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Using Labor Market Data to Improve the Job Prospects of People with Disabilities

by John Dorrer, Aaron Fichtner, and Kathy Krepcio

Quality labor market data and analysis provides crucial information to job seekers, educators, and employers. For policymakers and practitioners looking to help both businesses meet their labor needs and job seekers find good jobs with advancement potential, comprehensive and timely data about local, state, and regional labor markets is important. But for many workforce providers, including those serving people with disabilities, this information can be complex, overwhelming, and hard to find. Yet, using and understanding labor market data is critical to identifying available jobs as well as determining where and what occupations are emerging for individuals seeking work. This brief provides an overview of labor market information, outlines its utility to better inform and improve state and local “to-work” activities for people with disabilities, and identifies publicly available information sources that produce the data. Finally, it showcases a strategic partnership in the state of Maine between the state labor department and disability service providers that works to assist frontline staff in the disability employment field to understand and integrate labor market information and tools into their practice.

Introduction

On a daily basis, workforce professionals face the challenge of keeping up with a shifting employment scene and a rapidly changing labor market on behalf of the thousands of individuals who seek their job preparation and placement services. To help them meet this challenge, current and accessible workforce information — that is, data and analysis about local, state, and regional labor markets — can be a viable tool not only for those providing employment services, but also for those seeking work or those hiring job seekers (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009).

What is workforce or labor market information (LMI)? LMI is generally defined as “the publicly available collection of facts, data, or analysis related to a particular labor market, including economic and business trends that can be used by information users to make decisions” (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009). Typical users of labor market information generally fall into five categories:

- Job seekers and members of the workforce (e.g., individuals with disabilities seeking employment);
- Frontline staff in public, private, and community organizations that provide workforce and education services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation counselors, job developers, school guidance counselors, case managers, etc.);
- Program designers and managers in public, private, and community-based organizations that provide workforce and education services (e.g., Title I vocational rehabilitation agencies, community service providers, and others);

- Researchers; and
- Employers and business organizations.

For all of these users, timely, reliable, and accurate labor market information is necessary for a variety of reasons, including:

- If public agencies or educational institutions need to set resource priorities and allocate funds, plan the types of education and training services to be delivered, and then develop courses, curricula, training, or workforce programs — then quality LMI is fundamental to these activities;
- If young adults or adult job seekers want to engage in career exploration, look for a job, or improve their skills and education — then accessible and easy-to-understand LMI is essential to their efforts;
- If job counselors or educators need to help job seekers make education and training decisions, assist with job searches, or identify employers for job development — then timely and relevant LMI is necessary to do the job effectively; and
- If employers need to recruit qualified workers, establish compensation levels, provide training, or locate to a new labor market — then up-to-date and useable LMI is necessary to making an informed decision.

The Labor Market Information Landscape: What is Available and Where Do I Find It?

In general, labor market information can be framed into four distinct categories that include information on:

- Workforce Supply
- Employer (Market) Demand
- Intersection of Supply and Demand
- Workforce and Education Services

Typical Labor Market Information Providers

- State labor market information agencies or units (generally located in state workforce agencies)
- Research organizations such as colleges and universities
- Reputable private or not-for-profit institutes and experts

Workforce Supply

Workforce supply data generally refers to data collected on individuals. For providers planning for or serving individuals with disabilities, relevant questions can include:

- How are individuals with disabilities faring in the state, local, or regional labor market?
- What is the current and projected available pool of labor among individuals with disabilities in the community, region, or state?
- What are the educational and skill levels of these individuals seeking work? What types of training or educational programs are they attending?
- What are the employment demographics of individuals with disabilities who are already in the workforce, including employment status, educational attainment, industry area, occupation, and earnings?

Major sources of data that can be accessed to examine workforce supply include (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009; Stapleton & Thornton, 2009):

- American Community Survey (U.S. Census)
- Current Population Survey (U.S. Census/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- National Health Interview Survey (U.S. Census)
- Survey of Income and Program Participants (U.S. Census)
- Decennial Census (U.S. Census)
- Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action (State/U.S. Census)
- Local Area Unemployment Statistics (State/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Federal and Federal-State Administrative (Program) Data (Social Security Administration, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor and state counterparts)

In addition to these data sources, state labor market information offices, also known as state LMI units, routinely collect data and conduct analysis and research on state and local labor market areas. These can include demographic and economic characteristics of individuals at the person, household, or occupation level. In addition, there are a number of private companies and organizations that have recently emerged to produce and sell labor market data as well as create analysis tools that help users access data.

