

## Boot Camp Project Narrative: Team Winchester, Virginia

The 2020-2021 Disability & Employment Boot Camp supported teams in their efforts to design and test innovative ideas in their evolving workforce landscapes; ideas that will strengthen system capacity to increase employment of Americans with disabilities.

### Experience Stages



### Convening Team Winchester VA

- **Samantha Greenfield** (Lead), Virginia Division of Rehabilitative Services
- **Ashley Moslak**, Virginia Employment Commission
- **Bonnie Zampino**, Virginia Career Works/Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development
- **Missy McDonald Spielman**, Frederick County Public Schools
- **Sharon Hetland**, Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education, Lord Fairfax Community College
- **Sue Boyce**, Frederick County Public School

### Defining the Challenge

#### Experience Highlights

The team completed a Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to help clarify the challenge with current business engagement. The team identified key stakeholders. The team completed a working session to refine the challenge statement.

#### Results

##### *Original Challenge Statement*

There are quite a few agencies/programs and organizations within our service area seeking employment, apprentices/unpaid work experience or looking to grow relationships with employers. It would be nice to learn more about how to approach employers in a more unified manner, gain employers' interest, and avoid confusion from all the "players" that reach out to

them. Increasing creativity in how services can be delivered and customizing approaches to integrated employment are also areas to focus on.

### SWOT Analysis

Through the analysis the team discovered possibilities for being better equipped to engage employers. Knowing that employers are not hiring people with disabilities was interesting, yet even more interesting than that was the realization that the challenge was even deeper.

SWOT Analysis			
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESS	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* BST can share information about business with members.</li> <li>* Wide variety of industries in our area.</li> <li>* Funding (WIOA).</li> <li>* Sharing of job openings.</li> <li>* Passion.</li> <li>* Employers are hiring.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Confusion within business world as to who we all are. They just hear "employment" and think we are all the same.</li> <li>* Maybe lack of a comprehensive business engagement plan that includes all of us as partners.</li> <li>* Making relationships with more than just one person in a company.</li> <li>* IMO employers want an "easy" hire and not very open-minded to applicants with alternative learning or transferable skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Employers are getting creative and looking to build their workforce.</li> <li>* More SHRM. Chamber of Commerce, EDA &amp; Rotary.</li> <li>* We can only add value if we can get the word out.</li> <li>* Opportunity for employers to have "vetted" candidates to them.</li> <li>* Businesses are looking to us for guidance on how to source and retain employees.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Lack of marketing and branding buy in</li> <li>* Businesses not seeing value in our programs</li> <li>* Lack of "tracking system" of employer contacts and engagement</li> <li>* Have not been able to complete an employer needs survey</li> <li>* Other local agencies have more money, grant opportunities and greater ability to spend money where needed</li> <li>* Our positions have our own mandates on our performance measures/goals/employer contacts</li> </ul>

### *Refined Challenge Statement*

The problem we are trying to solve is how the Business Support Team (BST) can better meet the needs of employers.

### *Key Stakeholders*

Division of Rehabilitative Services; VEC Veterans Employment Services; Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education; Virginia Career Works; Virginia Employment Commission; Frederick County Public Schools

## **Building Empathy**

### **Experience Highlights**

The team learned the benefits and techniques for building empathy to get inspired by the employers they hope to serve. The interview technique enabled the team to listen to employers to get new ideas about how to design for them. The team synthesized their learnings to identify patterns and surprising insights to inspire new opportunities for design. The team recognized that employers are used to being approached to make a hire rather than being approached by workforce to determine what they need. As one teammate remarked, the exercise surfaced memories of identifying “whether the product I was trying to sell aligned with what the client needed,” illustrating how important it is to listen for needs that can be addressed rather than imposing a service that an employer may not need. Roles for the empathy interview process were designated among Boot Camp teammates who then synthesized themes that stood out. The team interviewed 5 employers using a pre-defined list of questions. The team agreed to include empathy building as a practice going forward to consistently listen to employers’ needs.

