

Getting and Keeping a Job: Best Practices for Employment Retention and Advancement

July 2010

Program Technical
Assistance Series

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Transitional Jobs (TJ) programs often measure their success by the number of their participants who are hired into unsubsidized jobs in the private labor market. But of course the ultimate objective is that graduates of TJ programs have the experience, skills, and support to stay in those jobs—and be successful enough in the workplace to advance to better jobs with family-sustaining pay.

Evidence suggests that employment retention and advancement programs can work in helping hard-to-employ people keep jobs and get raises, but that keeping participants engaged in retention programs can be difficult.¹ Moreover, in order for retention and advancement programs to deliver positive outcomes, they must be both well-designed and well-supported by the organizations that implement them.

Key #1 Ongoing Case Management

Retention efforts vary by program, but what they typically have in common is a post-placement case management process that includes follow-up with both employers and workers focused on identifying and resolving issues before they result in a resignation or termination.

Key #2 Sufficient Intensity and Duration

The success of these efforts appears to depend on how intensely, and for how long, this follow-up occurs: an evaluation of employment retention and advancement programs by Public/Private Ventures found that programs lasting at least six months and programs conducting three or more participant contacts per month were associated with positive outcomes such as working more months, working full time, and higher earnings.²

Key #3 Incentives

Also, keeping participants engaged in the retention program is critical. One way to help ensure that participants maintain contact is through the use of incentives. Incentives are often monetary, such as cash bonuses, gift cards, or wage supplements, but non-monetary incentives like child care and homework help for children also work for some populations.³

1 Bloom, D. et al. *The Employment Retention and Advancement Project: Results from the Chicago ERA Site*. New York: MDRC (2006); Clymer, C. et al. *Promoting Opportunity: Findings from the State Workforce Policy Initiative on Employment Retention and Advancement*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures (2005); Hill, H. et al. *Delivering Employment Retention and Advancement Services: A Process Study of Iowa's Post-Employment Pilot Program*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research (2001); Navarro, D. et al. *The Employment Retention and Advancement Project: Results from the Post-Assistance Self-Sufficiency (PASS) Program in Riverside, California*. New York: MDRC (2007); Wood, R. & Paulsell, D. *Employment Retention for TANF Recipients: Lessons from GAPS*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research (2000).

2 Clymer, C. et al. *Promoting Opportunity: Findings from the State Workforce Policy Initiative on Employment Retention and Advancement*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures (2005).

3 Ibid.; Hill, H. & Parvetti, L. *Using Incentives to Promote Job Retention and Advancement: Guidance from the Performance Improvement Industry*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research (2000); Wood, R. & Paulsell, D. *Employment Retention for TANF Recipients: Lessons from GAPS*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research (2000).

Key #4 Engaging Employers

Engaging employers and getting their buy-in is important as well. Remember, employee turnover costs employers a lot of money, so they should have an intrinsic interest in boosting retention. Taking a “dual-customer” approach—considering the needs of employers, including their input in program design, and responding to their feedback—can make retention programs more successful.⁴

Some of the other program elements that can improve job retention are things that TJ programs already typically do well—job readiness and employability training, work experience and training that develop hard and soft skills, and access to supportive services are all associated with better retention outcomes.⁵

To supplement the evaluation findings noted above, we spoke to several expert practitioners in the field of Transitional Jobs and asked for their input on how to ensure retention efforts succeed in helping hard-to-employ participants stay and advance in unsubsidized jobs. Their suggestions:

- Employment retention and advancement should be a priority of TJ programs from the beginning, both as a part of program design and as an objective for participants.
- Programs should be sure to invest enough resources and personnel in retention services to ensure their effectiveness—just as with any other program component.
- For startup programs, retention strategies and investments should be a core component in the initial budgeting and fundraising plans.
- TJ programs should have mechanism in place to help participants who are not successful in their first unsubsidized job placement, such as short-term re-assignment to a Transitional Job until they can get another unsubsidized job, to give them another chance at success in the workplace.
- Participants need to see the value in staying engaged with a retention plan. Incentives—especially monetary incentives—are an effective way to keep participants engaged. Monetary incentives also provide needed help to new workers, since entry-level wages are rarely adequate to sustain families or individuals.
- Whenever possible, TJ placements and training should provide experience in growing industries with opportunities to enter career pathways for advancement.

All of these retention strategies require significant investments of funds, staff time, and planning to be effective. Nevertheless, TJ providers should take care not to neglect this highly important element. After all, the objectives of the Transitional Jobs strategy are only fully accomplished when participants achieve long-term success in the workplace—and carefully planned and well-executed retention efforts increase this most important of outcomes.

The NTJN would like to know about your successful employment retention practices. Please call Chris Warland at 773-336-6082 or email cwarland@heartlandalliance.org to share your knowledge—we will publish your submitted promising retention strategies in a future newsletter.

⁴ Fischer, D. *The Road to Good Employment Retention: Three Successful Programs from the Jobs Initiative*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005).

⁵ Ibid.

The National Transitional Jobs Network is (NTJN) is a coalition of city, state, and federal policy makers; community workforce organizations; anti-poverty nonprofit service providers and advocacy organizations committed to advancing and strengthening Transitional Jobs programs around the country so that people with barriers to employment can gain success in the workplace and improve their economic lives and the economic conditions of their communities. The NTJN supports a constituency of over 4,000 active members and stakeholders across the country.

The NTJN is a project of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights.

