Developing Employer Relationships
Highlighting Success:
COMCARE in Wichita

COMCARE in Wichita has been diligently working with employers over the past three years to develop good working relationships. Two of COMCARE’s employment specialists - Robin Madson and Steve Green discuss how they have built and developed good working relationships with employers in the Wichita area.

Robin Madson and Rusty Eck Ford

When I began to work as an employment specialist, I knew part of my job was to meet with employers and develop jobs for my clients. One of the businesses I started with was Rusty Eck Ford. I began by using the Internet to research different departments within the company, gaining information and facts which helped me feel more confident in approaching them. I called and spoke to Ken Heskett, Director of Operations, who scheduled a meeting with me for the following morning. When I arrived, I was surprised and a bit nervous to find the owner, Les Eck, Ken Heskett, Director of Operations and John Muir, Service Manager sitting on one side of the room facing me as I walked in. Armed with determination and information about the company, I went to into the meeting.

I needed to engage the employer and began asking about the company and what their experience has been with the hiring process. John, the service manager, talked about his high turn over in the service department and that he usually hires high school kids. John explained applicants would have to have a current driver's license with a good driving record and could not have a DUI. It became apparent the company was growing and he needed numerous employees on all levels. The turnover of staff was stressful for him. Gaining the understanding of how they handle hiring needs allowed me to focus information on how supported employment services could address their needs.
I had a client in mind for the service department. He has a diagnosis of schizophrenia with ongoing symptoms of paranoia and command auditory hallucinations. The client is tall and thin with a full beard and mustache, dressing as if he stepped out of the 60's. He often mumbles, has poor eye contact and stooped posture. Several years ago he worked successfully as a truck driver with a good driving record, but didn't like long haul driving. With his diagnosis and accompanying symptoms it was difficult for him to get through an interview.

During the meeting I gave them an overview of the client that I had in mind describing his skills, strengths and abilities and my follow-up services. I told them I would like the opportunity to work with them to reduce and/or eliminate the high employee turn over in the service area. I thanked them again, expressed how much I appreciated the opportunity to discuss supported employment services and potential employment opportunities. As I got up to leave Ken said, "I'll call you". I must have had a pretty doubtful look on my face, Ken immediately followed up with, “Really, I will definitely call you” smiling to me as I left. Ken called a month later asking if I could fill two positions in the service department. I was elated and nervous knowing I was about to develop my first company and I didn't want to make any mistakes. I needed to make a good job match. I called my client asking him if he was still interested in the position. He became very excited and clearly wanted the job. I knew my client would need a lot of reassurance to build confidence before the interview.

My client and I practiced driving in the parking lot for several days and my client also read the driving handbook to prepare for the potential position. He was ready for his interview which was scheduled for the following Friday. He prepared for the interview by getting a hair cut and clean shave. I was able to use flex funds to purchase pants, a dress shirt, belt, dress shoes and socks for the interview. Prior to the interview, we discussed what questions might be asked. He was hired on the spot!

Soon after starting his new position, he had problems with the voices "screaming at him." He didn't want to lose his job, but didn't know how to make the voices stop so he can perform his work duties. I asked the employer if we could put a radio in his department to help eliminate or minimize the voices, his employer agreed. My first successful job accommodation with the employer has allowed my client to use the radio when the voices become too loud. The client has been employed for 3 years now and has taken several vacations. When I see him now, he stands tall, is clean-shaven, and well-dressed. He is never late, has rarely missed a day of work, and he is well liked by his co-workers.

I continue to have a strong relationship with Rusty Eck Ford, attending monthly meetings with all department managers, and continue to be called for all hiring needs. Ken Heskett, Director of Operations, says, "Before working with Robin, filling certain positions were a constant nightmare for department managers. Robin has partnered with the managers helping fill positions with quality applicants. Thank you for three years of excellent service, Robin."

Steve Green and HCR Manor Care

Sam is a 39 year old man who I’ve been working with since November 2005. He
is very polite, congenial and very reliable. Previously he had been employed in the food service and janitorial fields, but this time Sam was most interested in working in the nursing home industry. Sam expresses a love of the elderly and the desire to perform janitorial or laundry work in this particular area.

In order to meet his interest of working in a nursing home, I first started by researching the possibilities, and learning about specific facilities in the community. This search led to the HCR Manor Care in Wichita, Kansas. An internet search provided a complete listing of their vacant positions, some of which fit Sam’s interest areas.

I called HCR and inquired as to who was in charge of housekeeping. I was connected to Jolean. She was very pleasant and interested in the services offered by Supported Employment of COMCARE. I scheduled an appointment to meet her to discuss job possibilities for Sam. Jolean was gracious enough to take me on a tour of the facility and meet the staff. I was very impressed by HCR’s friendliness and professionalism. After our meeting she asked that Sam and I come in the following day to fill out an application and interview with her for an available part-time position in the laundry department. Jolean was very impressed with the detail and neatness of his application. She decided to hire Sam for the position the day of her interview with him.

Sam has been employed with HCR Manor Care for two months. During this time, I have maintained weekly contact with Jolean to inquire about Sam’s job performance and/or problems with transportation. Jolean states that “Sam is always early, often too early for work. I sometimes have to remind him of the smaller tasks he has trouble remembering to perform. However, he is very detail oriented and consistent.”

This relationship with Jolean and HCR Manor Care is in the early stages. I plan to continue to meet with Jolean to check on Sam’s progress and learn of new job responsibilities as he has acquired. I have assured Jolean that I would keep my fellow employment specialists aware of any openings at HCR Manor Care. Jolean stated that she would contact me by phone or e-mail of current job opportunities at the facility.

Tips for Developing Employer Relationships!

As the two examples given above show, developing relationships with employers entails a myriad of skills as well as practice and experience. In order to build effective relationships with employers, the following are some tips for employment specialists.

Prepare for the first contact: know something about the business before going in and plan how you will introduce yourself to the employer.
In the beginning of the process, focus on what the employer needs, listening to the employer and what is important to them. You should be listening more than talking!

Discuss the benefits of your involvement (e.g. knowing the applicants, providing practical support to increase the likelihood of success on the job, etc.) and match those benefits with what the employer says her/she needs or values.

Job matching: carefully matching a particular client’s strengths, abilities and desires with what you have learned about the needs and desires of the employer. Don’t just try to fill a position.

Once a client is hired, regularly meeting with the employer to ensure they know you are committed to providing assistance. Do what you say you will do.

Please feel free to contact the Supported Employment Trainers/Consultants at KU: Linda Carlson and Galen Smith or call (785) 864-4720 for further information.

People, Places and Events:

Exemplary Status for Supported Employment

In April, Kansas' Social and Rehabilitation Services announced a new opportunity to celebrate Community Mental Health Centers and the services they are providing to Kansas consumers. Centers that meet certain standards of practice will receive a status as an exemplary center for supported employment. These centers will be recognized via the EBP Times newsletter, with an international circulation, press releases, and announcements to the Governors Mental Health Planning Council etc. To review the exemplary status requirements, visit: http://www.socwel.ku.edu/mentalhealth/EBP/exemplary%20status%20for%20supported%20employment.htm

To keep the process open, anyone can nominate a Center at any time. To make a nomination, notify Nancy Rapp, Nar@srskansas.org, or 785-296-3471. Nancy in turn will contact the University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare, Office of Research and Training. They will make an appointment with the nominated Center and come out to provide a Fidelity Review.

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