



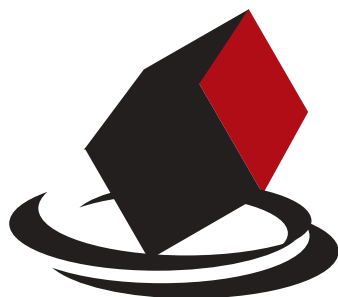
Are employer perceptions about CareerLink accurate?

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Cherished beliefs

Private firms have traditionally treated applicants from government employment services with suspicion. Employers felt that such services tapped a relatively small pool of workers, and that further, such workers simply were not "up to par." They complained that such applicants lacked "employability". That is, applicants lacked the education, work experience, training, and work ready attitudes that employers needed.

In the late 90s, Pennsylvania reorganized its fragmented employment services system into a single "brand" called CareerLink (see "What's CareerLink?"). The restructuring allowed for numerous improvements, including the CareerLink website (a "monster.com" for employers and job seekers in the state). But despite the changes many employers still seem to hold the same beliefs about the typical CareerLink job seeker. But are these beliefs still valid?



WorQ



Time to Reconsider?

Findings from a recent study of CareerLink job seekers in Southwest Pennsylvania suggest that some of those beliefs need to be reexamined.

▶ In 2002, CareerLink connected to 110,000 job seekers in the nine counties of Southwest Pennsylvania. As most of these job seekers were either unemployed, or employed but seeking work, that makes CareerLink a relatively *large* pipeline of mobile labor compared to other common labor pipelines (like high schools and colleges) in 2002.

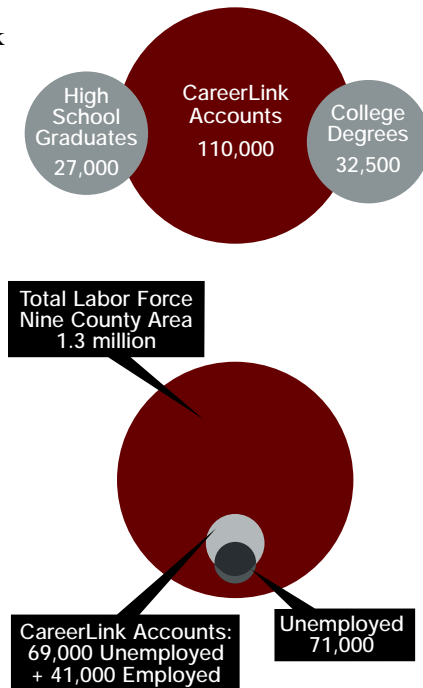
▶ Further, CareerLink captured a respectable portion of the area's total workforce, and the bulk of the area's unemployed population. The latter is a solid accomplishment for a system designed to assist the ranks of the unemployed.

▶ The results provided evidence to justify employer perceptions in part. 2002 CareerLink job seekers that entered through physical, "One Stop" centers certainly do appear to lack sufficient education, job experience, or technical certifications.

▶ However, "center-entered" accounts make up only 23% of CareerLink all CareerLink accounts. The remaining 77% entered themselves through the Web, and these "self-entered" accounts report numerous job experiences and certifications. Moreover, their level of education is actually comparable to the area's overall population.

Why Do Beliefs Persist?

With such a large, promising group of job seekers in the CareerLink



pool, why do negative employer impressions persist? Interviews with CareerLink personnel suggested employers may simply be reacting to applicants that (electronically) show up on their door in response to the job openings they post on CareerLink. Personnel noted that although numerous qualified candidates apply, such people are often joined in the queue by a significant number of wildly unqualified persons, many originating from One Stop centers. This forces employers to spend extra time and money screening out such candidates electronically, or with job interviews.

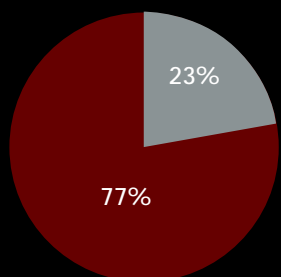
In other words, companies are right about some of the applicants that show up at their door, but wrong about CareerLink job seekers as a whole. They may be forming their impressions solely on a small number of inappropriate applicants, without realizing that CareerLink still taps into a large attractive pool of job seekers.

Good News and Bad News For The CareerLink Brand

The study reveals good news and bad news for the CareerLink brand. The good news is that impressions that most CareerLink job seekers lack employable characteristics is verifiably wrong. In fact, via its website, CareerLink has successfully connected to an educated and experienced pool of workers who outnumber less skilled center entered applicants by more than 3 to 1!

