

JOB AND LIFE SKILLS

Taller San Jose



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The Challenge

Alex Ortega had just turned twenty-one when he was released from jail. He had served 30 days for petty theft. Alex had not previously been in serious trouble with the law even though he had been involved in a street gang since he was 16 years old. Serving time, however, missing his young wife and baby, had sobered him a bit. “I need a real job,” he thought. He was frustrated by the series of bottom level jobs he had held since he was 18. Besides, his past earnings didn’t begin to pay for even subsistence living for his small family.

What Alex didn’t know was that he lived in one of the most expensive areas of the world, where at minimum wage he would have to work 110 hours a week to afford a modest one bedroom apartment in a crowded urban environment.

Alex had immigrated to Orange County, California, from El Salvador when he was three years old. His mother worked in a factory at night; his father was a day worker, catching jobs when he could through a local hiring hall. Alex had worked alongside his father for the past couple of years, learning the rhythms of the day worker’s market. It was the luck of the draw. Sometimes there would be work for days—gardening, roofing, demolition—but there were more days when he and the other men sat idle. Day labor provided neither workman’s compensation nor employee benefits. The pay was uncertain, whatever the employer chose to provide, and always in cash.

Several days before Alex was released from jail, he had read a story in the local newspaper announcing the opening of a training program for construction workers in Santa Ana. It was just blocks from his home. He

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copied down a contact number and made the call on the day of his release. They were recruiting young men between the ages of 18-28 for the first training class. Alex made certain that he was accepted.

At the end of 14 weeks, Alex was at work on a construction site—his starting salary, \$8.50 an hour. Sixty days later he received a call from the nonprofit program that had provided his job training. An employer was looking to hire a qualified young carpenter to connect to the union program. Alex accepted the offer. Because of his previous training he was able to enter the program at an advanced level with a starting salary of \$14.80 an hour. Every six months he will receive a raise. At the end of four years, Alex will be a qualified journeyman carpenter and will likely earn \$40,000 annually.

There are many young people like Alex—undereducated, unskilled, and without adequate support systems. In many of the urban centers of our country—where both poverty and immigration are major factors—the high school dropout rate can edge toward 50 percent. What happens when functionally illiterate young people move onto the streets of our cities? How do they support themselves?

The job base in the United States has changed dramatically in the past twenty years. In this global market, many of the historically predictable jobs in manufacturing have shifted overseas, leaving low-paying service jobs in their wake. The promise of high-tech jobs has been uncertain and the undereducated and unskilled often don't have the skills to match the requirements of the technology marketplace.



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The Invention:

A holistic educational and vocational center tailored to the needs of young adults.



The Solution: Getting the Idea to Fly

When an agency takes on the mission of training workers and matching them with the changing needs of today's marketplace, there are several steps with which to begin:

- Understanding the job market
- Learning what the employers want
- Exploring your community's resources
- Finding your niche and getting known for what you do best

Understanding the job market

The job market in every community has unique characteristics based on economic, historical, social, and demographic realities. In order to serve your clients well, you'll need to understand how the job market operates in your community and what factors influence its ebb and flow. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides information about the current rate of unemployment in your state, county, and city, you'll need to dig deeper to learn about specific populations. This may involve searching for answers to your own specific questions:

- What is the unemployment rate for the younger population—those between 16-24?
- How do women fare in the local job market?
- How does ethnicity affect employment or earning power?
- What is the employment rate for those who have been incarcerated? For high school dropouts?

ABOUT TALLER SAN JOSE

Taller San Jose (St. Joseph's Workshop), a faith-based organization in Santa Ana, California, took on the challenge of training undereducated and unemployed Latino youth for the workforce when gang issues in the city were at a height. Beginning in 1995 with eight young people and a dilapidated building, the program now works intensely with 500 young people each year—providing training, work readiness skills, job placement, and job coaching. Taller San Jose focuses on three training areas—nurse's aide certification, Microsoft Office certification, and first level construction skills. The executive director, Sister Eileen McNerney, CSJ, attributes the program's success to focus and will. "We focus on young people," she says, "because Santa Ana has the lowest median age of any city in the country. We had to learn where the jobs were and how to develop the capacity to train for those skill sets. We never stop deepening and strengthening our programs. Most important, we stay close to our clients so that we're grounded and understand their needs. We're their brokers in the community and we never give up on them. They repay us with their success."

- What is the prevailing wage for various job categories?
- What is the most common wage for beginning or inexperienced workers?

Learning What the Employer Wants

Employers have nearly universal expectations about the work ethic of their potential employees. They want to hire people who will show up every day, on time, drug free, with a good attitude. “Present those people to me,” says a local manufacturer, “and we can train them to do what is required.” Other employers have more specific requirements—for safety and efficiency they want employees who understand and communicate in English.

While these seem like simple requirements, they are often significant hurdles for young people who have not worked before, for those who have been unemployed for a long time, and for those not familiar with the American work ethic.

