



By Allen Anderson

Job Placement in Rural Communities

Rural job placement is a significant challenge. How do you find jobs in small communities? What will ensure immediate and ongoing effectiveness in rural job development?

We need to start by defining rural. I use the rule of thumb that any single community over 5000 people is the end of rural and the beginning of urban. Rural is anywhere with 1 to 5000 people.

There is very little difference in the kinds of skills you use in rural or urban settings. You have to be more skilled and prepared in a rural setting than in an urban one, because of the fewer job opportunities and the need to maximize obtaining each one.

If your job placement is failing, consider that it may be because it is being done by chance, with little or no marketing strategy or planning put in place. Job developers beat the bushes when a candidate becomes available, hoping that the candidate's skills, good luck and "on-the-feet" thinking by the job developer will be enough to land a job. Generally it is not and the candidate is labeled as having too few skills to get into the highly competitive rural job market.

People with significant employment barriers have a very slim chance of being placed under the rural "by chance" strategy, so what is a better way to get jobs?

Lets start with the two classic errors that often occur in rural job development.

The first is conducting your job search specific to a particular candidate and the job they want, and assuming that this job will be available at the same time your candidate is ready. This combination, of a specific job available at a convenient time and you finding it when you need it, is improbable. Urban settings can use this strategy with more success because at any one time there are more jobs available, therefore the probability of success goes up. I don't recommend this strategy in either setting, as it does not work really well over the long term in either place.

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The second is assuming you can sell the idea that it is good to hire your candidate at the moment when the job is available and your candidate is ready. This assumption supposes you will be able to overcome whatever other issues the hiring person has (like pressure to hire a relative, ex-employee etc.) which will prevent them from selecting your candidate.

Managing these factors and any doubts you may have about the candidate, makes rural job development a daunting task.

So what should or can you do?

The great advantage in a rural setting is that it is much easier to identify all the employers and all existing or potential job openings. There are a limited number of employers and often access to key people is simpler and easier than in urban settings.

The first step in job development in a rural setting is to do this identification. You can know the entire labour market in a rural area. This will allow you to prepare a specific marketing strategy and take advantage of being in the right place at the right time.

What jobs can you expect will open in this community with what employers? This identification step is useful in getting to know employers and building your connections. Your agenda with the employer is to meet, get to know them (discuss their business needs) and identify their potential for job openings.

Even if they are not hiring immediately, or in the near future, the employer will be aware of you and may think of new ways do business with you. Better yet, you will be aware of which employers hold more potential and you will have heard some of the community's objections. Therefore, for any next steps, you will be better prepared.

Always approach employers through responding to their needs rather than asking them to respond to your needs for a job for your candidate. If an employer has no opening, but you have gone to discuss their needs, you can always go back. You can only ask for a job for your candidates two or three times and be turned down before an employer sees you as a nuisance and gives you a permanent no.

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The second step is to recognize that rural communities hire through connections. It is almost entirely a hidden job market. You must build a network to inform you of openings and to give you credibility in the community.

Networks are built because people approve of you and your ideas. In rural communities, it is necessary to begin your connections by doing a concept sell. Employers must believe the concept of hiring your candidates, or using your services, is a good idea. Selling concept, at the time of trying to persuade an employer to hire a particular candidate, is very difficult unless the candidate's skills sell themselves. Therefore a key element in a rural strategy is selling the concept of hiring your candidates early in your relationship with local employers.

There will be a lot of skepticism at the beginning. This will help you understand what questions you must be able to answer for this community. I generally recommend a series of speaking engagements (the best), news stories and one-on-one encounters. Information through direct mail tends not to work well. Your message is "hiring from me is a good idea for the following reasons". Listening to the resistance will tell you how to rebuild or repackage your services.

As people come to believe your message, they will offer you opportunities to present a candidate. If they do not buy your concept, they never buy your candidate.

Soliciting significant personal support for the concept from the community is also a big help. If a community leader gives approval, chances are others will also give the ideas a chance.

With this strategy, if you have gotten to know the community you are more inside than out and can speak about problems with more authority. You may also given the resources you have available be able to propose new solutions not thought of or possible in the community with out your assets. Your community approach can be: we have these resources how can we make them work for both you and ourselves. Ask how you can help.

As you get to know the community, you will see and be advised of upcoming job openings. You can then present your candidate at the best time in the selection process. You can use timing, networks and avoiding competition or approaching employers at the wrong time.

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The keys to rural job development are:

- Preparation, getting to know the employers and the hiring schedule
- Talking first about employer needs before talking about what the candidate wants
- Soliciting community leader support for the concept of selling your candidates
- Involving the community so they get more from the decision than one person getting a job.

Rural job placement is an almost pure selling task. Most rural employers know the options they have when they offer a position and have probably selected their solution before they post their position. If you are to move them to a new way of thinking, they must buy the new idea before they think about their regular solution and stick with it. Your advantages if you prepare are: you can know the employers well, you can be in the right place at the right time, and you will know the potential objections which will make rural job development much easier.

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