

The personnel factor: Exploring the personal attributes of highly successful employment specialists who work with transition-age youth

George Tilson* and Monica Simonsen
TransCen, Inc., Rockville, MD, USA

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Abstract. Employment specialists play a pivotal role in assisting youth and adults with disabilities find and retain jobs. This requires a unique combination of skills, competencies and personal attributes. While the fields of career counseling, vocational rehabilitation and special education transition have documented the ideal skills sets needed to achieve desired outcomes, the authors characterize these as essential mechanics. What have not been examined are the personal qualities that effective employment specialists possess. Theorizing that these successful professionals exhibit traits and behaviors beyond the mechanics, the authors conducted a qualitative study incorporating in-depth interviews with 17 top-performing staff of a highly successful national program, The Marriott Foundation's *Bridges from school to work*. Four personal attributes emerged from the interviews: (a) principled optimism; (b) cultural competence; (c) business-oriented professionalism; and (d) networking savvy. In presenting these findings, the authors discuss the implications for recruitment, hiring, training, and advancing truly effective employment specialists, and offer recommendations for further research.

Keywords: Transition, job development, employment outcomes, attributes, competencies

1. Introduction

Now in its third decade, the field of transition to adult life for youth with disabilities has amassed a history of legislation, regulation, policy, models of intervention, and research related to the processes leading to desired post high school outcomes [11]. Despite progress, students with disabilities are still at a significantly increased risk for poor transition outcomes [28, 39]. In other words, they are at greater risk of dropping out of school and have higher rates of unemployment or underemployment, social isolation, homelessness,

dependence on others, and involvement in the criminal justice system. This is especially true of: a) minority youth, particularly those living in urban settings [18, 30, 37]; b) youth with developmental disabilities, including intellectual disabilities [22, 38]; c) youth with emotional/behavioral disabilities and mental illness [3, 7, 8, 14, 42]; and d) youth with multiple and significant disabilities [9, 12]. Through substantial efforts to identify the key variables in successful transition to employment, especially for these marginalized populations, a number of predictors have emerged [35]. One of the most consistent predictors has been community-based work experience while youth are still in high school, particularly paid jobs where students are integrated into authentic work places alongside co-workers without disabilities [18, 24, 33, 35].

*Address for correspondence: George Tilson, TransCen, Inc., 401 North Washington Street, Suite 450, Rockville, MD 20850, USA. E-mail: gtilson@transcen.org.

Over the years there have been thorough descriptions of vocational, career and technology education and work experience programs for youth with disabilities [1, 21, 23]. Thus, for the most part we know the mechanics of how to implement such interventions and considerable outcome data have been drawn from evaluations of these efforts [18, 31]. Essential to the success of these work experience programs are the employment specialists who are responsible for carrying out the programmatic features and best practices that have been presented in the literature. These professionals are required to assess the skills of the job seeker, create relationships with community employers, assist in matching youth with work opportunities, and provide workplace supports to the youth, their supervisors and coworkers. Recently there has been concern expressed about the shortage and high turnover of effective direct service professionals to assist people with disabilities find employment in the community [2, 36].

To guide the practices of these employment specialists, the field now has a series of identified competencies that serve as a framework for training and evaluation of employment specialists (e.g. Association for Persons in Supported Employment; Training Resource Network, Council on Rehabilitation Education, The Division of Career Development and Transition of the Council for Exceptional Children, National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth). See Table 1 for examples of these competencies. Although there is some professional consensus about the importance of these skills, few of these competencies have been validated through empirical research [26]. Further, it appears that the skills, knowledge and competencies identified by these organizations as important for practitioners can be categorized as the “mechanics” rather than the personal characteristics or attributes of the individuals who implement job development, placement and workplace supports. Given the high degree of staff turnover, transition programs and employment service providers are left trying to identify how to recruit and identify individuals who have the potential to acquire these competencies and become effective employment specialists. This is especially true in regards to early career professionals who may not have relevant experience.

The relationship between personal attributes and professional competencies, job satisfaction, job performance, and career longevity has been extensively explored and documented in the fields of education, sales/marketing, and nursing [5, 6, 20, 34]. For example, in one study of 200 sales representatives, Barling & Beattie [5] found a statistically significant relationship

between the self-efficacy skills of the representatives and their respective sales performance. Hospital patient satisfaction is frequently linked to the personal attributes of nursing staff, including compassion and strong communication skills [34]. This led us to ask if successful employment professionals also exhibit unique personal attributes. Do these attributes better enable them to acquire and make the most of the specific competencies needed to be effective employment service providers? As the disability employment field struggles to recruit, train, and retain qualified employment specialists, it is surprising that there is limited research about the personal attributes of successful employment specialists.