State Labor Market Information Agencies: A Valuable Resource and Partner

All 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, have offices that are responsible for providing data, analysis, and insight about their state and regional economies and labor markets. These LMI units generally provide research and tools that can be used by workforce development providers, employers, and policymakers to improve their decision-making and practice. Workforce products and data available can include:

- Population and workforce demographics
- Employment, unemployment, and labor force statistics
- Occupational employment and wages
- Occupational projections and outlook
- Regional economic assessments

For a complete list of labor market information contacts and websites by state, visit: <http://www.bls.gov/bls/ofolist.htm>.

The Emerging Private LMI Marketplace

In recent years, a private data delivery system has emerged as a new source of innovation in the labor market data arena, producing new data and developing tools that allow users to access and analyze data. These private for-hire vendors are making available to state and local government agencies such offerings as:

Online Job Posting Data: A number of companies and organizations now provide an analysis of online job postings as a means to identify hiring trends of employers. While such “real-time jobs in demand” data systems exclude the many job openings that are not posted online, they do provide more timely information on labor market trends than is currently collected and available from traditional government data sources. State departments of labor are purchasing these data sources as a means to supplement government data

Display and Analysis Tools: While state and federal websites provide access to labor market data, they have traditionally been difficult to navigate and overwhelming to casual data users. In response, some companies have developed online tools that allow users to easily obtain the data they need and to identify trends in the data. Often these sites feature the visual display of data in colorful charts and graphs.

Employer Demand

Employer demand data generally refers to data on occupations, industries, employers, job openings, salary, and job requirements. For job seekers with disabilities, frontline workers and education and training providers, as well as policymakers and program managers serving individuals with disabilities, key questions include:

- What job tasks or jobs are (or will be) available consistent with job seekers’ skills, interests, and experience?
- What are the requirements (e.g., education, skills) and hiring processes for jobs in particular occupations and industries?

- What are the wages, benefits, long-term career opportunities, and potential for job flexibility for particular occupations or in particular industries?
- What industries should be targeted for training and other workforce assistance? What industries or businesses are growing? What industries are targeted for growth by state or local economic development efforts and resources?

Major sources of data that can be accessed to examine employer demand include (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009):

Occupations

- Occupational Employment Statistics (State/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Occupational Outlooks and Career Information (State/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Growth Occupations List (State/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Prevailing Wages Database (State)

Industry

- County Business Patterns (U.S. Census)
- Current Employment Statistics (State)
- Census of Employment and Wages (State)
- Local Employment Dynamics (U.S. Census/U.S. Department of Labor)
- Economic Census (U.S. Census)

Employer

- Firm Expansions and Contractions (State)
- Firm Size Data by Location (U.S. Small Business Administration)

Job Openings

- Publicly Available Job Boards (State/Private/Nonprofits)

Salary Information

- National Compensation Survey (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Salary and Benefit Information (www.careeronestop.org)

Job Requirements

- O*Net (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration)

Intersection of Supply and Demand

Intersection of supply and demand data generally refers to data that analyze information about the gap between supply and demand. For example, supply and demand information can include a comparative analysis between the location of jobs and the concentration of available workers or it may include an analysis of the skills and education of job seekers and those required by local employers or businesses. For users looking to gain insight into the nexus between supply and demand involving the population of persons with disabilities, key questions can include (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009):

- What jobs are employers having the most difficulty filling? What particular job tasks are increasingly hard to fill?
- What skills (e.g., soft skills, technical skills) and educational requirements are needed by employers? Do the skills of program participants who are seeking work match employer demand?
- What are the significant business and other economic trends (national, state, regional, and local) that will have an impact on the labor market?
- Which industries and occupations are declining and which are growing?

There are no clear and definitive sources that supply data on the intersection of supply and demand. Data usually come in the form of special reports on particular topics published by state and local agencies or reputable research institutes, agencies, and organizations and industry-related employer associations.

Workforce and Education Services

Workforce and education services data provide information on the location and availability of education (e.g., academic, vocational) and training opportunities from educational training providers. Providers can include local One-Stop Career Centers and their partners (e.g., vocational rehabilitation agencies), community colleges and other postsecondary institutions, local nonprofit community-based providers offering employment services or other local employment-related resources (e.g., private training organizations), as well as data on the performance of these providers. People needing workforce and education service information include job seekers with disabilities and their family members, frontline workforce and education staff, K-12 and postsecondary teachers and educators, employers, policymakers, and program managers. Key questions asked by these users can include (Fichtner, Kauder, & Krepcio, 2009):

- Where can a job seeker (with or without a disability) obtain needed education, training, and workforce services? What resources (e.g., loans, grants, other financing based on eligibility requirements) are available to access these programs or services?
- Where can a student (youth or adult) obtain needed postsecondary credentials for jobs in demand in the local community?
- Where can a laid-off worker obtain job or career transition services and reemployment services?
- What resources are available to businesses to help train current workers in new skills?
- What services and education and training programs have good graduation rates and job placement track records?

