

BUSINESS

Work Advice: Providing customized help to battle joblessness

Project EM is a pilot program that promises to offer personalized, holistic support to job seekers by connecting them with workforce-development agencies nationwide



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February 8, 2024 at 7:00 a.m. EST

My [recent column](#) on the stigma and damaging effects of long-term unemployment resonated with readers. Some expressed relief at learning they're not alone in their struggles — but that was cold comfort to others looking for concrete advice.

“Your article nails it, but ... no real solution is offered. I have emailed the article to several friends and relatives telling them that this is exactly me. But what do I do about it?” a paralegal asked in an email.

“I enjoyed your article but found your recommendations to be ... of no value,” said another unemployed reader, after one of the online sources I listed turned up no results relevant to him.

I share their frustration. It's hard to offer general strategies that address the multiple individual and systemic factors in unemployment. Of the readers I heard from who had found their way back into the job market, no two followed the same path. Even when everyone's in the same boat, they need life jackets sized to fit them.

Customized one-on-one counseling or coaching seems like the obvious solution — but it's often inaccessible to someone who is struggling to pay for basic needs, and it takes time to find a counselor you click with.

Furthermore, widely available guidance on upskilling, résumé writing and networking doesn't address the emotional obstacles. Excel tutorials won't fix depression; tweaking fonts and layout feels like repainting the shuffleboard court on the Titanic; and networking is a constant tightrope walk between enthusiasm and desperation. And you can crush all those skills and still be dismissed as overqualified (read: too old) or bypassed in favor of “passive” job seekers who are already employed. (Note to employers: Isn't that a bit like going on a dating site hoping to meet married partners?)

In short, it is hard to find a one-stop point of access to the kind of holistic, customized support job seekers need. But an ambitious new program is hoping to change that.

In 2022, the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies (NJHSA), known informally as “the Network,” started a pilot program aimed at addressing the mass unemployment resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, especially among underserved populations such as rural residents, veterans, people with disabilities and older workers. The program, Project EM, taps into a nationwide network of 19 workforce development agencies to connect job seekers with individualized career coaching as well as workshops and other resources aimed at addressing the other effects of unemployment, from mental health to finances.

The best part: It’s free and available to unemployed and underemployed job seekers regardless of faith, education, background or location.

“From entry level to C-suite, we can help,” said Sarah Welch, senior vice president for strategy at NJHSA.

Project EM offers clients a holistic, continuous, “client-led” model of support, she said. Counseling, workshops and support groups help manage the “trauma associated with work loss” and long-term unemployment. “Doing a job search is incredibly scary and it’s incredibly lonely ... you need someone there who can keep you focused and remind you how valuable you are to your family and community,” Welch said.

Individualized coaching is especially effective because it “can dig into granular details of challenges for that specific person,” said Cindy Key, a career coach in Louisville, who works with Project EM. For example, Key said, she has worked with many women trying to get back into the workforce after taking time away to raise children.

Project EM also partners with employers to help them find qualified hires they might otherwise overlook. “This has to be a whole community push,” Key said. “We’ve been persuaded that we can and should do it all ourselves,” but the truth is that job seekers “really have to have advocates in a lot of places to get ahead,” she said.

Record-low U.S. unemployment rates might suggest that this kind of broad-based workforce support isn’t necessary. But statistics on jobs filled don’t tell the whole story of people barely scraping by in multiple jobs, underemployed after a career derailment or pushed into retirement against their will. In fact, despite the strong economy and low unemployment rate, the United States is a middling performer among industrialized countries when it comes to labor force participation, a broader metric that includes how many working-age people have dropped out of the job market.

Welch believes the response to Project EM’s offerings in its first two years shows how much high-quality, personalized employment support is needed, and how it can make a difference. In its first year, the program serviced nearly 3,000 job seekers who lacked other access to workforce support and conducted more than 700 live workshops accessible to the public.

Lorna Katz from the Boston area can attest to Project EM’s effectiveness. Katz, a former sales account manager, lost her job because of the coronavirus pandemic and was unemployed for some months. She came across Project EM while researching options online. After connecting with the program, she received one-on-one coaching on résumé writing and interview and business etiquette, as well as support group sessions.

“The interaction, the follow-up, the presence that this organization provides us and what they provide has been just phenomenal,” Katz said. “I can’t emphasize enough how they made themselves available.”

Beyond the practical tips on résumé writing and interviewing, Katz said Project EM “helped [me] not just regain confidence and self-esteem but push[ed] the right buttons to propel me forward again.” Some months after first contacting Project EM, Katz landed another job in the same industry with an employer that she says makes her feel valued for her experience and work ethic.

My inbox suggests Welch is right about the demand. My hope is that this program, and any others seeking to follow its model, will be up to the task.

To sign up for online workshops or register for personalized support, visit Project EM’s website at <https://www.jewishtgether.org/project-em>, or call (614) 237-WORK (9675) for assistance.