These employer expectations, especially attendance and attitude, are listed among “the soft skills of employment.” They aren’t always acquired in a classroom or in a one-on-one job-coaching session. They’re best learned through practice—on-the-job training programs that simulate the workplace and require apprentice workers to come on time, every day, drug free, and with a good attitude. Actual performance is the best indicator of future success.

Exploring Your Community’s Resources

Juan Torres, 22, was saddled with a \$6,000 debt. He had registered for a job-training program with the intention of receiving his paralegal certification. The program director promised him a substantial scholarship and a student loan of \$5,000 which he could pay back when he obtained his first job. It sounded like a dream come true, but Juan had not read the fine print on his contract. In order to fulfill his obligation he had to maintain a 97 percent attendance rate. Midway through the first semester his baby daughter required surgery. Juan and his wife spent their days in the hospital. Juan missed six days of school, losing his credits for the semester. He started over during the fall, but then his second-hand car had transmission problems and, again, he faulted on his attendance pledge. Meanwhile, without the job that he had expected to have, his student loan payments came due. Within a few months, he was overwhelmed with debt. No one at the training program helped him question whether or not the promised outcome matched the realities of his life.



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Your local job market contains both threats and opportunities for the vulnerable unemployed. Your role will be to familiarize yourself with the community's resources so that you can access them, with the obstacles so that you can get around them, and with the pitfalls so that you can protect the vulnerable from exploitation.

If you are to become an effective advocate for the unemployed, you will want to know how to assist your clients to use community assets appropriately. Take time to investigate the employment-related services in your community—both the profit and nonprofit entities. When you have identified services, agencies, and organizations that you believe to be effective, build relationships with them. Keep individuals in these organizations informed of your goals and progress so that they view you as a collaborator.

Attend Chamber of Commerce meetings and begin to put names and faces to potential employers. Identify the employers located within

fifteen miles of your service area. Find out what kind of jobs are available in these environments. These will be the workplaces that your clients will be able to access. Network with local temporary employment agencies to learn about how they broker jobs with employers and in which areas they specialize. Explore the resources of your local educational institutions. Community colleges often provide relevant training at a minimal cost, and they may be willing to bring their programs to your site.

As you are learning about the resources in your community, don't be overly impressed by high-minded words and glossy flyers. If you really want to understand the services and how they are delivered, ask to tour the facilities. Wherever you explore, take note of the client base. Look for results. When gathering information about agencies and services, keep the following questions in mind:



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- Who does the agency say that they serve? Who do they believe that they serve best?
- Is there a community college or a state-funded job training program with whom you can align your services?
- If it is a for-profit agency, how is it financed? What does the client pay?
- If it is a nonprofit organization, what is the source of funding?
- Does the agency entice clients with the promise of a scholarship only to saddle them with high interest loans and future debt?
- Who are your partners in the community likely to be?

Finding Your Niche And Getting Known For What You Do Best

Vanessa Soto was 18 and pregnant when she signed up for an 18-week program to obtain certification as a nurse's aide. She had dropped out of school three years before to spend her days with her gang-oriented boyfriend. She hadn't liked school and didn't know if she could learn. The nurse's aide program appealed to her. It was fast-paced and personal. After 10 weeks at a desk, she was gaining clinical experience at the bedside. As a nurse's aide, Vanessa's common sense, engaging personality, and learning came together and she experienced success for the first time in her life. Several weeks after her baby was born, Vanessa easily found employment and was hired with a starting salary of \$8.50 an hour. She took a second level of training, was hired in the local hospital, and received a \$3.00 hourly increase. Today she is using her bi-lingual skills and medical background to provide case management and coach-

ing to pregnant teens. She's earning \$16.00 an hour and can afford her own apartment.

The nonprofit agency where Vanessa received her nurse's aide training had developed the program because they learned there was an on-going and continuous need for this entry level job and that it led to a career ladder in other medical fields. The agency not only provided the basic training required for state certification but they also learned what skills and values local nursing homes and hospitals were looking for in nurse's aide candidates. They added a home-health component that was highly desirable to many employers and gave special attention to helping bi-lingual students use their language skills for patient care. The agency developed a program that enabled its candidates to stand out from the crowd.

Short term, intense, and highly focused training programs—20 weeks or less—often work best. It's an investment of time that people can make because the payoff is within their grasp.

Employers are often best equipped to identify what skills and competencies are "missing but needed." By interviewing human resource directors and hiring agents in both large and small organizations you can learn where there are gaps in skills between employer needs and the unskilled worker. You can strengthen your services to both the employer and the client by filling that gap. Questions to consider may include:

- Where are there jobs with potential upward mobility?
- What skills can be acquired through short-term training programs?
- Is there a niche in your job market that is not being filled by another organization?
- Who can you interview to find out what training is "missing but needed" in your community?
- How can you get better at what you already do well?
- How can you strengthen your reputation as a trainer or broker for future employees?



Measuring and Adapting: Did It Fly?

You'll be able to encourage foundations, donors, and government entities to invest in your program if you can deliver what you promise, and evaluation through measurement is the evidence of your success.