The bad news is that where the "rubber meets the road," i.e. in the electronic queues for typical job postings in CareerLink, employers may be forming a bad impression about what the

MOST CAREERLINK ACCOUNTS ARE SELF ENTERED



Center-Entered (grey square) Self-Entered (red square)

table 1

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: CENSUS VS. CAREERLINK

2000 CENSUS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	NINE COUNTIES	COMPARABLE?	2002-03 SELF-ENTERED "ATTAINMENT"	NINE COUNTIES
No schooling to 12th Grade (no diploma)	15%	Y	None Listed	12%
High school graduate (includes GED)	39%	Y	High School or GED	28%
Some college, no degree	16%	Y	Not applicable	14%
		N	Vocational/technical	7%
		N	Professional certification	9%
Associates degree	7%	Y	Associates degree	12%
Bachelors degree	15%	Y	Bachelors degree	14%
Masters degree	6%	Y	Masters degree	4%
Professional school degree	2%	N		
Doctorate degree	1%	Y	Doctorate degree	1%



system can offer them based on a small sampling of inappropriate applicants. As everyone knows, one bad experience can spawn a dozen retellings, which can set or harden negative impressions among customers.

And there is little doubt that such impressions likely have a real impact on employer participation in CareerLink. Some firms may simply not participate in the system at all, while others may decide to post only low skill jobs. This in turn makes the system less attractive than it could be for job seekers. After all, the more job openings the system has, the more job seekers will want to use it.

What Can We Do About It?

If CareerLink job seekers were really “unemployable” then the only option available for improving employer perceptions would be to send all such individuals to skills and work readiness training. In fact, One Stop center personnel do help such clients select appropriate training so that they might access appropriate job openings. At a minimum, study results confirm that most center entered accounts are indeed in need of substantial help. Funds should continue to be directed toward improving their employability and welfare.

But since 77% of CareerLink account holders actually do have significant work experience, education, and skills, there are several opportunities to improve employer perceptions and satisfaction. Some possible strategies are:

▶ **Filter clearly unqualified applicants from employer job postings.** If inappropriate applicants to job postings are at the root of the impression problem, one obvious solution is to simply “filter out” these applicants. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. CareerLink personnel actually do manage certain job posting queues. But given that current federal policies give One Stop clients strong incentives to apply for large numbers of jobs, and given the limited resources One Stop centers have, “filtering” can only be expected to prevent a modest amount of inappropriate applicants. Administrative policy changes designed to support the CareerLink personnel in filtering applicants would result in a higher number of better qualified candidates responding to a posted job opening.

▶ **Draw more qualified applicants from the self-entered pool into existing job postings that “match” their skills, education and work experience.** Whereas filtering out

inappropriate applicants is one way to improve the “quality” of a job posting queue, increasing the number of appropriate applicants is another. WIBs and One Stop centers frequently engage in periodic activities designed to capture and route job seekers to particular postings, including job fairs, advertisements, and coordinated hiring efforts for specific employers. But with 110,000 individuals in the pool, systems need to be developed to “target” particular groups of accounts for particular types of job postings. More on that in a moment...

▶ **Draw more employers and job postings into the system that “match” with existing self-entered CareerLink job seekers.**

This option assumes that there are job seekers in the pool who are not finding the jobs they want in available postings, and as a result are not showing up in the queues at all. Again, given its limited resources, CareerLink cannot recruit individual employers for every job seeker’s individual needs. But CareerLink managers certainly do attempt to obtain the participation of new employers all the time. CareerLink needs a cost efficient way to draw additional companies and jobs into the system that match the unmet needs of these “neglected” job seekers.

Adopt A Winning Practice From The Private Sector

There is an industry-proven set of tactics that, if properly implemented, would be of great benefit to CareerLink. Private firms in the direct marketing industry regularly try to find matches between offers in their catalogs and customers through a careful analysis of the information contained within their own electronic mailing lists. CareerLink’s database of job seekers could function as such a list, and similar tactics could be adopted to increase the match rate between job seekers and jobs. Taking such action would require the following steps:

▶ **Break the existing pool of self-entered job seekers into labor market segments.** The self-entered market segment represents a promising group of customers, but is likely too large to target. Identify smaller groups of accounts with similar work experiences, education, and/or certifications. Segmentation of the job seeker pool into smaller groups defined by employability characteristics will aid CareerLink staff and employers in making a good match.