Draft of standard empathy interview questions. Answers to be cataloged and shared amongst partners:

### Employer Empathy Interviews (Updated 3-3-2021)

**The who & why:** “Virginia Career Works which include partners from Division of Rehabilitative Services, Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education Virginia Employment Commission and Frederick County Public Schools are working on a regional Workforce Development Team in conjunction with the Department of Labor to improve employer hiring, retention and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. We are gathering insight from regional employers. I was wondering if I could have approx 45 minutes of your time to learn more about the challenges you are experiencing in today’s hiring and retention climate.”

**Purpose of interview:** To connect with employers, businesses and HR professionals to learn more about “first hand” challenges they are currently encountering in order to get new ideas about how community workforce development partners can better design a hiring & retention based toolbox.

**Length of time for interview:** Approx. 45 minutes/1 hour

## Results

### *Employers Interviewed*

In addition to Lowes, EDA, Chamber of Commerce, VEC, and The Shockey Companies 9 other employers were interviewed anonymously.

### *Key Insights*

1. Effectiveness and receptiveness of the employers of the “Empathy” Interview style
2. The realization that a good way to serve employers is to have better prepared clients to present for consideration of employment
3. Have employers embrace alternative interview and portfolio/video methods
4. Employers have challenges with finding applicants that have the skills and abilities to multi-task/cross train
5. Some employers are getting an overwhelming number of applicants and many are not even qualified for the positions (shotgun approach)



### *Final Challenge Statement*

The problem is how the Business Services Team (BST) can better meet the needs of employers.

### *Final How Might We Statement*

How might we help the various workforce programs, agencies, and school systems work together to better meet the needs of employers through enhanced collaboration and unity?

## **Identifying a Solution**

### **Experience Highlights**

As the team conducted empathy building and convened, potential solutions were identified. The team identified the desire to align with the new Network2Work application. The team ultimately selected a solution to prototype and test during the Boot Camp and acknowledged a desire to pursue additional solutions identified at a future date if possible. The team participated in a Peer session where they gained insights from other teams.

### **Results**

#### *Potential Solutions Identified*

1. Adopt the empathy interview format for BST meeting format with employers
2. Regional webinar for employer (+EDA, Chamber, Workforce Initiative group), possibly include an employer panel
3. A video repository
4. A focus on better preparing candidates (tactics to explore - job shadowing, internships, working interviews, disability disclosure)
5. Use empathy interviewing with all BST meetings & business clients to learn about their needs (and make this information available to all programs so everyone is working to provide support to the client in a more aligned way)
6. Find a way to leverage existing assets differently, more broadly (e.g., virtual workshops on accommodation and disability, mentor workshop)

### Chosen Solution to Prototype

Adopt the empathy interview format for BST meeting format with employers.

## Prototyping Solution

### Experience Highlights

Dialogue between team members revealed that empathy interviews may be a way to solve confusion existing between agencies or workforce service partners regarding the duplication of services and lack of clarity on what resources are available with which entities. Upon this discovery, the team revised their original interview questions to prototype an Email Interview Guide to share with partners.

### Results

The team developed a set of questions appropriate for partners and began utilizing the empathy interview method to engage in dialogue with workforce partners to identify respective challenges. Interview questions include:

1. Tell me about your current hiring strategies.
  - What sources are you using to advertise your openings?
  - What is working? Why?
  - What is not working? Why?
2. Tell me about what you find to be frustrating when recruiting.
3. How many types/what kinds of positions do you personally hire for?
4. Tell me about the steps taken for a recent successful hire.
  - What made it an easy process for you?
  - What was most attractive about the candidate?
5. What is the most common reason you witness for termination? Why do you think that may be?
6. What is the average length of time it takes your new hires to become fully knowledgeable and independent in their job tasks?
7. Does your company have any diversity hiring guidelines/mandates (ex. Federal contracts)?
8. What is your experience with interviewing/hiring under-represented individuals, for example: disabilities, non-English speaking, returning citizens, recent HS grads with little to no work history?
  - Generally speaking, do you find applicants disclose their disability at any point during the hiring/on boarding process?
  - Suggestions you would give an individual with a disability that may increase their likelihood of being offered a job.