In the quest to find and develop effective employment specialists and ultimately improve the employment outcomes for the job seekers with whom they work, it is important that organizations be equipped to identify characteristics of employment specialists who have the greatest potential to acquire requisite professional competencies. Whitely, Kostick & Bush (2010) conducted a study that specifically focused on the personal attributes of 22 employment specialists who worked for mental health provider agencies with strong track records of implementing evidence-based supported employment [40]. Through in-depth interviews, they identified eight predominant attributes which they labeled as: initiative, outreach, persistence, hardiness, empathy, passion, team orientation, and professionalism. While these findings provide a foundation for understanding the essential attributes of effective employment specialists, the subjects in this study were limited in terms of the population of job seekers with whom they work (i.e. adults with severe mental illness), whereas the respondents in our study provided employment services to youth job seekers across a wide spectrum of disabilities. In another study, Fabian, Simonsen, Buchanan & Luecking (2011) endeavored to identify unique characteristic of job developers and found these professionals could be assigned to the following categories: a) *Relationship Builders*; b) *Supply Siders*, or c) *Job Brokers* [19]. These characteristics were based on perceptions these professionals had about employers and the employment process, rather than personal attributes. Neither of these studies screened the participants to ensure that each employment specialist had personal records of successful employment outcomes for the jobseekers they represent. The present study sought to extend the work of these researchers by identifying personal attributes of highly effective employment specialists who have documented successful employment

Table 1
Sample employment specialist competencies by professional source

Competency/activity	APSE/TRN, Inc.	CORE	DCDT	MFPD	NCWDY
Discovery & assessment					
Counsel job seeker on disability disclosure; develop a disclosure plan with the job seeker, based on needs for accommodation	X	X		X	X
Develop person-centered vocational profile based on interviews with job seeker and others familiar with his/her abilities and work history, selected assessment tools, record reviews, and observations	X	X		X	X
Develop career exploration sites that align with the job seeker's interests and goals	X		X		X
Provide information about career opportunities; Guide job seeker in identifying short- and long-term career goals				X	X
Conduct formal and informal career assessment activities to identify job seeker's interests and preferences	X		X	X	
Use job seeker's interests and preferences to develop post-school goals	X		X	X	X
Employer relationships					
Gather/analyze labor trend info, and job requirements	X	X		X	X
Effectively contact and communicate with employers	X			X	X
Maintain list of contacts	X			X	
Use effective marketing tools	X			X	X
Use language and images that highlight abilities and interests of job seekers	X			X	
Conduct informational interviews with local companies	X			X	
Respond appropriately to employer concerns	X			X	
Provide info on incentive programs available to employers	X	X			
Job matching					
Conduct job site analyses to identify job requirements, expectations, and workplace culture	X			X	X
Match skills and interests of the job seeker to skills and demands required by employers	X		X	X	X
Develop employment proposals for customized jobs	X			X	X
Workplace supports					
Identify support needs and facilitate methods of accommodation	X	X	X	X	X
Develop an individualized plan for post-placement support	X			X	X
Ensure transportation is in place	X			X	
Solicit natural support, including family	X		X	X	
Assist with initial orientation and training	X	X	X	X	X
Introduce new employee to co-workers; facilitate workplace social connections	X			X	X
Assist employer to evaluate job performance	X			X	
Collect data to monitor progress	X			X	
Identify and assist employee in accessing community resources	X		X	X	X
Provide consultation and support to the employer	X			X	X
Identify opportunities for job/career advancement	X			X	

Note. These organizations have specifically identified these competencies/activities in their program guidelines or publications. Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE); Training Resource Network, Inc. (TRN); Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE); The Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) of the Council for Exceptional Children; Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities (MFPD); and the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD-Y).

outcomes for marginalized youth with a broad range of disabilities.

2. Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with employment specialists (known as “employer representatives”) from the nationally operated Bridges from School to Work Program (“Bridges”) for transition-age youth with disabilities. We believe these professionals serve

as viable proxies for a wider range of employment specialist personnel responsible for placing youth in community-based paid jobs and unpaid work experiences, which include employment staff of community provider agencies, transition staff, and vocational rehabilitation counselors. Initially our intent was to interview and compare staff with the highest and lowest placement and retention outcomes. It became readily apparent that while there were a few marginal performers, none could be considered to have unacceptably low outcomes, from the program perspective.