▶ **Sell existing job seeker market segments to employers.** With a better understanding of the types of job seekers in the CareerLink “list”, local WIBs and One Stops ought to be able to go beyond ad hoc job matching and more systematically market *groups* of job seekers to employers. A careful analysis might reveal (hitherto unknown) inventories of qualified candidates suitable for particular industry clusters, including firms which have yet to post jobs on the system. Such an approach would be far more feasible than recruiting employers for individual job seeker needs, yet more effective in persuading companies that CareerLink contains workers of particular interest to them.

▶ **Sell existing CareerLink jobs and services to existing accounts.** Once market segments are established, One Stops should find matches between the job seeker segments in their backyard, and the jobs and services at their disposal. Since contact information including mailing addresses and e-mail addresses are regularly provided by account holders, targeted marketing efforts could be made to encourage job seekers to apply for particular types of jobs, or enroll in particular kinds of training.





The Next Stage In CareerLink's Evolution

Testing such tactics would require a new stage in CareerLink's ongoing evolution. Some resources would need to be committed to a market segmentation analysis of job seeker data. Importantly, WIBs and One Stops would need more open access to data on job seekers in their own backyards. Finally, some new procedures would need to be developed to implement this more proactive approach. The job seeker list would need to be continuously purged of inactive accounts, while address data would need to be kept

clean and up to date. Things that successful direct response marketers regularly do to ensure their mailing lists are both deliverable and responsive. Yet, if such tactics made progress in changing employer attitudes about CareerLink and in increasing job "matches" across the system, the pay-off would be well worth it.

ENDNOTES

1 "Transforming State Workforce Development Systems: Case Studies of Five Leading States", Ganzglass, Jensen, Ridley, Simon, and Thompson, National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices.



ABOUT WORQ-PM

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For more details on the research behind this publication, contact CCWD to request an expanded version of this report.

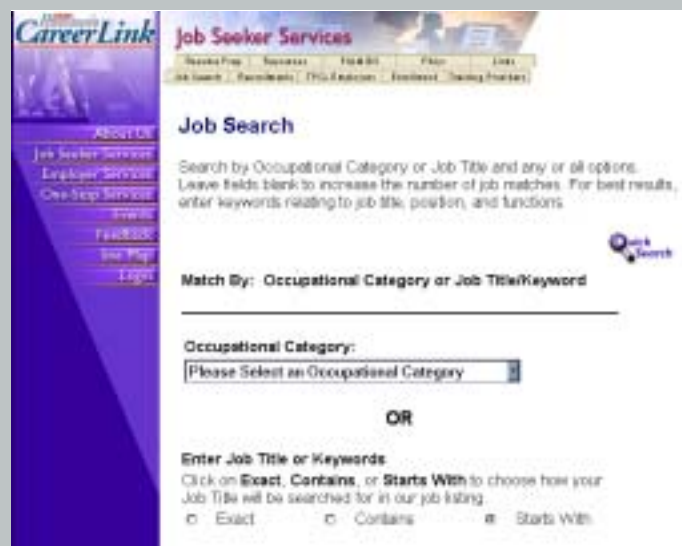
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what's CareerLink?

In 1998 Congress passed the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to unify fragmented federal and state employment, job placement, and training programs. The act required that state and local governments house services from 17 different programs within a system of "One Stop" assistance centers. The intent was for clients to have access to federal programs such as Employment Service, Unemployment Insurance, Adult Education and Literacy, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Job Corps, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Welfare-to-Work at one convenient location.

Pennsylvania responded in both real space and cyberspace. By the end of 1999, every workforce investment area in the state had opened at least one comprehensive "One Stop" center.¹ By late 1998, the state rolled out a computer system to support the centers and to act as an electronic labor exchange, accessible from the internet. Both the One Stop centers and the computer system were established and aggressively promoted by the state under the brand name "CareerLink".

The overall purpose of CareerLink is to match people and jobs — either by helping workers find jobs (or training for jobs), or by helping employers find workers. The supporting computer system has four main functions. First, it serves as a web-based labor market exchange system, like *monster.com*. Second, it tracks the services administered at One Stop CareerLink centers. Third, it provides information to clients on training (including job training) and training providers. Finally, it also serves as a performance measurement system, collecting the data



necessary for calculating program performance measures required by state and federal government.

At the centers, visiting job seekers (often with some assistance from center personnel) use the system to access job market data. Via One Stop computer facilities, they can enter their resumes, search for, and apply for jobs on their own. CareerLink center personnel also use the system to facilitate the job matching process for both job seekers and employers. Finally, any qualified job seeker with internet access can use CareerLink as they would *monster.com*, submitting their resumes to openings posted on the site by employers on-line.