The quality, accessibility, and quantity of public information that is available on workforce and education services vary by state and community. Available information may include data on educational and training programs, type and location of providers, costs, program or training duration, and outcomes such as graduation or job placement rates. Information sources include federal and state websites (e.g., federal websites providing the name and location of Ticket to Work Employment Network providers, state websites providing the location and available services of local One-Stop Career Centers and vocational rehabilitation offices), as well as resources available from other community-based employment assistance providers (e.g., state employment resource books for people with disabilities and their family members, state eligible training providers lists and training program databases, and individual training provider report cards offered online by states).¹

Employment Resources for Job Seekers with Disabilities: An Example from New Jersey

Various public and private organizations in New Jersey have created strong resource guides and products that appeal to job seekers, including ones specifically targeted to people with disabilities and their family members, as well as information for frontline staff in government and nonprofit community-based agencies. Products range from comprehensive resource guides and online report cards to disability population-specific documents that provide a variety of information, including employment assistance resources.

New Jersey 2009 Resources. Published by the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Disability Services, this guide provides a comprehensive statewide directory of programs and services, including advice and information on education, employment, and training resources. Located at: <http://tiny.cc/eYBd6>.

Employment Guide for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Published by Autism New Jersey and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, this guide provides an overview of workforce issues and resources related to anyone with ASD seeking a job. The information is targeted to individuals with ASD and others helping them find employment. Located at: <http://tiny.cc/pWMJW>.

Great Expectations! Preparing Your Child with Developmental Disabilities for Employment Success. Published by the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, this publication provides inspiration and tools for parents of developmentally disabled children to help their children prepare for the world of work. Located at: <http://tiny.cc/8jU2v>.

It's All About Work! Exploring an Untapped Labor Pool. Published by the Bergen County Division on Disability Services and the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Disability Services, this guide provides information and detailed resources for business owners, managers, and human resource personnel who want to hire people with disabilities. Available by request through the Bergen County Division of Disability Services at 201.336.6500.

New Jersey's Consumer Report Card for Training Programs. Provided by the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, this online directory of training programs in the state allows New Jersey residents to search for education and training programs that meet their specific training needs, while also serving as the state's list of eligible training providers that can receive government funds. Located at: www.njtrainingsystems.org.

NJ Next Stop. Provided by the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission, this is the state's primary free career guidance Internet portal for high school students, parents, teachers, and counselors. The site offers accessible information about the skills New Jersey workers must have to qualify for jobs being created within targeted industries over the next 5 to 10 years. Located at: www.njnextstop.org.

1. For example, www.yourtickettowork.com (includes a directory of Ticket to Work employment networks), www.careeronestop.org (links to state websites and listings of education and training resources, One-Stop Career Centers by state, and more), and www.jan.vwu.edu/cgi-win/TypeQuery.exe?902 (list of state vocational rehabilitation agencies).

The State of Maine and the Development of a Strategic LMI Partnership

In 2008, several Maine state agencies and private rehabilitation providers serving individuals with disabilities explored the possibility of a partnership with the state's labor market information unit to assist with the need for improved information about job opportunities, career prospects, the shape of the Maine business community, and the workings of the local labor markets. The impetus of the partnership was the initiation of a new federal grant designed to help move adults with psychiatric disabilities to employment. In order for the grant program to be successful, employment specialists needed much better information about the local labor market and program participants needed better tools to make more informed career choices. As a result, these agencies, led by Maine Medical Center's Vocational Rehabilitation Program, turned to the state's LMI unit for help (NTAR Leadership Center, 2009). What emerged was a new strategic alliance between the Maine Department of Labor's Center for Workplace Research and Information and several agencies — including the Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine Department of Labor's Bureau of Rehabilitation Services — that incorporated the use of LMI data into the daily operations of these agencies.