We subsequently adjusted our approach. We invited all staff to participate in the study. Following the interviews we examined each employment specialist's individual placement outcomes.

Our decision to use qualitative methodology to conduct this investigation follows the rationale posed by a number of researchers. According to Erickson (2011) "qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them." (p. 43) [17]. Ours is a grounded theory approach, that is, throughout our analyses we compared our findings with the extant literature as a means of corroborating our evidence, or developing new categories for further analysis. In grounded theory, data collection and analysis reciprocally inform each other through an emergent iterative process. It has been characterized as a systematic and inductive approach [29]. This approach allowed us to return to the literature to search for any empirical studies related to that phenomenon. Since the lead researcher had extensive professional experience with the Bridges model, as its first site director, then national director and trainer, our team was able to draw upon his experience as a resource [16]. Our overall process for conducting and presenting our analyses included data organization, reduction, display and conclusion drawing/verification [27].

2.1. Study sample

The respondents of this study were 17 top-performing staff of a highly successful national program, the Marriott Foundation's Bridges from School to Work. Since 1989, Bridges has been implemented in the urban centers of Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Across the sites, approximately 1,000 youth between the ages of 17 and 22 enroll in Bridges annually, with the goal of preparing for and entering the workforce. These youth represent the broad spectrum of disability. From 1990 through 2012, Bridges enrolled more than 18,000 youth. Of these total enrollees, 75% secured competitive paid employment across every industry sector; of these, 76% retained their initial job placements for a minimum of 90 days.

Typically, over a 15–24 month period employer representatives from Bridges conduct skills assessments, career planning, job development, placement, evaluation, and follow-up services. Program activities and results are closely tracked and monitored through

a comprehensive, proprietary, web-based data management system. The system allows effective record keeping and management of all aspects of the youth's employment progress while enabling a process of continuous quality improvement throughout Bridges as an organization. These staff members receive intensive formal and informal training. It should be noted that the current probationary period for newly-hired employment specialists is six months, which gives both the program and the professional a significant opportunity to determine whether the match is strong and mutually beneficial. This speaks to the Foundation's commitment to recruiting and retaining the best possible staff of employment specialists.

Through the Marriott Foundation national office we gained access to all seven Bridges sites as well as to the Foundation's database, which contains extensive process and outcome data for each site. We identified 57 Bridges employment specialists who had been employed prior to 2010, with tenure of at least two years. These staff were fully informed of the purpose of the study through a letter sent out by the executive director of the Marriott Foundation and were invited to participate in interviews on a voluntary basis. The research team then followed up with details of the study, and provided staff with consent forms, documentation of IRB approval and contact information. All prospective interviewees were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time should they so desire. In all, 20 employment specialists representing each of the seven sites participated in the interviews. Following a criterion sampling technique espoused by Marshall & Rossman (2006) which allows the researcher to select, post hoc, respondents that meet pre-determined parameters, we then reviewed outcome data from the Bridges national database for each of the 20 interviewees [25]. Our final sample included 17 employment specialists whose placement and retention outcomes matched or exceeded the national and respective site outcomes for Bridges. Their tenures with Bridges ranged from two to 12 years, with an average of six years. Site representation was as follows: San Francisco (5); Chicago (4); Atlanta (3); Dallas (2); Philadelphia (2); and Los Angeles (1). Eleven of the respondents were female; 6 male. Most of the respondents self-identified as belonging to ethnic and racial minorities: African-American (5), Latino (4), and Asian-American (2). Eleven of the participants had a bachelor's degree; six had master's degrees, one of whom stated she was currently in a doctoral program. Of the 17 participants, 11 spoke a second language; if not fluently, at a level they felt was useful in

helping them communicate with limited-English speaking youth and their families.

2.2. Instrumentation

To guide the in-depth interviews, we developed a structured protocol, following the examples of Creswell (2009) and Yin (2009) [15, 41]. From our review of the literature on the topics of youth transition, professional competencies of employment practitioners, and self-efficacy, we identified key empirical factors that influenced the protocol items and addressed our key research questions. As mentioned previously, the lead researcher had extensive prior direct experience with the Bridges program; therefore we were able to further focus our protocol based on his detailed understanding of the model and its delivery.

