

# **BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: DESIGNING A FUTURE THAT WORKS.**

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CECILIA GANDOLFO: I work at the Institute for Community Inclusion. Basically what we do is focus on the issue of disability in adult life, especially the issues of employment and helping people to secure employment. We do a lot of training of professionals that work in the employment field, helping them do a better job working with individuals with disabilities when it comes to securing jobs.

Today we are here to talk to you about a workshop we put together quite a few years ago. It's called Building Community Connections. The goal of this workshop is to help individuals with disabilities learn how to become more empowered and involved in their job search through what we call networking.

The workshop is a two-day workshop. And it's for job seekers. The professionals that attend are there on a trainer basis to learn how to offer workshops like these to job seekers-- and the goal is get folks involved in their own job search process.

What we are going to do is give you an overview of what the workshop is about, tell you of some of the goals, the research behind why we are doing what we are doing, and why we believe networking is a training tool that should be taught. In addition we will talk about some of the barriers that get in the way. So hopefully this will be useful to you either in your jobs or your own job searches.

I want to share with you a little bit of research that we have monitored through the years regarding how people get jobs. It's called the Fordyce letter. It goes out to headhunters in the mainstream community—that is people that do nothing but help people get jobs. And every year the Fordyce letter does a survey of employers on how they hire people. I have been monitoring this newsletter for the number of years. The survey is a very simple one. They ask employers what techniques they use for hiring people. So the questions are: do you use walk INS, people that walk in the door as a technique for hiring people? In '93, '96 and '99, about 96% of employers said “Yes, we hire people who walk in the door.” That is, the people who come in and either drop-off a resume or fill out an application. The next question is regarding

advertising or help wanted ads. The answers hovered 94%, 95%, 92% percent all saying "Yes we hire that way." And that's a no brainer. A lot of money goes into paying for advertising, so they better say yes; we hire that way because that's a huge line item in the Human Resources Office Budget.

The next item is employee referrals. Do you hire people when an employee says, I know someone you should hire? And this was the interesting one to me. In '93, it was about 56% of employers who said they hired that way. In '96, 77% of employers said they hired that way. In '99, 87% of employers said they hired that way. That's a huge increase. I would ask you what conclusions would you draw from that? To me it says that they trust the judgment of one of their own employees. In other words, they trust the people they know, preferring this to hiring out of the blue. It is someone who's being recommended.

The Internet is relatively new technology. In 1993 it wasn't even on the survey. In '96 28% of employers said they were using it. In '99, 52% said they were using it. It is being used, but like any new technology it takes a while to be incorporate as a common practice.

The last two questions concern job fairs and direct mail. Job fairs, a gathering of employers has relatively low numbers: 3 and 4%. And what I will tell you tells me something about the recipients of the survey. Job fairs attract large companies, people, organizations with human resources departments. If I am a small business owner and have perhaps 30 people that work for me, I don't have a human resources person. I don't have someone who can spend a day at a job fair. But, job fairs are very good places to make contacts, to get business cards, to introduce yourself, if you are, you know, lacking confidence in the job search process. Go in, shake hands, hand out your resume. It's a good opportunity; it is just that not all employers are represented there.

And finally direct mail. Direct mail is people that mail in resumes whether there is a job opening or not. They just do a mailing. There is a difference between direct mail and walk ins. In both scenarios we don't know if there's a job. We just know there's an employer we want to target. Almost all employers say they hired through walk ins. Very few employers said they ever hired from mailing. The only difference between the two really is that one is face-to-face contact and one is not. With a walk in they see you. They get to know you even if only a receptionist sees you. With direct mail, they see a piece of paper. So again, what this tells me is employers want to know who they are getting.

The next survey was for job seekers, asking them how they got their job. This was done through the Department of Labor. 14% said they used help wanted ads. 12% said they used agency support. That would

be private headhunters or private placement agencies. 11% said something other than that. Most of those were public agencies, department of employment and training and so forth. And then 63% described something informal they did. When you get the description of what they did it was what we have come to call networking. It was talking to people. It was employee referrals, taking tours, informational. They got in and tapped into what we call the hidden job market. They talked to people about job opportunities.

The last piece of research behind this I want to share with you is a few years old. Because we thought that networking was the way to go. It seemed apparent to us that what worked for the mainstream population should also apply to people with disabilities, but we couldn't find anything that substantiated that theory. So we did our own research. We researched this and found that networking was the most effective strategy for job seekers with disabilities as well as job seekers without disabilities. And what we found out more specifically was that by using networking in a job search, job seekers were able to find jobs with better wages, with more hours, and they reduced the amount of time it took to find a job. So the strategy that works for the mainstream really does work for the disabled also. If you are looking for a job, networking is the way to go.