The initial goal of the partnership was practical — to develop a sustainable and enduring process to better educate vocational rehabilitation counselors, employment specialists working with consumers with disabilities in local One-Stop Career Centers, and others, about how to access and use LMI to help them in their day-to-day job duties. The partners, however, soon realized that the value of the collaboration was mutual. According to state officials, the partnership enabled:

- Various vocational rehabilitation and employment service providers to access more robust economic, labor market, and workforce information statewide or regionally for their various federally required state plans and grants, as well as to provide information to these providers that would help them design more responsive employment assistance programs;
- Vocational rehabilitation counselors and other employment specialists to obtain access to quality, timely, and comprehensive information, as well as acquire new and enhanced skills (regularly updated) in the use of applying this information. State agencies serving individuals with disabilities were able to better understand their program outcomes in the context of what was happening in the state and local labor markets based on the data provided to them by the LMI unit (e.g., information on local hiring, wages and earnings, etc.); and
- LMI analysts to access data from disability employment programs, such as vocational rehabilitation, and use the information as an important source of workforce data. In addition, the LMI unit was able to work with the vocational rehabilitation agencies to match state administrative data with Unemployment Insurance wage records, thus providing the vocational rehabilitation agency with information and analysis about their participants' employment histories, earnings, and mobility patterns.

Finally, recognizing that the effective use of labor market information requires the development of knowledge and skills over the long term on the part of users, this partnership of agencies and the Center for Workforce Research and Information created the Labor Market Information Academy. This academy was not only designed to provide an introduction and overview of LMI to frontline staff involved in employment assistance activities for individuals with disabilities, but included the implementation of several organizational techniques to support the continuous use of, and access to, LMI data in their daily work. These techniques included:

- Widespread training about LMI through the Labor Market Information Academy to provide frontline workers with a general framework and concept of LMI;
- Pre-training/post-training tests of participants to assess the depth of what was learned;
- Tying the use of LMI to frontline staff job performance standards;
- Working with the state LMI unit to make LMI products more accessible and user friendly, including receipt of regular emails about regional business activity;
- Asking supervisors to reinforce LMI use through their daily interactions with staff; and
- Requiring counselors to conduct research about a business or industry using available LMI data before approaching an employer about job opportunities.

All partners are planning to conduct follow-up sessions to ensure continuity in building the knowledge, skills, and competencies of frontline staff.

For further information about Maine's LMI efforts and the Labor Market Information Academy, contact: John Dorrer, Director, Center for Workforce Research and Information, Maine Department of Labor (207.621.5179, john.dorrer@maine.gov) or Christine McKenzie, Director, Vocational Rehabilitation Programs, Maine Medical Center (207.662.4900, mkench@mmc.org).

The Value of Partnering with Labor Market Information Providers

- To learn more about public data sources, including their strengths and limitations;
- To learn more about the best and easiest ways to access these sources;
- To tap into the intimate knowledge of LMI experts who know about the economy, labor markets, and workforce issues particular to a state, region, or locality; and
- To connect a particular unique need for information with people who have expertise, analytical capacity, and knowledge about multiple information sources.

Conclusion

Quality, timely, and accessible workforce information is increasingly being viewed as a critical tool for developing more effective "to-work" programs. LMI can provide information to better inform state planning efforts and strategies, and LMI providers can be strong partners in improving an organization's decision support process. With the continued unacceptably low employment rate for individuals with disabilities, it becomes important for state program officials to be more effective in the delivery and management of vital employment assistance services and more accountable for outcomes. Readily accessible, timely, and trustworthy information helps policymakers and service providers develop programs that meet the needs of employers and respond to a changing, diverse workforce. Most importantly, quality accessible information also allows job seekers with disabilities to make more informed choices about their careers, and helps them to navigate an increasing complex labor market.

Fundamentally, knowing whom to ask for help — such as the example provided from Maine — can give employment specialists working with job seekers with disabilities access to greater knowledge about where to find information and how that information can be used to improve program performance and the job outcomes of those they serve. While labor market information can be complex, LMI experts can help make it more understandable, user friendly, and applicable to the unique data and programmatic needs of organizations serving individuals with disabilities.

Useful Resources

The U.S. Department of Labor sponsors two websites that provide useful information about LMI and state LMI activities:

- *www.workforce3one.org* is a knowledge sharing and e-learning website that offers workforce professionals, employers, and educators a network to feature and discuss workforce solutions, including resources on labor market information. Registration is required to access podcasts, webinars, and research on a variety of topics, including national and state labor market information.
- *www.careeronestop.com* offers career resources and workforce information to job seekers, students, businesses, and workforce professionals, including information about how and where to find labor market information by state.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor houses the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is the principal fact-finding agency in the federal government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. Located at *www.bls.gov*, the website contains information about wages by area and occupation; local, state, and national employment rates (including the employment rate of individuals with disabilities found at *www.bls.gov/cps/cpsdisability.htm*); and data on occupations and national employment (such as unemployment).

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About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

Consortium Partners

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Center for Workers with Disabilities, American Public Human Services Association

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