- What would be your thoughts on an applicant with a disability that does have the skills and abilities to do the job but may not interview well, (1) submitting a portfolio and/or video doing the work and (2) answering some basic interview questions to demonstrate their abilities?
  - What would be the best way to approach you with those materials if your company uses online applications that do not allow uploads?
9. Are you comfortable/knowledgeable about the types of resources and accommodations that are available within our local workforce development community for hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities?
10. Would you be interested in or see value in student & adult internships (paid, unpaid, short term, long term)?
- What about applicant tours/business overview videos, or mentors to help job seekers navigate a successful job search?
11. What do you think would be helpful supports/tools/resources/technology/personal touches that Virginia Career Works and its partners can develop to make hiring and retention easier for employers to find job ready candidates?
12. Do you have colleagues we should connect with that may like to share their insight on these topics?

## Testing and Refining the Prototype

### Experience Highlights

The team's focus shifted to sharing the empathy interviewing technique with partners to increase understanding and cohesiveness as well as reduce confusion for employers and job seekers. Training on empathy interviewing for community workforce partners was further discussed and included other partners when the opportunity to conduct an empathy interview presented itself. Additionally, the team identified the need to develop a shared repository where data from interviews can be housed for the benefit of all partners.

### Results

Conducting empathy interviews with workforce community partners enabled the team to introduce partners to the concept of empathy interviews, what they are, how they work, and how they can be beneficial, resulting in buy-in to the empathy interview model and concept.

The Empathy Interview Guide was refined to become *Empathy Interviews: A User Guide*. The refined guide defines what an empathy interview is for users, provides empathy interview email scripts, empathy interview questions and note-taking worksheet for employers as well as empathy interview questions and note-taking worksheet for workforce community partners. Alongside these tools are a set of guiding principles to help the user. These guiding principles provide the following guidance:

1. The interview should seem like a conversation and not a formal interview.
2. Providing the questions in advance allows the one being interviewed to adequately reflect and have specific examples in mind.
3. Share with the interviewee the purpose of the interview and confidentiality. This is presented in the email request for the interview, but it is a good way to set the tone for the interview and to encourage an honest and candid exchange.
4. Interview in pairs. This allows for a conversation. It introduces the one being interviewed to another potential partner or problem solver. It is helpful to have one person asking questions and another one capturing notes.
5. Listen. Listen. Listen. Go with the silence. Some questions may take more thought. It may be harder for the interviewee to provide a specific story or example. They may be hesitant about telling the story. Wait for a response. And then wait some more. See the Appendix for the email template(s).

## Outlining Next Steps

### Experience Highlights

The team created *Empathy Interviews: A User Guide* which includes a series of questions to use when asking human resource managers and business owners their perception(s) and understanding(s) of regional workforce partners and their programs, their hiring methods, and retention challenges. Questions also sought to understand employer opinions regarding work-based learning, apprenticeship programs, the value of workforce hiring incentives, and experience interviewing, hiring, and retaining underserved populations such as individuals with disabilities, ESL, and ex-offenders.

### Results

Following the refinement of the Empathy Interview prototype as a user guide that workforce partners can use to improve and unify the business services provided by multiple workforce program partners, the team will utilize a forthcoming data tracking system to house results collected so that local workforce service providers can review employer feedback.

Furthermore, the team will create a Northern Shenandoah Valley Workforce Services Mapping Guide that helps employers connect with local agencies providing prospective job applicants and hiring incentives as well as training and educational options.



See Appendix for preliminary graphic for the Northern Shenandoah Valley Workforce Services Mapping Guide.

Immediate next steps for the team include: Making a presentation of the Empathy Interview Guide to Northern Shenandoah Valley Region Business Services Team on April 27, 2021.

Sending the Empathy Interview Guide to all Business Services Team members with a survey to collect feedback.

Asking members to conduct at least 1 Empathy Interview with an employer or community partner by May 25, 2021 and present at the Business Services Team meeting on that date.

Asking partners to complete a survey requesting feedback on effectiveness and suggestions for the final Empathy Interview Guide by May 24, 2021.