So based on that, we said well how do we teach job seekers with disabilities this strategy? Because one of the things we know about job seekers with disabilities is frequently they get marched down the path of working with providers—that is working with professionals in the field to help them get jobs. And that's sort of limiting because that's the antithesis of networking. Networking means to get out there yourself and tell everyone. Get everyone involved. And the provider approach is tell one person, focus on one person. So, we decided to develop a curriculum that trained job seekers with disabilities on how to do what everyone in need of a job would do.

It is often said: "It's not what you know. It's who you know." And what we were encountering with job seekers with disabilities was the response: "But I don't know anybody." And one thing we know about networking is you don't need to know anyone who can hire you. You need to tell everybody possible that you want a job. And the kind of job you are looking for, as well as the kind of skills you have. And you need to ask people if they have any suggestions for you. And you start by asking for help from people. You need to open up the process.

So we put together a training that helped jobseekers think about who they know. So who comes to mind? Who do you know; put yourselves in job seekers roles for a minute. You are about to start a job search and you have been told you need to start networking-- who comes to mind as people you know?

Well, there is family, church, community, clubs, and school, both present and past. Your children's school, stores where you shop and spend your money. They know you because they come to rely on you as someone that's keeping them in business. So if you ask a question and you ask for some support. They are probably going to try to help you out. What I tell people is networking is anybody you know well enough to say hello to, who won't look at you like you have ten heads when you ask a question.

When we talk about networking, there are two realms we look at. The first is personal networks. It's kind of an inner circle around us. The people we know very well. The second tier, or aspect of networking, is community connections. Folks that aren't family, but they are people that know us, whether they are therapists, counselors residential staff or services that you use. My hairdresser is one of the best networking contacts I have. She knows everybody. People who work in service industries dealing with people know people, and might have suggestions for people for you to meet. In networking you start with people you know well. And then you broaden that circle to expand to other people, maybe that you don't know, but that others know who could help you. And that's the notion behind this whole concept.

Now beginning this, and expanding your search beyond those you know well can be an intimidating process. In the disability world there's a significantly high unemployment rate. So we need to figure out how to tap into any strategies that are going to help us get jobs in the community. So that's one reason we talk about networking as a strategy. You are using informal resources. Everyone knows to look at help wanted ads. Everyone knows to respond to the flyer on a window. But coming in recommended by someone, name-dropping, can give us a jump-start over the competition for jobs. We know that employers want to know who they are getting. So we need to tap into as many of these informal resources as we can possibly come up with and to do this networking is a strong resource. It increases your chances.

People with disabilities frequently need some accommodations in the workplace. When you have come in recommended, you come in as a known. It's a little easier sometimes to say, you know, I am here; I am ready to do the job. By the way, I do need to talk about some accommodation needs that I have. Sometimes because you are an insider it makes those conversations a little more comfortable. It increases the receptivity of a part on the employer. When you talk to people about your job search, you are taking steps

towards self-empowerment. You are taking control of the job search. And we are big advocates of self-empowerment. That's why we talk about networking as a strategy.

Talking to people and asking them for help can be an uncomfortable process. One of the things in this process that we deal with is addressing why people don't network. We need to look at what gets in the way of networking. When we do the workshop after the first day we ask the students to talk two people about their job search, and then report to the class how that assignment went. Inevitably, people come in, sit in the room. Get ready for the workshop. And they -- right before we start pull me aside and say, "Between you and me, it's been a busy week. I didn't get a chance to do the networking homework." And we have to confront this in class, embarrassing as it may be to them.

When we look at the reasons, the barriers, it comes down to a number of issues. People are fearful of trying this new technique because it's not something they have done in the past. It's scary to go out there and talk to people that you know well and talk to people that you are just getting to know about your job search. And the thing I always say back to folks is: "Okay, what's the worst that's going to happen?" They may say: "No I don't want to talk about it." But I tell them: "People are not going to hit you. They may be too busy when you ask. I guarantee most people want to help."

So just think about that. Some people are too proud to ask for help. I have always been independent. Now you are asking me to get help with something. I have fought my way through life. I live with a disability. I really made it a point to be as independent as I can and you are telling me now I have to go ask for help? And again the thing to remember is, this is something that everyone does. This isn't something you have to do it because you have a disability. In fact, it's just the opposite. Let's clue in and let's do what everyone else is doing because they are getting the jobs and we are the ones that still have a significant high unemployment rate.

