined.*
- *If only there was a more customer service orientation from staff in the center.*
- *If only the County Government staff were able to hire in a more direct way the older worker who has been trained by a County Supervisor for one year.*
- *If only staff could specialize – in population needs and industry needs’.*

Adult Jobseekers

Areas that don’t work as well as they could and suggested improvements:

- The front end process is not very customer service oriented. As one participant described it, and everyone else agreed, ‘*they kind of order you around, they tell you to put your social security number here (pointing) and then go there (pointing) but no one explains the process, the steps and what will happen next.*’
- ‘*They were not ready for us.*’ The facilitator asked who ‘us’ was. All of the focus group participants responded that ‘us’ meant ‘*professionals, people with long work histories, people with education and skills.*’
- The process is ‘*not very organized, not very professional.*’
- Several of the focus group participants had used the services of the Professional Outplacement Assistance Center (POAC) and reported that the Montgomery Works system was ‘*not like POAC*’. The facilitator asked how POAC was different and the responses were that POAC was ‘*more organized more professional, more efficient, more customer friendly.*’
- Focus group participants reported getting an assessment and some overview on how to read the results; however they reported that ‘*no one sits you down and says – based on the results – here is what you could focus on.*’ They all reported wanting more of a career coach, someone who helped them plan a pathway to a new job/career.
- Some of the participants reported that they ‘*picked classes on my own*’ and again, reported that an improvement would be if a professional staff person provided insights and advice.

- Participants reported that there is not much help in the career resource area, so they can use their own computer at home.
- One person reported attending a Job Fair. They stated that the Job Fair had a recruiter instead of the actual employer. The focus group participant had expected to interact with the actual employer and suggested that if a job fair is going to have recruiters instead, that should be made clear in the advertising.

Specific improvements identified by the job seekers:

- More funds for classes.
- More training opportunities.
- More direction from the career counselors.
- More strategizing with career counselors.
- Career counselors who have more information about resources, for instance one participant said, *'I never knew about POAC until this focus group'*.
- Create internships and volunteer opportunities so jobseekers can get a foot in the door with employers.
- Develop mentoring opportunities with employers or with jobseekers that have gotten jobs.
- Improve customer service. The wait is too long and then there is no direction on what will happen next.
- Create classes at a higher level of skill.
- Provide networking opportunities.
- Provide job leads.
- Easier access to the job leads descriptions.
- More direct link to employers after course completion/graduation. As one person said, *'The program needs to be an advocate for us with businesses; I get job leads from the counselor, but I often do not hear back from the employer and the program is not advocating for me to get a job interview'*.

The facilitator asked jobseekers, *'if you could wish for one thing to be different, what would it be related to the services you receive'*.

- *'More help.'*
- *'Help me understand how to get from point A to B to C.'*

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Business focus group participants were asked what they saw as their workforce challenges over the next two to three years. Many of the employers in the focus group hired professional level employees, including scientists, researchers, and project managers. Some hired non-professional entry level, including animal care takers, census workers, accounts receivable clerks, and housekeepers.

- Retirements of baby boomers over the next three years and replacing their knowledge and experience.

- Retention. As the economy improves, keeping individuals who may see better opportunities elsewhere and leave. Most of the employers reported investing in their employees' development. When they leave, it is costly for the business.
- Paying competitive wages for the area.
- Ongoing professional development of their current workforce.
- Training of professional level technical people (e.g., scientists) in management and customer service.
- Creating career pathways within a small company.
- Gen Y's ability to conduct an interview and to have realistic expectations for the salary in their first or second job.
- Traffic. The areas traffic problem makes traveling for work and the commute to work difficult and adds to the retention issue.

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.