We conducted pilot interviews with five Bridges staff that had been on the job for less than a year and would therefore not be among the final interviewees. The intent of these pilot interviews was to determine the clarity and relevance of the questions (content and format), the respondents' comfort level in answering the questions, and whether the length of the interview protocol seemed appropriate. Pilot interviewees were also given an opportunity to suggest how questions might be revised or added. Based on their feedback, we determined that minor changes to the order of the questions would create a more logical sequence that would better encourage conversation. Five advisors, including four field experts at TransCen, Inc. and a doctoral student at the University of Maryland, subsequently reviewed the draft protocol and provided further feedback, including the addition of probes to further facilitate open discussion.

The protocol was organized into eight sections: (1) respondent demographics; (2) roles, responsibilities, and issues in working with youth and employers; (3) collaboration with families; (4) cultural and diversity competencies and experiences; (5) collaboration with colleagues and community partners; (6) perceived youth success factors; (7) professional development; and (8) personal philosophy.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

All interviews were conducted via telephone during the months of December 2011 and January 2012. Respondents granted permission to make audio recordings of the interview sessions. Two researchers co-facilitated all of the interviews, which gave us

the ability to take extensive notes throughout the conversations and to review them jointly immediately following the sessions, each of which was approximately one hour in duration. In keeping with accepted procedures for qualitative research [29] we followed an iterative process, moving back and forth between data collection to analysis. At the conclusion of each session we compared notes and identified initial impressions and emerging themes. In order to take full advantage of themes that suggested new or revised questions, we made enhancements to the protocol. Audio recordings were subsequently transcribed; all identifying information about the respondents was removed to maintain anonymity.

As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), we first organized the data, in this case by placing the responses of all interviewees under each protocol question, with allowed us a first opportunity to compare and contrast data across the respondents [27]. Initial impressions were then incorporated into preliminary summary write-ups. In this way we were able to summarize data we were getting from individual interviews and across interviews.

It is important to note that while we went into the coding process with an understanding of existing constructs related to our research questions, we did not have an a priori coding system. Rather, initial themes emerged during the interviews themselves. We uploaded the transcripts into the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 9 (2011) and began labeling segments of text with our initial codes, in this way assigning meaning to the narrative data. From this point we were able to cluster the text segments relating to a particular construct or theme. Our team of researchers continued this process of data reduction until we reached a consensus that we had identified four mutually exclusive categories. As a final step, we shared our preliminary findings with the participants in order to ensure that we had accurately captured their experiences and to solicit their feedback on our categories of personal attributes. All seven participants we reached for this member checking step indicated we had a credible interpretation of their experiences; in their opinion the four attribute categories accurately reflected their perceptions of personal characteristics of effective Bridges employment specialists.

3. Results

Analysis of the data suggests that there were four distinct attributes of the professionals in our study. Each

was characterized as having a) a sense of principled optimism, b) strong cultural competence, c) business-oriented professionalism, and d) networking savvy.

3.1. Principled optimism

We define “principled optimism” as having the genuine belief in the capabilities of the jobseekers and a responsibility to empower them. The employment specialists articulated a belief in the youth on their caseloads and genuine interest in getting to know their unique talents.

“I believe in each person’s potential. I believe that every kid needs to be given the tools to succeed, life skills – how to act like an adult, unlocking potential.”

“You have to get rid of your own biases and preconceived ideas about youth. Throw it all out! Every student is unique and you must start where you are with them. They can tell so quickly if you’re really interested in them or if you’re just a phony.”

The employment specialists also demonstrated this confidence in the youth by referring to the importance of setting high expectations.

“Basically I set my expectations pretty high for them. Don’t dumb things down. Give them a feeling of wanting to achieve. They work hard to maintain their jobs. I motivate them by holding them to a high standard.”

In addition to believing in the youth, the employment specialists in this study described a strong sense of responsibility to empower and support youth. There were many indicators that these professionals view unexpected challenges as opportunities to act; as one staff member put it “to do whatever it takes.” This sense of obligation and commitment was influenced by a variety of factors, including: religious values, innate philanthropic principles, and empathy developed through having difficult childhoods.

“I am very religious. I’ve been very blessed in my life to have a good support network of family and friends and go to college. Many of our students don’t have this.”

“In our community, nation, and world – we’re only as strong as our weakest link. In working with our population, we are strengthening the weak links and helping them reach their potential which will help

all of us. If you lose the passion, step aside – it does a disservice to the youth.”

“I came from a dysfunctional family – I struggled so that is why I relate to the struggles of these youth – can empathize and hopefully make a difference.”

