

You may not reproduce, display on a website, distribute, sell or republish this article or data, or the information contained therein, without prior written consent. This printout and/or PDF is for personal usage only and not for any promotional usage. © Crain Communications Inc.

October 17, 2020 04:00 AM

Rewriting job training: Nonprofit workforce development groups face influx of job seekers with varied backgrounds

LYDIA COUTRÉ □ □

Daniel Zakroczemski

Nonprofits that offer workforce development programming have had to make rapid adjustments this year to train and support a growing number of job seekers who are coming to them with a broader range of backgrounds and experiences.

Nonprofits that offer workforce development programming have had to make rapid adjustments this year to train and support a growing number of job seekers who are coming to them with a broader range of backgrounds and experiences.

Efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 and offer safer learning environments forced training opportunities online, which has highlighted the digital divide and sent programs scrambling to find funds to build inventories of computers and hotspots to lend to job seekers. The loss of physical spaces for information sessions or career fairs has made connecting with some job seekers a bit more difficult, especially if they aren't active on social media or other platforms that organizations have been using to share resources.

"That physical space kind of provided a place for folks to go if they didn't have that connectivity, where they can return to," said Mike Glavin, senior director of talent solutions at [Greater Cleveland Partnership](#). "And without that, there's just more opportunities for folks to kind of fall through the cracks, which is really sad."

More than 817,000 Ohioans are receiving employment benefits since the outbreak of the pandemic, and workforce development nonprofits are hearing from more job seekers. And many organizations report serving clients with a range of backgrounds and work histories.

While past recessions have been more industry-specific or narrow in their impact, relatively speaking, the pandemic and its economic fallout have been "unfortunately, equal

opportunity," said Jacob Duritsky, vice president of strategy and research at [Team NEO](#), the region's nonprofit economic development organization.

"Across the talent spectrum, you're seeing everything from restaurant workers up through CFOs who have lost their positions due to closures," he said. "So it doesn't quite fit in the box."

The [Urban League of Greater Cleveland \(ULGC\)](#) has been seeing new growth in certain populations of job seekers, including college students who are attending classes remotely and qualified, highly degreed workers who were recently laid off.

"This very highly skilled and highly educated group of individuals was something that the Urban League was known for serving for years," said Marsha Mockabee, ULGC president and CEO. "I mean for many years, the Urban League was the place that many African Americans, when they graduated from college, this is the first place they came to find a job. So that concept is not new, but we hadn't had that group of job seekers that we focused on for a number of years."

ULGC — along with Goodwill Industries of Greater Cleveland and East Central Ohio and Ohio Means Jobs | Cleveland-Cuyahoga County — is part of [Ohio to Work](#), a [recently announced program](#) that aims to provide career counseling, training and placement assistance for those unemployed throughout the state. [Jobs- Ohio](#), a private economic development agency for the state, is spearheading the program first in Cuyahoga County, with plans to expand statewide.

The goal is to build on existing work and fill gaps to serve more people, said Cedric Gaddis, regional talent manager for Team NEO, a sponsor for Ohio to Work. The program will offer virtual career fairs, the first of which includes at least 30 Cleveland employers with immediate job openings in health care, manufacturing and IT.

Employers, too, are adjusting their approaches to recruitment. Gaddis said he's finding a lot of employers are more open to working with re-entry workforce development programs that help previously incarcerated people find jobs.

Many in the manufacturing sector, which didn't have the same layoffs as many other industries, are trying to come up with creative ways to scale up an incoming workforce, Glavin said. He has heard anecdotally from employers that are reaching across industries to recruit from areas harder hit in the pandemic, such as hospitality.

[The Centers for Families and Children](#) and its El Barrio workforce development centers have seen a growth in the clients it typically serves — low-income clients with employment barriers — but also is seeing job seekers who may be unemployed for the first time, said Carole Beaty, the centers' chief of programs for family and work.

She said they're seeing individuals who have good, consistent job histories but often in entry-level positions, the competition for which is incredibly tough right now.

Balancing act

Organizations must balance their goals to help people start down career paths with job seekers' urgent needs for paychecks, especially during higher unemployment.

