

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Joining me today on the podcast is Maria Heidkamp, director of program development, and a senior researcher at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. Maria, welcome to the podcast.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

Thank you, Ramona. Before we go anywhere into the conversation, I want to thank WorkingNation for having been a great partner to us as we were building the New Start Career Network, which I know we're going to talk about, but the videos and events and other opportunities to work together were really important to us to help raise awareness of the challenges of older long-term unemployed job seekers and of the work we were doing, so it means a lot to me that as we are closing down the program and we've written the final report that we get to share some lessons with you, so thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure because you've really informed a lot of our coverage on older workers. You've mentioned the New Start Career Network, which started in October 2015. It deals with long-term unemployment, particularly with older workers. Why don't you give us a little description of that program?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

In 2014, in the aftermath of the great recession, more than four in 10 of New Jersey's unemployed job seekers, or about 125,000 people were long-term unemployed, so we realized New Jersey had one of the nation's highest shares of long-term unemployment. It was high everywhere, but New Jersey was first or second in the nation. Of that population, 70% of those New Jerseyans had been out of work a year or longer, so really long-term unemployed, and we noticed that roughly half of them were over the age of 45. We were also aware that the public workforce system, which is under-resourced, was really not in a position to provide the kind of support these job seekers might need, right? We spend a lot less as you know, of course, Ramona, in this country on active labor market programs like career counseling, meaning that really these older long-term unemployed individuals were left with very little help, so we sought funding to develop a free statewide program that would build in the kinds of supports we thought these job seekers would benefit from.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How did you go about setting up this program? I know you did some research, you talked to some community groups, and other groups. Tell me about where that led you. What kind of help did you offer these long-term unemployed?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

We ended up developing a program that had four main components, web-based tools and webinars targeted to older long-term unemployed workers. We also included premium tools like Jobscan, which lets people compare their resume with a job description, and can be helpful for people trying to get past an automated ATF systems, and Big Interview, which is a video interview tool with banks of questions.

We were trying to make sure we had a lot of web-based support. We focused on employer engagement, primarily through members-only job fairs. We had partnerships with a number of organizations, including Rutgers University's career services, the Mental Health Association in New Jersey, the State Library Association, various community groups, like United Way, or AARP New Jersey, the County College Consortium, and others. I guess what I would consider our most innovative component, access to personalized coaching provided by trained volunteers. In the end, we ended up with over 400 volunteer career coaches throughout the course of the program

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Over the course of these six-and-a-half years, you've assisted over 6,000 people. One of the things that you were mentioning is you had some volunteers who came in over the course of that time, couple of hundred, 400. What kind of coaching did they give them? I always wanted to make sure that we don't tell the older worker that they have to change so much, but there is some kind of coaching that is needed to address the jobs of today.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

One thing we know about long-term unemployment is that it can just wreak havoc on older workers' motivation, their confidence, their self-esteem. Many of them feel like they had a long work history, they did everything right, and now, here it is, they've been unemployed for a year, or 18 months, or whatever it is. The coaches were not just talking about how to fix a resume or how to have a better LinkedIn presence. I mean, those were important, but the coaches really were there to help with accountability and motivation and rebuilding their confidence. I mean, I think the empathy and compassion that the coaches shared with the job seekers was huge. Many of the coaches themselves either knew people who had been long-term unemployed or themselves had gone through a stretch of long-term unemployment, so they had some firsthand knowledge, and I think that just made them able to really help in a way that was more important in some ways than just the nuts and bolts of how to do a job search.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, I did not know about that part, that the people that were doing coaching, a lot of them had had that experience themselves. Did you guys track afterwards how many people might have found work?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

We had a couple of large surveys and the last survey was in June of 2021, and at that point of the survey respondents, 38% of them reported that they had obtained a new job. However, it was hard to track because our program was open-ended. You could come in and use the tools, you could attend a webinar, you could go to a job fair, but you didn't have to report back to us. There wasn't anything that was mandatory for the job seekers. The best we could do in some ways was anecdotally, we would hear from a coach, or from a job seeker when they got a job, they might let us know that, or through the surveys.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Did you work directly with the state of New Jersey, or were you working with private employers, or combination of both when you set this up?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

When we started, we got support first from the Philip and Tammy Murphy Family Foundation. It was several years before he became governor, but we had put in a proposal to their foundation, and were honored to get the generous support that we did. We then matched that support by getting contributions from other employers, from the Volunteer Generation Fund because of the work we were doing to promote volunteerism in this state and some other sources, so it was primarily privately funded.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

However, the Heldrich Center does do a lot of work with the state's labor department, and in 2018, we teamed up with the labor department and the New Jersey Office of Innovation to work together to try and create some other tools for job seekers. There's a program called the New Jersey Career Network. The idea was to learn from what we were doing with New Start Career Network in terms of providing support and accountability and motivational techniques and see if we could build a digital version of those kinds of supports. The Department of Labor has since provided support to the Heldrich Center to run a New Jersey job seeker community that is separate from New Start Career Network and will be ongoing for a while now. It really emphasizes peer support and emotional wellbeing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things you've already mentioned is how stress can get into someone's head who's a long-term unemployed. How are you helping people deal with that?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