“I truly feel that I might be the only opportunity for a student to be able to get out of the type of lifestyle they are in. I’ve been around long enough to see a change; how it enhanced their life. I feel like I’m giving back.”

The employment specialists seemed to be extremely invested in the youth and some described being compelled to work with youth with more significant barriers to employment. The employment specialists described their sense of satisfaction and joy when their clients were successful.

“I basically love picking the schools that are from the most challenging socio-economic backgrounds and the most challenging family backgrounds.”

“I can give an example of a student who was “paralyzed” about going out to meet employers. Shaking like a leaf. Couldn’t make a phone call or speak to people. Gradually with support she improved immensely. She was able to succeed. I went with her on the bus, I sat next to her, and she felt so much better. I took her out to buy an outfit for the interviews. She found a job – I was so proud of her!”

“I’m excited about being able to make a difference in someone’s life.”

Through close examination of the interview transcripts, it became clear that their commitment to and passion for their work motivated these professionals to work hard on behalf of youth that they believed in. There was a strong sense of personal satisfaction and exhilaration conveyed by these staff; they were eager to give examples of youth successes and seemed to be energized in sharing their stories.

“It’s pretty cool to see [the youth] actually change their behaviors, use new skills. You see it in their faces. They’re making a contribution.”

“I think leading by example is absolutely essential. If I don’t do this, I don’t expect my students to do so.”

Across the interviews, it was striking how pervasive this sense of principled optimism was. The employment specialists demonstrated a genuine sense of optimism

that they would be successful in finding jobs for these youth with multiple barriers to employment. When asked to describe specific barriers, the employment specialists in our study were more inclined to describe the strategies that they used to overcome these barriers and frequently talked about the compensatory strategies used by the youth themselves. They described their work with pride and demonstrated principled commitment to quality. Perhaps this sense of principled optimism is best illustrated in the following quote:

“I think I’m very passionate about what I do. That’s what makes the job what it is for me. I don’t mind doing it seven days a week – students can contact me anytime. I have to be aware of the needs and I am proud of the work I do. If you are not flexible and creative, this is not the job for you.”

3.2. *Cultural competence*

We define culture broadly as “the values, norms and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world” [13]. Therefore, cultural competence is not restricted to race/ethnicity. Further, we define cultural competence as having an awareness of the context in which youth live (e.g. urban, high poverty, high crime) and the ability to communicate effectively with youth and their families. The employment specialists in our study seemed committed to learning about the youth as individuals and understanding the cultural context in which the youth lived. They demonstrated cultural competence by considering the interconnectedness of environmental and situational factors that would influence the job placement and retention process (e.g. poverty, homelessness, family support; neighborhood gang activity). The employment specialists repeatedly described their strategies to accommodate for specific barriers and to help connect youth with other resources (e.g. citizenship, housing, etc.).

Many of the employment specialists talked about the importance of connecting with the youth. Several referenced the fact that texting was an effective and age-appropriate way to connect and maintain contact with the youth.

“I have constant communication with them. Texting is huge. It is important to keep in touch with them frequently. I send congratulations notes in the snail mail when they meet each benchmark.”

The employment specialists also described the importance of communicating with families. They demonstrated a respect for the role of family members—specifically for culturally and linguistically diverse youth. Further, they identified the various strategies they use to engage family members including phone calls, letters, and home visits. While it is important to note that some of their practices are dictated by the Bridges program itself or by leadership at the local site, it was also notable that the employment specialists spoke of the families in a manner that reflected a high degree of respect and even reverence. They described their efforts to be flexible in order to accommodate the logistical barriers to family involvement.

“I try to meet all the parents – first, we send out a letter; then I do a home visit or meet them at school in person. Key is the visit – seeing and talking with the parents gives me an idea of how the students live, where they live. We want the parent to know that I’m involved and what I’ll be doing. I talk to them as a partner.”

“After the home visit, I try to figure out the parents’ personality. For some, I will drop by again to see them. I started doing monthly phone calls to keep the families informed. I’m straightforward and honest with them.”

By treating the youth and their families with genuine respect, they formed trusting relationships with them and thus were able to communicate with them effectively. Culturally competent individuals are able to identify the role that their own race, ethnicity and experiences play in shaping their world view and communication styles. Each of the Bridges employment specialists had diverse caseloads and they acknowledged the existence of cross-cultural communication issues.

“I am working with a colleague who has done mentoring with young black males with rough histories – she will come and assist me.”

