



REEMPLOYMENT FAST TRACK

The Emerging Online Path for Integration

“Virtual” is everywhere - from Siri, the iPhone’s new virtual assistant to the Xbox Kinect to the University of Phoenix - we can simply ask a question and get an immediate answer or action; we can swing an arm and have an avatar play a sport for us right from our living rooms and we can participate in a virtual classroom and get a college degree. “Virtual” is also empowering our workforce programs more each year.

Workforce Services - The Start of the Shift

One of the more significant shifts to virtual service in workforce services began in Unemployment Insurance, by far the most dominant workforce program in dollars and numbers, at nearly \$50 billion and touching over 20 million job seekers (nearly half the US total) last year. In 1991, Colorado’s UI program faced pressure to cut costs and maintain services and responded by moving claims taking to a call center virtual environment.

No longer did UI claimants have to come to offices to file claims, sometimes facing long lines for service; the state saved a ton of tight funds formerly spent on bricks and mortar; and accuracy improved dramatically. Initially, the Colorado plan faced stiff opposition, but two decades later, all but a couple of states have strongly embraced phone filing, many have moved claim filing online and some are moving toward taking claims exclusively online.

A somewhat similar move happened in the Workforce Investment Act as states began to provide virtual One Stops as an alternative strategy for physical buildings in areas too small to otherwise serve. Today, mobile units and other virtual access points (such as online registration, job board searches and online seminar/workshops) allow workforce services to serve all job seekers, regardless of geography.

Job Boards

Job listings were on a virtual parallel track in the past two decades. When Bill Warren started Monster.com, a top job seeker strategy, now largely defunct, he was to buy a local newspaper and scan the classifieds. That changed rapidly, with: 1) the advent of job boards, 2) the evolution of job board aggregators (e.g. Indeed.com and SimplyHired.com) that scrape the results of thousands of job sites into one searchable site and 3) the recent integration of social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) with job board aggregators, which allows a job seeker instantly to see which friends have connections at a target employer.

The result of the online explosion of job postings is that many more jobs are “visible” than in the past. Previously, experts estimated that no more than 20% of all openings were advertised or posted in a public forum. Now, as many as 50% of all jobs may be visible to job seekers who understand which boards to track and how to use them effectively.

US DOL Grants

US DOL is pushing the envelope to stimulate more creativity in this area. In particular DOL has two current initiatives aimed at better integrating Unemployment Insurance and Employment Services. Both are expected to generate new breakthroughs in online integration. The “National Vision” grant, awarded to five states, is supporting the up front integration of employment services for

unemployment insurance claimants as well as online social media in an attempt to provide useful national models for online services. The Innovation Grants close March 22, 2012 and are designed to “support innovative approaches to the design and delivery of employment and training services.” Better coordination between programs and partners improves linkages between employment and training services and labor market needs, develops new procurement strategies and leverages new technologies.

Online Job Search Workshops

One notable part of workforce services has fallen behind, however. Job search workshops, in nearly every state, are provided only in a traditional classroom environment. For a small disadvantaged group of job seekers, traditional classes can work and are the best medium for teaching. However, confining services to the traditional approach subjects the vast majority of job seekers to the capacity limits of One Stop space, scheduling and staff time. We have a job search training system built for the lowest common denominator. As a result, most states provide meaningful job search training to no more than five percent of all job seekers. For employers, the job search skill gap is noticeable with half-hearted applications, poor resumes and weak interviewing skills. And it is a drag on the hiring process.

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Yet, the common denominator for most workforce clients is that they are job seekers. Whether they need support to, e.g. buy food, access housing or upgrade their skills or education, at the end of the day, most are seeking a job and need to land one. Unfortunately, the vast majority have never learned how to find a job and land it. Few high schools, colleges or others ever truly teach job search - from the art of writing a resume to the knack of networking and from navigating the nuances of online job boards to interviewing with confidence.

Three years ago, nonprofits often rejected online tools, indicating that their clientele did not use computers. Today, the response is different. Nonprofits encourage nearly all clientele to learn how to search for work online, noting that most job seekers, at any level, are now often asked to apply online. With home access to the internet in 2008 at 75% according to a Nielsen survey, it is likely that job seekers are now approaching universal access to the internet, either at home, a neighbor's, a public library or at a one stop.

Fortunately, online solutions for job search workshops are beginning to appear. For example, some one stops are providing social media driven job clubs. An increasing number of states are developing integration between labor market information and their online career guidance. Others are using online assessments to identify skill gaps.

A few states are leveraging an even more comprehensive approach to job search training. Those states are beginning to use the same cutting edge learning tools found now in high schools and colleges: 1) multi media, including audio and video examples and teaching; 2) teach-show-do approaches that allow learners to immediately apply what they've learned, e.g. writing a resume or answering tough interview questions; and 3) constant connections to dynamically-updated content that is online and on demand.

With grants available and dwindling resources driving a growing demand for empowering and leveraging client powered self-services, we have a promising future for labor market dynamics to ride the virtual wave. And in time, who knows - maybe we'll be asking: “Siri, find me a job”