"We encourage the career pathway and those entry-level positions that provide an opportunity, but also recognize some individuals may choose a 'right now job' that they need," Beaty said. "If they do take a 'right now job,' then maybe they still want to consider learning in one of our other programs, which is why the technology helps."

[Towards Employment](#), an employment services nonprofit, is trying to steer people to the jobs that exist today, said executive director Jill Rizika.

"If people come in and their experience has all been in restaurant, then we may think about what would be transferable skills so that we can connect you to opportunities that exist today," she said.

Rizika said Towards Employment is trying to continue to listen to its employer partners and continue to be flexible and responsive. The organization plans to launch a sort of alternative staffing agency as a flexible mechanism to help connect people to temporary or part-time work while supporting them with other services so that when they're stabilized, the organization can help them navigate their next step toward a career.

[Youth Opportunities Unlimited \(Y.O.U.\)](#), a nonprofit workforce development organization, offers a summer jobs program that connects 2,500 to 3,000 young people to jobs each summer. This year, it was able to place about 820 young people, which Craig Dorn, Y.O.U. president and CEO, views through a "glass half full" lens.

What continues to be a challenge is finding new young people to enroll and building relationships remotely. Y.O.U.'s usual types of recruitment approaches (going into neighborhoods, connecting in rec or community centers) are rendered useless right now, which makes finding new clients difficult. He sees this as a bigger challenge than connecting them with jobs.

"But once they're found, they're getting a really excellent experience," he said. "It's not challenging to even find placements for them because it's kind of a weird economy. ... The unemployment's really high, but some places like Amazon and drug stores and grocery stores are in desperate need of people."

Dorn worries about young people he can't reach during the pandemic, which has underscored the digital divide. Y.O.U. and others are working to get clients needed equipment but cannot offer such support to those they aren't reaching.

"Young adults were hard to find before COVID," Dorn said. "So it's not like it got easier."

OhioGuidestone, a nonprofit that offers workforce development programming in addition to its behavioral health care services, has found engagement is better than expected, said Kiersten Watkins, assistant vice president of program operations for [OhioGuidestone](#), which offers a mix of in-person and virtual experiences.

For its virtual training, OhioGuidestone worked with a funder to add a budget for initially 30 Chromebooks. It has since secured hotspots and more Chromebooks and has plans to continue growing its inventory, which is currently all in use.

Benefits of virtual

Despite the digital divide and ongoing challenges organizations face in getting people needed technology, the move to virtual has offered some benefits. Some organizations, like ULGC, have been able to serve more individuals than in-person formats could. Being able to join trainings remotely means less worrying about two common barriers: transportation and child care. Though balancing watching a child and taking a class is no easy task, it's now an option.

Virtual interaction also helps level the playing field for some job seekers, said Laura Lamb, chief operating officer for [Vocational Guidance Services \(VGS\)](#), a vocational rehabilitation nonprofit focused on serving people with disabilities or other barriers to employment. A high unemployment rate makes competition even harder for VGS clients in some cases, Lamb said.

"On a good day, it's challenging for individuals with disabilities. Given the pandemic, it's even harder," she said. "There are more people applying for opportunities, more people applying for jobs, more people seeking employment. The labor force is flooded."

At the same time, the large need for front-line, entry-level workers, such as those at grocery stores and retailers, has "opened an opportunity for our individuals to get their foot in the

door" while many are nervous to work in a pandemic, Lamb said.

Organizations are continually learning best practices for virtual programming, which is likely to continue in some form after the pandemic. OhioGuidestone has assigned two instructors to each cohort: one for instruction and one to help students navigate technology without interrupting teaching.

Dorn said he "absolutely" sees a role for virtual education well into the future. The Centers for Families and Children already had been in the process of developing remote workshops, and the pandemic accelerated its timeline of implementing the technology. Towards Employment is looking for ways to evolve toward a hybrid model by the end of the year and is considering a new staff position that would offer tech support to participants.

Lamb said VGS is also in the process of planning for the future and examining how else virtual platforms can be used to provide new areas of programming and training.

"If anything, 2020 has taught us to be grateful but also be nimble," Lamb said. "I have not seen anything like this in my years here, and I really hope to never see it again."

Inline Play

Source URL: <https://www.crainscleveland.com/nonprofits/rewriting-job-training-nonprofit-workforce-development-groups-face-influx-job-seekers>