“Being a minority helps me – most of the youths’ profiles are similar to what mine was when I was a youth, so I think I can identify, I can empathize with them better.”

The employment specialists were asked to describe some of the youths’ barriers to employment. Each employment specialist was able to describe a multitude of challenges, including poverty, homelessness, neighborhood gang activity, medical issues, transportation,

pregnancy, and undocumented legal immigration status. When the employment specialists described challenges faced by the youth, they expressed a sense of awe and admiration for the fortitude of these young people.

3.3. *Business-oriented professionalism*

The employment specialists in our study had a broad range of backgrounds, education, and career paths and yet, they all shared a sense of business-oriented professionalism, defined as understanding what motivates businesses and having a commitment to high personal standards for professional behavior that mirrors effective business practices. The employment specialists frequently spoke about the needs of the employer and their strategies to provide solid customer service.

“We are a resource to employers so I have to work to get the employers to see me as a valuable asset. Letting them know this is what we can do for you—we call it ‘features to benefits.’ I always provide follow-up to the employer to ensure service after the sale.”

“It is important to let employers know that I’m there to serve them – customer service. I listen to what they want and provide what they need. I show an interest in them. I personalize my approach with each employer and many have become good professional friends of mine.”

“When meeting [employers], I try to find out what their needs are, find out what’s going to make their job/life easier. That’s basically what it’s all about. They are in it to make money, they aren’t a social services company – they aren’t there to help.”

The employment specialists demonstrated a pragmatic understanding of the value that employers place on soft-skills. When describing their relationships with the youth, they spoke of the importance of holding students to high expectations.

“I was at one point an enabler. Took me years – I would give them bus cards when they should be responsible. I’ve gotten so much better at those types of things.”

“I tell the students that they have to treat me like their first professional adult relationship.”

In addition to having high expectations for the youths’ behaviors, the employment specialists had high standards for their own professional conduct. None of

the participants complained about their workload and many of them spoke about working extra hours to meet the needs of the youth and businesses.

“Having lots of energy is important for this job. You can’t come to work tired and exhausted. Even if you are tired, you need to act perky.”

“What I do is work a lot of evenings at home – like putting things in the database so I can spend more time during the day for job developing and going to the schools. Anything that I can’t do in the evening I make sure that I can take care of during the day time.”

“I kind of set goals for myself and I don’t know how I do it – I just do it. I had a 13 hour day yesterday – a 10 AM meeting and I didn’t get home until 11 PM!”

The notion of setting goals and holding oneself accountable is consistent with the employment specialists’ outcome-orientation. They spoke frequently about their performance measures rather than their effort.

“Retention and advancement are critical – are we accomplishing this?”

“If I push too hard – I might encourage them to do something that doesn’t work out. Have I set the kid up for failure? That can cause problems with that employer.”

We asked the participants to describe how they organize their workload. While the employment specialists in the study reported a variety of strategies for prioritizing and organizing their job tasks, a common theme seemed to be that they all employed specific strategies for multi-tasking. They talked about chunking their job tasks so that they could meet the needs of the youth, the employer, and complete paperwork. A few illustrative quotes paint the picture of hard-working professionals who are capable of juggling multiple job demands.

“I set aside every Friday for paperwork. As for job development – I have a goal to meet new employers every Thursday. Lots of lists and calendars. Only interviews and emergencies interfere with this schedule.”

“Organization is the key. I maintain a binder with all information about the activities I’ve been involved in. Every day I review the notebook and specifically track my activities.”

“My mantra: whatever is worth doing is worth doing well.”

3.4. *Networking savvy*

The Employment specialists in our study can be characterized as having the ability to connect with people and resources to create and access opportunities for youth. Throughout the interviews, the employment specialists described creative strategies for identifying new opportunities for youth, negotiating mutually beneficial relationships, and collaborating with colleagues. These were all reflective of what we have called “networking savvy.”

Some employment specialists described specific strategies for identifying potential employers; several had taken the initiative to join business organizations, not only to promote the program, but to become an active participant in these organizations. Hence they were seen by employers not as outsiders but as “one of them.” Two employment specialists even took leadership roles on committees within these business groups.

“I’m part of the chamber of commerce and I make presentations to business groups, like rotary clubs.”

Although Bridges is an employment service program, the employment specialists in this study gave multiple examples of how they worked with other organizations or advocated for other supports that the youth may need to address a barrier to employment.

“I had one student who was living with an alcoholic father who was the [SSI] payee for him. The father didn’t want him to work and the youth became homeless. I had to reach out to other organizations to help him find shelter.”

