



Making Virtual Job Fairs Universally Accessible



Virginia Career Works: Making Virtual Job Fairs Universally Accessible

Making an Impact

In 2020, American Job Centers (AJC) were challenged with finding new ways to connect job seekers and employers because the pandemic required social distancing protocols. Events such as virtual job fairs greatly increased and took the place of in-person ones. In Northern Virginia, several proactive measures were taken to ensure that their virtual job fairs would be accessible to job seekers with disabilities.

One strategy used to increase access was the development of Virtual Job Fair Preparation Webinars. Since May 2020, Virginia Career Works has conducted six preparation webinars. Participation has varied with the smallest group of four job seekers and the largest including 60! Because of this AJC's commitment to universal access, which includes these virtual preparation events led by Eliza Chappell, with Virginia Career Works in Vienna, also the Disability Resource Coordinator, the virtual job fairs have been quite successful. Over 50 percent of job seekers who have participated in the preparation webinars have been either invited for a formal interview or made a job offer. The strategies are now standard practice for every Virginia Career Works virtual job fair. Staff have been trained so that future virtual job fairs remain fully accessible even if Eliza is not available. There are plans to pre-record the virtual job fair preparation webinar for customers to access at any time.

The Challenge

When Virginia Career Works moved their activities to virtual formats, Eliza knew she needed to pivot her efforts to ensure job seekers with disabilities were prepared, and that the virtual job fair experience was equally effective for everyone. Eliza wanted to assist customers in developing strategies to help them make a positive impression with employers in a virtual setting just as she had been doing when preparing them for in-person recruitment events.

The Plan

Eliza developed a preparation workshop to ensure virtual recruitment events would be accessible from start to finish. The Virginia Career Works tested different online platforms to learn accessibility features and limitations providing feedback to participating employers and the job fair committee. Eliza brought in partners with accessibility expertise such as the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, who helped troubleshoot limitations blind job seekers using screen reading software might have participating via a virtual platform.

Preparation webinars occur prior to a virtual job fair and are an hour long. Information shared includes the Job Fairs' structure, how to technically navigate the platform, how to communicate with employers in this setting, and to answer any questions or concerns to help make the most of the event. In addition to these preparation webinars, individual support is given to customers with disabilities who need customized assistance.

Eliza also takes time to ensure accessibility on the employer's end. Employers receive instructions on how to make job recruitment materials accessible for all job seekers and present materials in alternative formats. Once Eliza receives materials from the employers, she ensures they are accessible to participants on the day of the event. While businesses do not know which participants may have a disability, they understand that employment opportunities need to be presented in an inclusive and accessible manner. To promote the event, outreach materials are disseminated to job seekers on virtual job fair preparation and instructions for how to request accommodation.

Implementation

On the day of the event, Eliza checks to make sure everything is set up properly. Her checklist includes questions such as:

- Are American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters available and ready?
- Is live captioning being provided?
- Have the employers shared their promotional materials in advance?
- Have all accommodation requests been adhered to?

The goal is to ensure there are no surprises when it comes to accessibility challenges so that everyone is able to participate equally. Full and equal participation for everyone is very important to Eliza and is a WIOA Section 188 requirement. "If you're not providing the same kind of real opportunity to connect with an employer, then that's not equal access," Eliza shared.