

Service Provider Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Staff Qualifications
and Knowledge

AtWork!: Creating a Robust Investment in Staff Professional Development

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Background

At the beginning of their transformation process, AtWork! did not have a training structure in place. Recognizing that job development required a different skill set for their staff, AtWork! made a commitment to invest in training, which they saw as “a key ingredient” to successful transformation.

Investing in the development of staff skills and competencies to support the transformation process is essential. Without that investment, as one agency leader put it, “every provider is going to continue to spin their wheels with people in, people out, retraining, all those type of things.”

Consequently, AtWork! invested in training its staff through a robust approach that included 4 main training strategies: in-house trainings, online trainings, staff mentoring and coaching, and a certification course at Highline Community College (HCC).

Implementation

AtWork! conducted two to three in-house trainings per year where they brought in speakers to talk about the transformation process and other related topics. They also asked staff to read change management books, and conducted exercises to prepare for transformation.

Staff at all levels were also encouraged to take part in seminars, watch webinars, and explore other online resources so as to continually learn the best practices in integrated employment.

Leaders within the organization acted as mentors, doing one-on-one coaching and supervision, especially with front-line staff. One job developer considered it “a luxury” to be mentored by a top executive in her organization. The mentoring experience helped her integrate theory learned from the HCC certification course into her everyday practice with individuals.

A final dimension to this training investment was the organization’s commitment to have direct support staff attend HCC, which offered employment consultant training and certification. AtWork! committed to sending several people each year. The training and certification course is one year in duration, for roughly 5 hours a week, making it manageable for staff working full time.

In the words of one staffer, this HCC course was “fantastic, absolutely incredible, and I would recommend it to anybody.” The first 30 minutes of each class focused on sharing job development experiences. Listening to what other employment consultants were doing helped participants to improve their creativity and to learn from other agencies’ experiences.

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Impact

The combination of training options (in-person, online, mentoring and coaching, and the certification course) made staff feel more capable and confident with the new set of skills necessary to find integrated employment options. The certification course in particular expanded attendees' professional networks, sparked their creativity, and kept them inspired to do the work.

One staffer who took the course said, "I think that's what probably hooked me in the field is I felt capable." The course thus enhanced the retention of competent and motivated staff to support the transformation process. Blending the certification course with mentoring worked particularly well for people with different learning styles, as this combination of training methods bridged theory and practice.

For more information on this practice contact thinkwork@umb.edu



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