Virginia Community Voice
Employer Focus Group Themes & Analysis
Spring 2019

Virginia Community Voice (VACV) staff led the April 2019 employer focus groups. Representatives participated from the public, private, and workforce development sectors. Participants responded to VACV questions as both as employers and as workforce agencies. Themes include employment barriers; candidate recruitment; candidate skills; mitigating barriers during the job search; and retaining employees. Themes emerged both from the participants' responses and from the questions asked by the team running the focus group.

Barriers:

Employers did not mention all known employment barriers, but did elaborate on some that they deal with for many job candidates and employees. Focus group participants spoke about the following barriers:

Organizational

Organizations often create barriers to hiring individuals, such as bureaucratic hurdles for additional positions, restrictions (like not hiring individuals with criminal records), or drug tests. Two participants noted that they have to go through a whole permission and approval process to add needed positions. Approval for new positions can take a long time, delaying the hiring process. Even language in position descriptions can act as a barrier, as noted by one participant, "when you're an employee, and you're looking at all these different positions, and you see something...all this required, not required, you get lost. Your eyes are like, '...that's a lot. I'm not going to apply for that position' but I could've applied for it. Had I known." This can hurt employees who want to move up in an organization, but fear they do not qualify. Organizations may or may not be aware of the bureaucratic hurdles they impose on both their own employees and job candidates. This issue will have to be changed organizationally, rather than with a policy or intervention, though awareness could help.

Another organizational barrier includes resumes that are screened off-sight by different departments than those hiring. For example, one participant said, "Bon Secours, when we talked to them, they said 'The screening of resumes that come in is not done in Richmond, it's not done in Virginia, it's done out of New York City." This implies that your resume will only advance if it has certain key words, even if you are qualified. This "outsourcing" hinders both the organization and applicants from finding each other.

Some organizations also see hiring individuals with barriers, such as those with criminal records or disabilities, as liabilities to their organization. This view disqualifies someone even before they interview, further limiting their chances of being hired. One focus group participant, in reference to hiring individuals with mental challenges noted, "...As an employer, I quickly go to the liability side...what's gonna happen that I can't control?".

Workforce development programs may also impose barriers inadvertently. For example, one focus group participant noted she had a qualified candidate fail a behavior assessment, likely for becoming confused at one of the questions. Because he failed, she was unable to work with the job seeker for one year, per the organization's policy. This barrier continues to hurt job seekers access the programs and connections offered by the development program.

Bias
Bias is a known barrier that prevents individuals from employment. Examples of bias from peer-reviewed studies include gender, race, disability status, and sexuality, to name only some. Focus group participants were able to name unconscious bias as a barrier to employment, saying, "...in the healthcare area, there's layers of unconscious bias that are woven fairly covertly into a lot of those outreach and filtering and interviewing and hiring…" This shows employers are aware of institutional / organizational bias established and perpetuated by their employment institutions.

Some participants were able to recognize their own biases, while others could not. For example, one participant said a person with a disability wanted to interview for a position, and initially the interviewer refused even an interview. However, they recognized they "made a mistake initially" and gave the interviewee another chance, ended up hiring them, and had a great employee for many years. This individual was able to recognize their own bias and overcame it.

However, other focus group members' bias was evident when they stated, "I'm looking for old school values that seemed to evaporate, and in that, a lot of applicants are coming from single-family homes." This suggests the employer does not believe a single parent, statistically most often mothers, is able to teach their children appropriate soft skills and work ethic. Whether or not they meant it, this also suggests they believe fathers instill these values in children. Another example is the following response to talking about "millennial mindset" (which is a stereotype), "I thought it was a disease" suggesting people in the millennial age bracket (people born from 1981-1996, or ages 23-38) are inferior workers to the older generations.

Skills
Research shows lacking both hard and soft skills is a barrier to employment. In the focus group, employer participants indicated they were willing to teach new employees some of the hard skills on-the-job, but that they should already have the appropriate soft skills for the position. One participant said, "The things you can't teach, they should have already: interpersonal skills, integrity, communication skills, those are the first things I'm looking for." Lacking these soft skills is an employment barrier.