So we need to talk about dependency—the idea that if we ask for help we will always need help. Everyone needs help of one kind or another to find a job. Everyone networks. Everyone asks for help. Most people like helping other people. It makes them feel good to help.

We may feel embarrassment. That this is just too hard to do. It is embarrassing asking for help. And to those who feel his way I say: "Start with someone easy." Start with someone safe. Practice your lines. Figure out what it is you want to ask for. Maybe tailor your requests to the nature of the relationship. You ask a little

bit more from someone you might know better and a little bit less from someone you are just meeting for the first time. Your goal is to get people to be able to help you.”

One of the things we talk about in this workshop is disclosure. As you are networking and you are talking to folks about your disability, you have to decide what you feel comfortable sharing about the nature of your disability. Some of you will go into your interactions using an interpreter. You know, the issue of disclosure, nondisclosure is pretty straightforward. If you use an interpreter the issue is right out there. For others it is less obvious. Some of you might be able to mask some of the disability issues. And you may want to. That may be the choice you make. For others of you, you may say, I want everyone to know—even though this disability is apparent.

But we ask people sort of to think about the decision process of disclosure. Think about their personal ethics. Whether the truth about the disability is better than the assumptions that people are going to make about disability. You need to consider if disclosing disability is relevant to the workplace. Are there accommodation needs that need to be in place for you now? Or is it just for social reasons you just want people to know? It may be what is not relevant now but will be down the road. All of these questions are part of the decision making process.

In some instances facts can be checked, such as criminal records. But if you have medical issues, they can't get into your medical records. Some people feel that they absolutely need everyone to know what's going on so that they can have honest working relationships. So they disclose. Other folks say, when I feel like people know too much about me, I get paranoid. That's part of the decision making factor.

Then consequences: what happens once people know about a disability? Is it going to work to your advantage, to your disadvantage? Does it change the nature of the interactions others with you? So this is stuff we ask people to consider in their networking for their job search, as well as in their actual job search process.

KRISTIN FICHERA: I am going to show you some exercises we do and give you a quick overview how and where we use them in our workshop. We start with an exercise where we ask people to describe their best, worst and dream jobs. The trainer usually goes first so as to make the job seekers feel comfortable. What we are trying to get at is to figure out what we want: our real dreams and desires. We really get tough sometimes; especially on the dreaming part. A big plus of our network training is that it really helps people with their self-esteem. By the end of the two days we are talking about positives in people. Talking about

dreaming. And so we get tough on people sometimes when someone says, my dream in life is that I want to clean. “Well, I want to clean toilets,” they may say. Well I cleaned toilets. That was my worse job. That was definitely not a dream job of mine. You might need to do that to pay the rent, but that is about it. I am doubtful that too many people really feel that is a dream in life. So we really do get tough on people if they are not dreaming big.

One of the things we will talk about is that we need to avoid a "Yes, but" frame of mind. A dream is a dream. Whatever your dream is, maybe can you do it whether you are deaf or not. Maybe deafness is irrelevant to what your dreams are. No matter what it is we do not shut down anyone's dreams. Maybe the big overall dream that you have, maybe being deaf would mean that you couldn't do that dream as is. But you may well be able to take parts of it and make them into some reality. So, definitely when you are facilitating this, avoiding the "Yes, buts" is an important factor. We want to be able to allow people to dream.

Now let's try this with some audience members. Are you comfortable trying this?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. My best job was a program manager.

KRISTIN FICHERA: How did you get that job?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I got that job sort of from working as a student in the office. And the boss of that program he saw me there, got to know me and he asked me if I wanted this job.

KRISTIN FICHERA: So you were already working in the office through a connection that you had? Someone created another job that you were interested in. You had a connection there—an in.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. My worst job was watching kids and baby-sitting. But worst of all I think, and I got this job through knowing someone too, was a job teaching high school. But it was more the supervisor than the job itself.

KRISTIN FICHERA: Sometimes people can make jobs a little more miserable than they need to be. But you did get that job through somebody you knew, you said?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was taking a class in graduate school. And someone I knew told me about the opening.

KRISTIN FICHERA: So it was through another connection. If you could do anything in the whole world starting tomorrow without worrying about skills, education, anything, what would it be?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I would like to write comedy for TV shows. That would be the dream job I would like.

