

Quality Service and Customer Satisfaction in Job Development*

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These are indeed exciting times in the field of job development for people with disabilities. Because of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA), emphasis in the business community on diversity, new methodologies for technological innovations, there are opportunities to relate to employers in totally new ways. Job development professionals are also learning new approaches to their work by observing the best practices of successful businesses. Consider the experience of one resourceful job development professional.

Over the course of two years, a supported employment agency facilitated the hiring of four individuals with disabilities by a regional franchise restaurant. After observing the process for training new employees, the agency's employment specialist offered the restaurant manager a few tips in organizing new employee training. After getting a receptive response from the manager, she also offered to help write a proposal to franchise headquarters about how the training could be done. She helped the manager write the first draft, helped the restaurant manager revise it, and subsequently helped present it to the district manager who has agreed to implement the recommendations in the dozens of restaurants he oversees. It is apparent that the agency and the employment specialist are seen as not only offering a potential source of new workers, but also as providing value-added service.

This kind of customer service is happening more frequently in those organizations that realize that job development and placement success, as much as in my business endeavor, are dependent on the ability to make the customer happy. In cases like the one described above, the customer is more than happy—the customer is delighted. Focusing on a chief, but frequently neglected, customer in rehabilitation — employers — we have seen some wonderful examples of enduring partnerships that have resulted in many job placements and satisfied employer customers.

Agencies and employment specialists are discovering that they have more to offer employers than they realized. Forward-thinking programs are learning that by providing excellent customer services to employers, the result is not only quality, long-standing placement, but also quality, long-standing partnerships with employers that lead to even more placements.

Here are a few tricks of the trade that we have found to be invaluable techniques in our work with employers of all sizes and descriptions.

Soliciting Customer Feedback

Sometimes the easiest way to find out what customers want is to ask. This can be done at any time in the job placement process. For example, we often ask employers after a placement is made to fill out a simple, quick form that asks what they liked about working with us and what they didn't like.

Even more frequently, we ask *before* the placement what we can do to make life easier for them

Creating Quick Response Time

At the most basic level, this means when the employer calls, jump. When possible, drop everything and attend to the employer's need. Even when there is no immediate need to respond, successful businesses often adopt a policy of returning all phone calls within 24 hours — a simple, but frequently overlooked, customer service technique that is easy for any job placement agency to adopt.

Customizing Your Service

Every workplace is different; every job seeker is different. Adapt your service for each customer. People go to Burger King because they can "have it their own way." The more agencies and employment specialists can avoid either the appearance or the reality of a rigid "model" of service, the better they will be at satisfying employer customers. By and large, employers are not interested, in whether agencies provide "supported employment," facilities "natural supports," or any other service or placement model. They are interested in whether or not agencies can meet their needs, just as any customer would.

Providing Value-Added Service

A question that an employment specialist might ask is "what else can I offer employers besides a job applicant?" ADA training? Diversity Training? Consultation on job descriptions? Help in designing the training of new employees as in the example above? One employment specialist we know once arranged an accommodation for an employee that he later helped the employer adopt for all of the employees in that worksite. Value-added service is really no more complicated or difficult than doing "that little something extra."

"Begging for Complaints"

Why would anyone beg for complaints? The idea is a simple one: successful businesses have learned that the customer who complains is a valuable customer. By making our customers know and believe that we care about quality and want to hear of any dissatisfactions, three important things happen: (1) the customer is likely to give us another chance; (2) we are able to focus on improving our services; and (3) the customer is very likely to give us positive publicity. The next time an employer, or anyone else for that matter, complains, use it as an opportunity to improve your service.

Offering 'Silk Ties'

Tom Peters, the noted management guru and author of numerous management and customer service books, tells the story of the business executive who brought a suit at Nordstrom's department store because of its reputation for customer service. The suit needed alterations and he was promised the suit the next day before he left on a business trip. He was disappointed to learn that the alterations were not complete when he returned. He left on his trip with a less than favorable impression of

Nordstrom's fabled customer service. However, the next day an express package was delivered to his hotel with not only his suit, but also two matching silk ties, free of charge. He was converted from a disgruntled customer to a loyal one. In job placement, 'silk ties' may be useful in many situations such as when a placement does not work out or when a promised employee decides not to take the job. The possibilities are virtually limitless, 'Silk ties' may include taking the employer to lunch, offering complementary information on the ADA, offering a free accessibility audit, and so forth. The key is to offer to compensate the employer in some way, however small, when for some reason the employer or customer is not pleased. Chances are that the relationship will continue to flourish.

Converting Competence to Outstanding Performance

To paraphrase an often-expressed belief of Tom Peters, 'good is nice, but only terrific will keep in you in business.' Many services that assist job-seekers and employees with disabilities are good. Yet as funding becomes scarcer (and agencies begin competing even more for existing dollars to operate) and as rehabilitation consumers begin to really exercise their freedom to choose the services they want and like, agencies that are merely good will lose out to those that are recognized as excellent. Excellence is what every agency and every professional should be striving for at all times. There are many ways to develop excellence. First it assumes that you are already competent! Then it assumes you as an individual, and your organization are committed to accepting new challenges, changing old behaviors, rewarding creativity, and dedicated to ongoing skill-building and evaluation.

Making the Whole Agency a "Consumer Service Department"

From the people who answer the phone to the agency director, everyone should be part of the effort to 'delight the customer.' Training in customer service is useful for all staff. Also, implementing procedures that are user-friendly such, as promptly returning phone calls, gives the strong impression that you are there to help.

To encourage excellent staff customer service, one organization instituted a "wall of fame." Letters received by the agency praising particular staff members for their work were framed and hung in a prominent place on the wall in the agency's reception area. Every month, new letters were added to replace older ones which were then put in the employees' personnel files—an easy and inexpensive way to promote good customer service behavior and create a positive organizational image.

Progressive agencies and effective employment specialists are well on their way to taking advantage of the new climate for job development. In fact, they are learning to view, as Tom Peters suggests, every element of their operation through the customer's lens. The importance of customer perceptions cannot be overemphasized. Little things mean a great deal to customers. Customer responsiveness will surely be the trademark of those agencies and employment specialists who develop the most enduring partnerships with employers and, as a result, they will be more successful in assisting job seekers with disabilities.