Criminal Record

Research shows individuals with criminal records have a hard time finding and retaining employment, and many employers will not hire individuals with records at all. Some industries do not allow individuals with records to work in those professions. Focus group participants noted that some companies allowed hiring returning citizens, but that policies have changed. Even individuals that have worked for a company for many years may suddenly be fired if policies change. For example, a participant said, "a friend of mine has been working as a lift driver for three years. Then in November of last year, they ran a background check, but he had a felony, which is 20 years old, and they let him go...they switched owners...the new owner ran background checks on everybody again." Focus group participants know the challenges individuals with criminal records face but are often constrained by law or organizational policy when hiring.

Networks
Studies show that having professional and personal networks help individuals find employment. Focus group participants noted in their hiring practices that they often take referrals from their employees for new hires. This is because their employees know the culture and can determine whether the person they know is a good fit. However, individuals without networks can suffer and have a harder time entering the job market. Furthermore, a person without a professional network may not have the references needed for a job, as shown by this excerpt, "I struggle...a lot of time with folk with references. Because when you think about somebody fresh outta high school, single-parent, they don't know anybody. So then the interview was great, we're just waiting for these references to come through. And nothing happens."

Trauma
Focus group participants were unable to name trauma as barrier, but did agree that it was a barrier once pointed out by Elaine. Trauma affects every aspect of a person's life, and is not "left at the door" once a person is at work; employers employ the whole person. Participants said, "I literally had somebody tell me that they're always used to people giving up on them. That's trauma," and, "...I get it, on the streets, it's ok for you to challenge someone...but if you had to do it over again what could you have done differently? Really get them to process it and see it from a different perspective." Though employers acknowledged trauma as a barrier, they were unable to think of it themselves, suggesting outreach on the trauma's effects on job readiness is necessary for this particular barrier.

Miscellaneous & Industry-Specific
Appropriate clothing: Focus group participants noted that some of their employees did not have job-appropriate clothing. Specifically, one employer had an individual with old, ill-fitting shoes that impacted her physical well-being. He purchased her new shoes.

Disability: Focus group participants named disability as a barrier to employment, citing liability concerns and bias (see organizational and bias sections). One participant talked about how her organization seeks out individuals with disabilities using Project Search, and

how individuals hired from Project Search have been an incredible asset to their department. This is also an example of an organization overcoming a negative stereotype about individuals with disabilities.

Driving Violation: If individuals are not transparent about their driving violations up-front for patient transport, it hurts their chances of being hired.

Drug Test: One participant noted that some places of employment will drug test applicants. Some individuals decide not to continue applying because they know of the drug test, excluding themselves.

Homeless: The representatives from the workforce development agencies noted they worked with homeless individuals who were trying to find employment.

Knowledge about jobs: Employers noted, even for themselves, that knowledge about jobs in different industries, and what type of jobs each industry has, was hard to find. This could also fit into networks as a barrier.

Language: Language barriers exist with individuals from different countries that may have Limited English Proficiency, and between military veterans and a civilian workforce. One focus group participant noted that when DuPont intentionally wanted to hire more veterans, they had trouble finding individuals. He stated, "It isn't as easy as we wanted, because the way they talk about their skills...great training you get in the military doesn't line up well with the employer language, so you need to have, literally a translator." While DuPont hired a translator because they were intentional about hiring veterans, many veterans are still disconnected from civilian organizations because of language barriers.

Mental Illness: Employers recognize mental illness as a barrier to employment but seemed to be more concerned about liability for themselves.

Sibling/Child/Elder Care: Many job seekers support other family members, impacting their ability to get and keep employment.

Substance Use: Employers view substance use as a liability that may not appear immediately after hiring, while also acknowledging it as a barrier.

Transportation: Many focus group participants noted that transportation was a large barrier for many individuals. They also referenced employees' abilities and willingness to overcome transportation barriers as a sign of willingness to work/work ethic. For example, "The willingness to work. We have folks that are walking to work, riding bicycles to work, driving to work...ubering...catching the bus to work. It's not rocket science…" this suggests that while employers know transportation is a large barrier, they may also believe it can be overcome by sheer will without other interventions.