“I have several students who are on the verge of homelessness with no food. I will ask a colleague for outside resources.”

“[My colleagues and I] collaborate on job development and share leads and contacts. If I have a student I’ve done everything I can think of – I’ll ask a colleague to see if they have a different perspective.”

This notion of collaboration with the team was extremely prevalent during the interviews. Employment specialists reported frequent occasions when they would work closely with a colleague on difficult situations involving the youth.

“I will ask a colleague for outside resources. We collaborate on job development.”

“I am working with colleagues who have done mentoring with young black males with rough histories – they will come and assist me in communicating with these youth.”

The employment specialists provided multiple examples of how they approached employers, and described their strategies with confidence.

“When I go to meet with employers, I’m very upfront and open to hearing what their needs are. I keep in touch . . . I’m personable . . . and the other thing – I don’t do it by formula because I look at every employer differently . . . It’s a relationship . . . an art not a science.”

4. Discussion

It is critical that employment specialists be capable of acquiring the unique professional competencies that lead to successful employment outcomes for their job seekers, specifically those who face multiple barriers to employment. The professionals we interviewed worked with youth with a variety of disabilities (including intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, autism, and emotional disabilities). All of them demonstrated their effectiveness in achieving excellent outcomes as indicated by the high placement and retention rates for the youth on their caseloads.

Many of the qualities that were identified by Whitley et al. (2011) were included in the definitions of the personal attributes we identified [40]. For example, our definition of “principled optimism,” included a sense of passion for empowering youth. Participants in both studies conveyed a strong sense of personal satisfaction and exhilaration when speaking of client successes. However, we noted that the employment specialists in our study were not only passionate about their jobs, they also exhibited a high level of self-efficacy. In other words, these staff believed their actions had a positive impact on the lives of their job seekers. This strong sense of self-efficacy may serve as an important buffer for these professionals when they are faced with multiple challenges. There were many indicators that the professionals in our study viewed unexpected challenges as opportunities to act; as one staff member put it, “we do whatever it takes.” Similarly, Whitley et al. specifically identified “hardiness” as a trait held by their

participants and explained that hardiness helped these professionals reframe negative situations and “[persevere] in the face of adversity” (2011, p. 513) [40]. Our term “principled optimism” captures both the employment specialists’ beliefs in the capabilities of youth, and in themselves, to help facilitate positive employment outcomes.

A unique finding in our study was that our participants demonstrated “cultural competency” by being able to understand the context in which their job seekers live. The Bridges program operates in urban communities with at-risk youth. These staff expressed an awareness of the complexity of the issues youth faced and demonstrated flexible communication strategies to interact with the youth and their families. It is important to note that, consistently, these employment specialists avoided references to the minority race, culture, or second language status of their youth as barriers; rather they seemed to take a person-centered holistic view of the youth. Perhaps this cultural competence suggests prior exposure to diversity. Indeed, the majority of our respondents were minorities themselves and 11 of 17 of them spoke some degree of a second language. It seems less likely that job developers who have never been exposed to socio-cultural differences would be able to connect with the youth and their families in the same manner and have the “hardiness” to persevere in the face of many challenging cultural barriers to work (e.g. homelessness, poverty, neighborhoods with gang activity).

Precisely due to their demanding caseloads, we were not surprised to discover strong indicators of self-management and time-management skills. It is essential that employment specialists are able to prioritize their work tasks. In a study of employment specialists in two states, it was determined that these professionals spent an average of half their time in activities not related to job development – including 24% of time performing administrative duties [10].

Of the work tasks that employment specialists have to juggle, many of them are not direct service activities but can instead be classified as networking (e.g. developing relationships with employers, connecting youth with other community resources). While the various lists of professional competencies include networking activities (e.g. conducting informational interviews), it is critical that employment specialists have the requisite skills for identifying relevant potential community partners, forging lasting relationships, and facilitating collaboration towards a common goal. Without this “networking savvy,” networking tasks (e.g. attend-

ing chamber of commerce meetings) may not be productive.

It is interesting to note that the successful employment specialists in our study had a broad range of experience and training prior to their work with Bridges. They came into their jobs from diverse professional backgrounds and perspectives. One might assume that professionals with sales backgrounds would make the most successful job developers, presumably because sales persons tend to be extraverted, outgoing, have strong communication skills, and are able to “sell” a product by determining the customer’s needs [4, 32]. However, only three of the 17 employment specialists involved in this study had a sales/marketing background suggesting that a specific educational background or work history may not be necessary, as long as the individual has the right personal attributes and a willingness to acquire new skills. Additionally, since employment specialists are required to interact with businesses and employers in a variety of industries, there are likely some advantages for an organization to have employment specialists on staff with a variety of work backgrounds.