KRISTIN FICHERA: So writing jokes for a TV show--that sounds like fun. Are you currently looking for a job?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. I am working on my dissertation now. I used to be a teacher. So, I am interested in writing. I like to do a variety of things, writing, and research. Using technology for instruction.

KRISTIN FICHERA: So you don't have a specific job in mind, but you have some talents and know what you might want to do within that job.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I sort of know more what I don't want to do.

KRISTIN FICHERA: That is hugely important in the whole career planning process.

This is the gist of how we do this exercise. And this is how we start the training. So typically, it works best if there are -- usually about 6 to 8 people in the training because as you can see, you were listening as we told everybody told their stories. Now if every one of you had to go through this, in a very large group such as we have today, even though we would be very interesting the people who went first may get a little bored. So the smaller the group, the better. Because you want to make sure everybody participates. But you would never want to have a training and just run out of time and say to people, "Sorry we don't want to hear about your dreams." You want to make sure everybody has a chance.

Our next step is to tie this information to what it has to do with networking. And what we always hope is that when you look down the list of all the best jobs, that when you look at the best jobs that people have found those jobs through networking. And this is almost always so as we have seen today. And the worst jobs do not turn out to have come from networking.

So, that's how that exercise works. That's how we get started. Then we dive into other things and get into the training. Throughout the entire training there are a bunch of exercises. And what you need to do when you start working with a group is you need to kind of feel out the group and figure out what is the learning style of that group. Sometimes you have groups where the learning styles are all over the map. Then you will need to use a whole bunch of different teaching techniques. Sometimes you might find that a group -- they don't want to sit and listen while you use overhead visuals, and you are just talking a lot. Some groups you realize that the exercises work best. And you might do all the various exercises with very little lecture throughout the two-day training. So you really need to get a feel for what each group needs and really try to cater to the group. Be flexible.

What I want to do very quickly is show you some of the other exercises. The next one we call "Think Positively." And the way we do this one is by putting up a flip chart and asking everyone to name three positive things about themselves in each of the three categories. (General Positives things about themselves,

Work Related Positives, and Skills they possess for the job) And again we are really tough on people here too because if someone says: "I am okay at..." we will say: "What do you mean you are okay? We want you to tell us what you are good at." This is something that people can take with them and use if an employer or interviewer asks them tell to tell them positive things. They practice this. And what we do is we give them a chance to write down three good things about themselves and to give an example. So you can't just say I am hard working. You have to say why you are hard working.

The next exercise is called "First Impressions." We ask them to list the top five words that they think best describe them, and then they give these descriptions to somebody else in the training that they just met and have them write five things that came to mind when they first met this same person. And then we have a discussion about the differences and about first impressions in general and how they effect how we come across to others.

Next is a networking exercise. In this one we basically have people list everybody that they know. And we tell them to write down everybody. The big thing that we always ask people is: "How many people put down the people you met today in this room?" Usually people don't put those people down because they think, they don't know them very well, or you know, they can't help them. But that's a big thing, because everyone you know no matter how slightly is a member of your network.

These are all things that can be used either all together or as single exercise. So you can use it in any way that you want to.

We also give guidance on good questions to start a conversation or interview with--making sure that you keep open-ended questions. There are many other different things we do—handouts we use, including a consumers guide for effective job searching called "Networking," and they can be obtained by contacting us (PLEASE INSERT CONTACT INFORMATION)

Finally, in terms of facilitating you want to make sure to maintain a positive tone. It really keeps people's interests more when they see you are excited. So keep a positive tone throughout. You want to encourage participation. In the trainings we keep the groups small so that everybody participates. There are times when people no matter what we do want to sit outside of the circle-- and that's okay. But we still ask them to answer in the exercises and try to get people as engaged as possible.

Again, we talked about the avoiding the "yes, but." At the end of the training, we wrap up the two-day training with a brainstorming session of ideas for each person. We talk about some real concrete ideas that they might use to help with the next step in their job search. It's really important during that during brainstorming time when people come up with ideas not to say, "Yes, but that's not going to work." You really want to make sure that you are encouraging. You really never know if something is going to work until you try it. So you want to again, to avoid those "well, but" responses. You want to promote assertiveness. Again a lot of this training is helping people with their self-esteem and helping them to learn to be more assertive. So you want to make sure you are constantly encouraging throughout the two days of training and the exercises you do if you choose to just do one exercise at a time, not a whole group training.

And you want to emphasize and encourage a readiness to get out there and really try all these things that we talk about—to put into practice and actually get people to go out and contact people and not give in to the fears of failure. We want to get people to overcome those fears and really get out there and network and talk to people.

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