Making good decisions about what to measure will depend upon

knowing the difference between outputs and outcomes. Outputs are the services you provide, while outcomes are the measurable changes in your clients that result. The number of students enrolled in a class would be an output, but the number of students who find good jobs and keep them are solid outcomes. Outcomes can be the achievement of your program goals or changes in your clients' attitudes about work or about their future. Your dialogue with a professional evaluation expert can help you decide which results matter the most. For example, don't just decide what the workplace needs; instead, work directly with employers to find out what they want. And you don't have to measure everything. People vote with their feet. If your program is not working, they won't be there.

In addition to evaluating the effectiveness of your program, you can also use measurement to monitor your relationships with employers and collaborators, especially those on whom parts of your program depend. Let them respond anonymously to a survey to find out if they respect your methods, if they want to continue their relationship with you, and if they have suggestions for improving your program or relationship with them.

Be sensitive to the timing of measurement. If your client base is made up of young people who live in pervasively drug-dependent environments and have a poor history in school or with previous jobs, you



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might want to start measurement after a client has been in the program for 30 days or so. This will help you avoid completing paperwork for someone who may not be ready. Gather baseline data as soon as a relationship of trust has been built, and give the program adequate time to instill change before collecting follow-up data. It's good to remember that some programs take time to become successful.



The Ripple Effect: Expect it and Encourage it

Elizabeth Bravo, 19 years old and a single mother, found her first job in a convenience store. While Elizabeth was bi-lingual in English and Spanish, her employer spoke a language she did not understand and it was difficult for her to communicate with him. He paid her in cash, changed her hours at whim, and on weekends left her working alone and unprotected until midnight. Although she worked eight to ten-hour shifts, Elizabeth was not allowed breaks. Her employer insisted that she squat down under the counter to eat her hasty lunch. Elizabeth wanted to improve her situation and with the help of a job coach at a community center, she was able to better her skills and to find employment as a full-time receptionist. She was happy to have the better job but was then faced with some new and unfamiliar challenges. Elizabeth didn't understand her rights as a worker and had never been paid formally. Every step of the way, her job coach was in the wings to help her make important decisions.

Many clients who have not worked before are unsophisticated about employment issues. They are often unfamiliar with their rights and will put up with unacceptable working conditions. Typically, they got their first job in an informal manner and may have been afraid to ask questions. Inexperienced workers may never have made a formal job application and they are often unprepared for a pre-employment interview. Even dressed in what they consider to be their "best clothing," they may not match the standard dress code of the workplace. Other clients may come with impediments that need to be dealt with before they can be productive workers. One person may need childcare; another may need to clear up legal issues in order to obtain a valid driver's license.

Working with clients to solve these problems can impact their lives in ways that they may not have anticipated. Those who have not previously worked in a formal workplace environment suddenly have an infrastructure in place to support the success of finding a better

position. They will know how to read and understand a paycheck, to select appropriate benefits, and set up and use a bank account.

A job coach who understands the workplace and what employers look for in an employee plays a significant role in leading clients to grow in this way. An effective coach works with the client every step along the way to:

- Prepare a resume.
- Practice typical interview questions, giving particular attention to how to address issues such as the lack of a high school diploma, lack of previous work experience, or time spent in jail.
- Select appropriate clothing to match the job.
- Make decisions about transportation and childcare.
- Decide how to use and save money appropriately.



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Caution

In the field of human services, connecting the unemployed or underemployed to the job market is one of the most empowering services that can be rendered. If this is what you have set out to do, don't be put off by naysayers who will warn you that others have tried what you have in mind and have failed. Even people of good will can offer simplistic solutions to what you know to be complex issues. Don't let yourself be discouraged or distracted. By staying close to the client and connected to community resources, you'll discover what works. You'll make the path by walking.



Summary

Take your inspiration, passion, and focus from the following story: One day a man walking on an isolated beach noticed countless starfish that had been washed up by the tides. Out of their element, they were shriveling and dying. Ahead of him, he saw a boy reaching down and pitching one starfish at a time back into the surf. When the man caught up with the boy, he cautioned, "There are so many starfish, you'll never be able to save them all. What you're doing just won't matter!" With great intentionality, the boy leaned down, picked up yet another starfish and tossed it into the ocean. "It matters to this one," he said and kept to his task.

In connecting one vulnerable person at a time to a productive work life, your role will matter enormously.

RESOURCE LIST

Sosa, L. *The Americano Dream. How Latinos Can Achieve Success in Business and in Life.* New York: Plume, 1998.

Zambrana, R. E., (Ed.) *Understanding Latino Families: Scholarship, Policy and Practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995.

Homeboy Industries: A community-based organization that puts hard-to-place youth to work.

www.homeboy-industries.org

Public Private Ventures: A public policy and program development organization focusing on workforce development.

www.ppv.org

City Skills: A resource that provides resources for the information technology labor market.

www.cityskills.org

United States Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration

www.doleta.gov

Quintessential Careers: Do's and don'ts about resumes, interviews and job searches

www.quintcareers.com

Youth Jobs: A source of tools and tips for young job seekers

www.youthjobs.ca

Taller San Jose: A community based organization that provides education and job skills to Latino youth.

www.tallersanjose.org