



By Allen Anderson

Working Against Ourselves

The vocational rehabilitation industry commonly uses a flawed strategy when trying to find jobs for people with significant employment barriers. This flaw is instrumental in inhibiting our ability to generate employment outcomes and long-term labor market penetration for these candidates. This flaw is: overselling the candidate - to both employers and ourselves.

What does overselling mean and what are its consequences? Overselling means we represent candidates as more perfect than they are. Overtly and subtly we hint that our candidates are a great hidden resource overlooked by employers. The candidates are presented as diamonds in the rough, fueling a mythology of missed and potential value and raising everyone's expectations.

This message is easy and positive to deliver to employers. It also makes us feel confident in whom we are representing. Unfortunately, for candidates and for us, this message is often blatantly false.

We oversell to avoid our greatest fear. We fear we represent damaged goods, second rate employees. The idea of a less than perfect candidate terrifies us. Who would hire them? There are better choices. The candidate's barriers are obstacles enough. We need to enhance not detract.

The problem is reality. As the candidates limitations appear after the overselling has taken place, there is significant disappointment that the diamond in the rough may not even be a diamond. Disappointment prompts employer withdrawal from our candidates and from our services. Once burned twice shy.

Trying to avoid candidate limitations encourages our industry to exclude people who need a job but are not perfect. We do this by using screening techniques that allow only the best candidates to be deemed employable. The rest are left in an unemployment holding pattern. We exclude by making public promises to never send out unqualified candidates. We build services to work only with qualified applicants although we claim to work with everyone. We exclude by measuring people against being job ready when job readiness is not a measure of employability. These strategies prevent people from getting jobs through us and move them into perpetual unemployment.

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We must be able to find jobs for candidates with all levels of ability and forget the ideas of perfection and ideal. We must accept the humanity of our candidates, all that is good, average and imperfect.

Our overselling strategy has to be replaced with a reality-based strategy. We need to accept people for who they are and use the motivation to go to work as the prime criteria for employability.

That said, how do we change?

Some general rules –

1. Recognize that selling candidates involves more about understanding the employer than presenting the candidate. By understanding the employer well, the candidate, limited or not, can fit.
2. Abandon the notion of the normal, standard, perfect or ideal candidate. Work from the position that each job is filled through the employer's definition of value at a given moment in time. It is us, not the employer, who move this definition into the realm of the perfect, as we over sell our candidates
3. Avoid employment competitions. Our candidates seldom stack up well when compared to others for a job. Our candidates do best when measured against the employer's needs and our candidate's capability to do the job. Get to jobs before they go competitive.
4. Use marketing strategies that take into account potential for failure. Expect failure and use it to lever the relationship. Your service to the employer is more important than the individual candidate.
5. Make failure work for you by having the candidate and you learn from it to ensure the next opportunity works better. Build your job development system expecting to find more than one job for the candidate.
6. Build a big enough employer base that you can absorb job loss. Do not be too dependent on a few employers for all your jobs.

Overselling is a curse in our industry as it leads to heightened expectations with little hope of realization. It disappoints all and rewards none.

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