Reviewing presentations and surveys and incorporating any appropriate suggestions into the prototype. A second version of the Empathy Interview Guide may then be developed.

Offering virtual training to all Virginia Career Works Centers Statewide.

## Closing Commentary

Forming this diverse team was an important first step; we learned so much from each other. Conducting empathy interviews with employers was the next important step as that became our solution! It's no surprise team members were busy, and this project was one among many on everyone's plates, but throughout the 6 months, the team continued to learn and grow and ended up developing a product that can help others enhance their business engagement and that can help the region work better with business more broadly.

## Appendix

WHAT IS AN "EMPATHY INTERVIEW" & USER GUIDE

# EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

A USER GUIDE

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The following pages include :

- (1) What is an "Empathy Interview"?
- (2) Empathy Interview Email Scripts, Empathy Interview Questions for **EMPLOYERS** & note taking worksheet
- (3) Empathy Interview Email Scripts, Empathy Interview Questions for **WORKFORCE COMMUNITY PARTNERS** & note taking worksheet

## Email Template for Employer Outreach

This email script/ template can be used when requesting the interview with an **EMPLOYER**. It highlights why the interview is being done and what solutions are hoped to be gained. **Copy and paste the following italicized text into an email to an employer requesting to schedule an Empathy Interview**

**The who & why:** *"Virginia Career Works which include partners from Division of Rehabilitative Services, Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education Virginia Employment Commission and Frederick County Public Schools are working on a regional Workforce Development Team in conjunction with the Department of Labor to improve employer hiring, retention and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. We are gathering insight from regional employers to strengthen our ability to provide the best possible customer service to our local employers. I was wondering if I could have approx 45 minutes of your time to learn more about the challenges you are experiencing in today's hiring and retention climate."*

**Purpose of interview:** *To connect with employers, businesses and HR professionals to learn more about "first hand" challenges they are currently encountering in order to get new ideas about how community workforce development partners can better design a hiring & retention based toolbox.*

**Length of time for interview:** *Approx. 45 minutes/1 hour*

## Employer Empathy Interview Questions & Notes Worksheet

Use this worksheet to record the responses to the interview questions

### Question

### Notes

Tell me about your current hiring strategies.

- a. What sources are you using to advertise your openings?
- b. What is working? Why?
- c. What is not working? Why?

How many types/what kinds of positions do you personally hire for?

Tell me about the steps taken for a recent successful hire.

- a. What made it an easy process for you?
- b. What was most attractive about the candidate?

## Workforce Community Partner Empathy Interview Questions & Notes Worksheet

Use this worksheet to record the responses to the interview  
questions

### Question

### Notes

Do you feel your agency's  
method(s) of promoting  
workforce development  
programs to  
employers is effective?  
a. Why or why not?

How would you describe the  
program(s)?

What ideas or ways have you tried  
to help employers see value in  
what you do?

### Email Template for Workforce Community Partner Outreach

This email script/ template can be used when requesting the interview with a **WORKFORCE COMMUNITY PARTNER**. It highlights why the interview is being done and what solutions are hoped to be gained. **Copy and paste the following italicized text into an email to an employer requesting to schedule an Empathy Interview**

*I am <INSERT NAME>, the <INSERT TITLE> with the <INSERT AGENCY>, one of the partners of our local Workforce Development Partners and Virginia Career Works. I am reaching out as a representative of our team with a request for your participation in a project spearheaded by the Department of Labor. Our local workforce partners would like to conduct virtual interviews with WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT partners to get perspective on services your agency provides local EMPLOYERS. Our ultimate goal is to use this information to develop as seamless as possible workforce service delivery methods to EMPLOYERS in the community.*

*The following information outlines our "who we are & why we are doing this" as well as the questions that we would like to center our conversation around. We anticipate the virtual interview and conversation to take 45 minutes to one hour. We would like to schedule the virtual meeting to conduct the interview within the next week.*

*If you would be willing to schedule a session with us, please reply with some day & time options that would work well for you. I can schedule a Google Meets meeting and provide login information once a date & time is confirmed.*

*Thank you so much for your consideration of our request!*