Skills:

Employers most often said they were looking for good "soft-skills" rather than hard skills. Employers noted hard skills can often be taught on the job, while they expect job candidates to have appropriate soft skills before entering the workforce. Soft skills participants repeatedly mentioned include: honesty; work ethic, willingness to work, drive, and ambition; stress management;conflict management; ability to adapt to change; maturity; empathy; appropriate attire; a good attitude; listening skills; team player.

Sought-after hard skills include basic communication (written and verbal) and math skills were needed for positions in his organization. The construction representative said candidates need heavy equipment operation skills.

Employee Recruitment:

Focus group participants named a few different places from where they recruit job candidates. Most participants named **employee referral** as one of the best ways to find new employees. For example, one participant said, "We had a specific referral program, because, just like customers, the best way to get someone is by referral, same with employees, so we actually would incentivize employees...if they came through they got compensated for it." This suggests professional and personal networks are an important part of finding a job. Workforce readiness groups can be included in a seeker's networks. For example, one focus group participant said, "What I've found is that our candidates, where they are seeking that full-time employment after the program, have more success if we make a call on their behalf and we have a relationship with. We have very much leveraged our relationships…" Having someone with an established relationship vouch for a job candidate lends credibility to that candidate and is a valuable tool for the job seeker.

Participants also named the **internet**, specifically Zip Recruiter and Indeed, as another tool used to find qualified employees. Even the internet could be a barrier for job seekers they do not have access to the internet, know about these sites, or know how to market themselves through resumes and cover letters.

Participants also named **workforce pipelines** and direct **recruitment from high schools** to find job candidates. One individual named the VCU Pathways to Healthcare Workforce as a source for their employees. Another person said, "I actually go out to the different Richmond public schools... and recruit graduating seniors... I prefer to hire from that group...because I know they're going through the training we provide to get them ready for the work environment..." Recruiting directly from high school and using established pipeline programs can help mitigate some barriers for job seekers, including network, training, and education.

Similar to workforce pipelines, participants also referenced **established community resources**, like Goodwill, the Office of Community Wealth Building, and more generally "community

partners." Employers may even recommend job candidates get certifications from a community college or utilize funding for training from the Office of Community Wealth Building. This is one way employers are helping to mitigate barriers for job seekers.

Participants briefly mentioned other ways they recruit job seekers, including looking for a **career readiness certifications**. The participant said, "The other assessment I utilize a lot is, Career Readiness Certification...A lot of companies like warehouse, construction, they are looking for that because it's a three level…The employer knows are you going to be able to follow instructions…" Similar certifications have been named as best practices for helping individuals with criminal records find employment.

Mitigating Barriers During Job Search:
Some participants in the focus groups were from workforce readiness organizations, providing insights into how these programs help mitigate employment barriers. For example, the "work, learn, earn" program teaches construction trades. This program seeks out, but is not exclusive for, individuals in recovery programs or being released from jail. The job candidates learn the hard and soft skills needed for the construction trade. Another workforce readiness participant said they had an internal job fair before the end of their program so that their participants have an offer before completing the program. Other participants talked about how they were able to identify their personal biases and overcome them. Another talked about hosting job fairs for entry-level positions in the healthcare field.

Retaining Employees:
Many of the employers noted how important it was to retain employees, but could not identify any organizational policies, programs, or funds available to help current employees if they have challenges after gaining employment. This could be because they do not know about policies (such as donating leave if a person is sick) or their organizations do not have any. However, many of the employers in the group noted how they, personally, had helped their employees overcome difficult situations. Some bought new clothes, gave rides, or invited them into their homes for extended periods. While these anecdotes showed how much these individuals care about the people that work for them, individuals helping individuals is not the organizational change needed to support all types of employees. Instead, organizations should take the lead on ensuring they put equitable and sustainable policies in place to help retain employees.