Stress due to long-term unemployment can really interfere with people's motivation and also their executive functioning. Those are the very kinds of skills people need to undertake a successful job search. That might be planning and executing and achieving goals, so if you're too stressed, you really can't function very well. That can be addressed in different ways, whether that's by incorporating more personalized support, as we did using volunteers, or maybe offering more group and peer support activities, but some of it is helping people find ways to process their stress, and improve their emotional wellbeing. That could be as simple as taking a walk in nature or real, or finding a project to work on where you maybe achieve some level of success. It may not be as a new job, but there might be something you've done that you can feel good about. I think that's not typically done through the public workforce system program, so I think we really learned a lot by going through that, by having the coaches work with people. Some of the coaches specialized in helping provide structure and accountability, which some job seekers wanted, and maybe others were good with how to think about making some kind of career transition, so we also had coaches that provided different kinds and levels of support depending on what some of the job seekers needed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In your report, I was struck by something that I think maybe is pretty obvious, unfortunately, that convincing employers to hire the long-term older worker was the biggest challenge for you. Where did you get with that?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

I would agree that employer engagement was the most challenging part of the project. Age discrimination and the stigma of long-term unemployment need to be addressed. Employers need to recognize that there are many talented, skilled, older long-term unemployed job seekers out there. I know I've heard you talk about this Ramona and other podcast episodes, and we've had a lot of conversations about it, I mean, there's evidence that some of the automated hiring systems just exclude this population. You'd like to think that the very tight labor market right now may help, but in general employers really don't include older workers in their justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion programs. Very few do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You and I have had this conversation many times, about age bias in the workplace is. It's like the ageism is like an acceptable bias. It's not included in the DEIA conversation as much as it should be, that people who are older bring a lot of value to a workplace. How did you address that in the program?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

We tried to cultivate partnerships with particular employers and found that very difficult to do. This included several employers who had been part of an initiative under President Obama to not discriminate against the long-term unemployed. I'd been to meetings with some of them, including one at the White House. When it actually came down to trying to find a way to get some of our job seekers in front of them, there was a lot of reluctance, I'm not going to lie. I mean, it was very, very difficult. There was one in particular I reached out to when I saw that their website included language about long-term unemployed job seekers were welcome and I was like, "This is great. If I can forge this partnership and we can spotlight this employer on our website and give them a great shout-out for their willingness to hire from this population," and no sooner than I made this outreach, I mean, literally, they took the language down the next day. I was devastated. It was really sad.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

We had great turnout for the job fairs. However, I think some of the employers would turn out because they thought they were getting Rutgers University students, even though we made sure the language said, "This job fair is for New Start Career Network and experienced mid-career workers," there would still be some who would show up thinking that they were going to get the latest crop of Rutgers students, who are very desirable candidates, but on the whole, I will say we had good turnout for job fairs. As you probably know, I mean, job fairs, they can be helpful, but if you do two big job fairs a year, you're maybe not getting the traction you'd like for job seekers and employer partnerships and things.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

I think older workers are generally not thought about when it comes to apprenticeship opportunities. They are not the population you think about for sector strategies. We tried a partnership with the county colleges to promote sort of a returnship-like model that focused on on-the-job training, or a wage subsidy, and we had a lot of trouble there, too. We just couldn't get the traction with employers. Between groups like WorkingNation and the Heldrich Center, we just need to continue to push this narrative. There's a business case for hiring older workers and they have all of these attributes that are attractive. They're mature, they're good at communication, they have the ability to problem solve. I mean, all of these skills that we associate with older workers and they may have them, but I just don't think that business case resonates the way we'd like it to.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're shutting down this New Start Career Network. What do you want other organizations to take away from it and how can what you learn be used to help people in other states?

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

There are a number of lessons. One is it really is critical to provide emotional support to all job seekers, but in particular, to long-term unemployed job seekers, right? I know we've talked about the stress and motivation and executive functioning. I think we've got to find ways to build that into public workforce system programs, as well as the programs of community-based organizations.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

I think it was great for us to learn how wonderful volunteers can be. We had people we recruited through Rutgers' alumni associations, through the Governor's Office of Volunteerism, through United Way, or AARP, and others. Some of them were professional coaches who just liked the idea of donating some time to help others were aspiring coaches who were working toward getting their coaching certification and wanted to use this as a way to foster their skills. But others had no coaching background whatsoever. They may have come from pharma or biotech or whatever, all sorts of industries, IT, the finance sector. It was just a wonderful thing.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

I wanted to also mention the changing nature of work. We found that most of our job seekers would have preferred full-time jobs with benefits, but the reality is that many need to accept short-term jobs, gig work, project-based work in order to get by, and that can be challenging to convince them to think about that, to be open to that, but the reality is quality jobs that pay decent wages that come with benefits are still in short supply and maybe are especially in short supply for older, long-term unemployed workers. We really need to find ways to get past discrimination, whether that's based on gender, or race, or age, or ability, or whatever it is, and really give people opportunities, especially to access quality jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Maria, thank you for those final thoughts. I really appreciate you joining the Work in Progress podcast today.

Maria Heidkamp, Heldrich Center at Rutgers University:

Thank you, Ramona. It's an honor to spend this time with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Maria Heidkamp of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.