

Service Provider Promising Practice

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Working with Staff

Addressing Staffing Shortages in Employment Services: Trillium's Strategies for Recruitment, Training, and Retention

By Jennifer Bose, Esther Kamau, and Jean Winsor

BACKGROUND

Since its founding in 1983, Trillium, an employment provider in Washington State, has had a strong focus on providing services and supports that lead to integrated employment. Trillium began as an early demonstration site for supported employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Currently, Trillium serves 750 people with IDD from offices in five rural and suburban counties. Like many employment service providers, Trillium experienced shortages in staff recruitment, training, and retention that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency. Trillium has implemented several strategies to address this issue.

IMPLEMENTATION

Trillium has taken multiple approaches to addressing its recruitment and retention challenges. These approaches include building relationships with their community, supporting staff professional development, empowering their employees, and offering financial incentives for new hires.

Building relationships with the community.

Trillium has found that reaching out to other community organizations to build relationships and to advertise Trillium's employment opportunities has been more effective than traditional recruitment methods, such as posting positions on employment websites. Trillium's executive director explained, "*no one usually goes on an employment search website saying, I want a job coach job or employment consultant job.*" These relationships created

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opportunities for potential candidates to learn about the organization and its roles, which supports recruitment.

One of Trillium's goals is to improve their ability to serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color with IDD as well as recent immigrants with IDD who speak primary languages other than English. Outreach to community organizations is an important part of these efforts. By building a more diverse recruiting and referral network, Trillium hopes to employ a more culturally competent and representative staff.

Training for new staff.

For their first six months of employment, new staff across all Trillium locations are enrolled in a training cohort that holds weekly meetings facilitated by staff with more experience. New staff are paired with mentors, experienced staff who are not their supervisors, who provide professional guidance and personal support primarily through opportunities to shadow them as they go about job development and job coach responsibilities. When new staff reach the six-month employment mark, Trillium solicits feedback on what has worked well for them during the onboarding process. This feedback data provides information about changes that need to be made or elements that are highly valued. The new staff have reported that the cohort meetings help them make connections



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to colleagues at their own experience level, build their confidence about asking questions, and reinforce the content they learned from the training.

Training for managers.

The leadership of Trillium has worked to ensure managers have high-quality job coaching and job development skills and the human resource and management skills to effectively support their staff. Trillium has invested in training from business and HR experts outside the field to provide these additional trainings on standard business practices, such as delegation, accountability, and workflow management. As a result, employment managers have the confidence and skills to support frontline employment specialists in their autonomy and creativity. Employment managers also feel confident in their ability to spot and effectively manage challenges that employment specialists are facing.

Inclusive, empowering culture.

Employment specialists have a great deal of autonomy about how they support individuals. The autonomy is coupled with opportunities for learning and connection among the staff. Weekly staff meetings are focused on staff needs and concerns and on finding ways to support clients. This gives some structure to a very autonomous job and is designed to support staff to do their work successfully and focus on accomplishing goals rather than completing tasks. Employment staff also have many opportunities to offer feedback on internal processes, including the training for employees, workplace policies, and transparency in decision-making.

Strengths-based professional development.

Trillium uses a strengths-based approach to supporting their clients and their employment staff. Staff have regular goal setting and performance reviews. Additionally, staff who have been employed for one year have an interview where they discuss their “*core gift*”, highlighting the skillset they bring to Trillium. Staff then develop a plan to use the strengths that align with their responsibilities.

Employment staff also each develop their own person-centered plan following the same format as the plan they develop with each client. After four years of employment, employment staff members can take a sabbatical to reflect on and redevelop their person-centered plans. Working through the same processes as their clients helps the employment staff maintain a fresh perspective on their work and the impact it can have on individuals.

Financial incentives for referrals.

Prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency, Trillium examined their hiring data and found that more than 50% of new hires were referred by current employees. The organization implemented referral and sign-on bonuses and now encourages all employees—regardless of their tenure—to identify people in their network who they think would be strong colleagues to apply.

IMPACT

Trillium faced staff shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency. To address these challenges, Trillium implemented several strategies. They built relationships with community organizations to recruit talented staff members and found this to be more effective than traditional hiring methods. Trillium also trains new staff through a six-month cohort program with mentorship and provides management training for leaders to enhance their managerial skills. The organization fosters an inclusive culture with significant staff autonomy and opportunities for feedback. Additionally, Trillium implements a strengths-based professional development approach, offering goal setting, performance reviews, and sabbaticals. These efforts have improved role clarity, increased staff autonomy, enhanced accountability, and created a supportive work environment to better serve their people with IDD.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REPLICATION

- » **Use non-traditional recruitment methods.** Engaging local community organizations, and nonprofits helped build awareness of Trilliums work, and was a more successful staff recruitment strategy than traditional job postings. This method helped potential candidates learn about the organization and its roles. This approach also helped Trillium attract more diverse job applicants.
- » **Invest in robust training programs.** Trillium implemented robust staff trainings, which set up employment staff to succeed at providing supports and services while offering professional development that helps with staff retention.
- » **Build an inclusive and empowering culture.** Successful outcomes are more likely when employment staff are well supported, have ongoing training, and are empowered to be creative and work collaboratively with their peers. Trillium's best outcomes are the results of staff working together on behalf of clients—leveraging the collective strengths and skills of staff. Trillium provided staff with autonomy and fostered a supportive work environment, with ongoing learning and growth opportunities that made staff feel valued.

For more information, contact:

Karen Williams, Executive Director

Karen@trillium.org



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