These four discrete personal attributes: a) principled optimism; b) cultural competence; c) business-oriented professionalism; and d) networking savvy provide a framework that could potentially enable the field to take specific steps in staff development. Further, the findings from this study contribute to an important discussion about ideal attributes organizations should consider when recruiting, training, and hopefully developing the careers of employment specialists. Perhaps this will contribute to improved retention of top performers, which would ultimately benefit the job seekers these organizations serve.

5. Limitations

Several limitations of this study point to potential areas for future research. First, we did not interview a comparison group of Bridges employment specialists whose placement and retention outcomes did not meet program expectations. This was primarily due to the fact that the Marriott Foundation has stringent performance measures; there were few marginal performers from which to draw. We also realized at the outset that it would be difficult to protect the anonymity of respondents. It is important to also mention the issue of “persisters” among Bridges youth participants. While the Bridges staff work in inner-city communities with

youth who face multiple obstacles to obtaining employment (e.g. poverty, immigration status, second language status, etc.), they have the luxury of recruiting and selecting the participants who have expressed interest in the program, and who demonstrate high motivation. This is a different scenario from transition teachers who are charged with working with all youth in their classrooms, regardless of motivation level. Another difference is that professionals working in school settings may have restrictions on hours they work and may have other competing responsibilities.

Our study was limited to interviews of Bridges employment specialists; hence we did not look at the perceptions of their bosses, the site directors – or the leadership at the national level. We are mindful of the fact that even slight variations in local leadership and operations can greatly impact outcomes. Generalizability of our findings to other settings may be limited; however we believe that the Bridges staff who participated in our study can serve as viable proxies for staff of community rehabilitation provider agencies, and school transition specialists charged with developing work experiences and paid employment.

6. Implications for future research

Similar future studies should replicate the protocol with a larger sample of employment specialists from various programs/settings who work with diverse populations of job seekers. Larger sample sizes would enable researchers to use quantitative methods to complement qualitative approaches. The inclusion of a comparison group of employment specialists whose placement and retention outcomes did not meet program expectations would further strengthen the findings. The variability in outcomes by locale suggests further examination of Bridges site variables which may impact outcomes, including local leadership and operations. Further research into strategies for incorporating the four attributes into personnel recruitment, training and performance appraisal processes would likely yield data that can be readily applied in the field.

7. Summary

Employment specialists play an integral role in securing employment for youth and adults with disabilities. The job requires a unique blend of skills and competencies. Chief among these is the ability to “match”

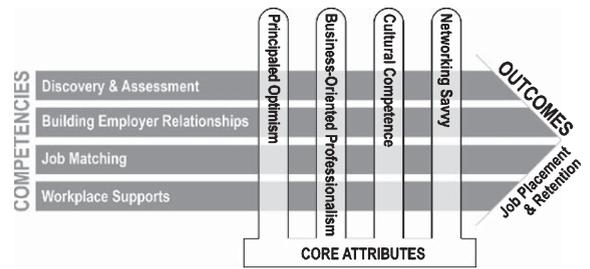


Fig. 1. The core attributes as a foundation for acquiring the requisite employment specialist competencies.

the talents of the jobseeker with the demands of various jobs. We believe this matching process applies equally to the recruitment and hiring of employment specialists in our field. Further, we theorized that personal characteristics also play a substantial role in a successful job fit, and this was demonstrated in our study through the emergence of four personal attributes: a) principled optimism; b) cultural competence; c) business-oriented professionalism; and d) networking savvy. These suggest a foundation on which specific skills and competencies – the mechanics – can be added (Fig. 1). By making a concerted effort to find employment specialist candidates who possess the right combination of attributes and competencies, organizations may be more likely to hire, develop and retain staff who will achieve excellent job placement and retention outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities and other barriers. Data from our study also raise the question: can these 4 attributes be taught or acquired, and if so, what are the best strategies to use? That said, it may be that these attributes are more innate than “teachable” and that recruitment of highly effective employment specialists would be best served by finding creative ways to attract, screen, hire and advance individuals who already have these characteristic, along with requisite competencies, and above all a strong desire to help people find and retain work.

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