**WorkforceGPS**

**Voices of Experience**

**Boot Camp**

**Boot Camp Listening**

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Melissa Gard: So I always want to jump at a chance to collaborate with other people, especially people who do things that are similar to the things that I do. So I like to find out kind of what they're doing, how they're handling things, how they're doing it.

**Boot Camp Opportunity**

And people who are working in the disability employment field usually are really busy. They're so busy working, they don't normally get much of a chance to talk with each other and compare notes. And I think they have a lot to share with each other. So this is an opportunity to do that. So I was looking for some insight into how our clients with disabilities get into jobs and careers that sustain them and that give them a kind of a foundation that they need to stay independent and to improve their lifestyles. So I thought maybe we could take a look at that, take some time and maybe figure out how we could get some businesses to be more open to hiring people with disabilities.

**Boot Camp Team**

So our team is a local regional team in the northern part of Indiana. I'm from the American Jobs Center and we have an employer and we have a person who is a training provider. We also have a person who works with a program through vocational rehabilitation. So she works with the youth programs. And we have a woman who works with adults in one of the service providers for vocational rehabilitation. And finally, we have a representative who works in employment services at one of our community mental health centers in the area.

So I'm the disability resource coordinator in Region Two for our American Job Center. So I go to a lot of community meetings and meet a lot of people, and so I had some contacts and decided to reach out to them. My contacts weren't part of the team, but they chose other people on their teams so none of us knew each other when we started off and we met weekly during this period of time, and so I feel like we've gotten to know each other rather well. I've only met one of the people on the team in person because of the pandemic -- we've been meeting by Zoom -- but she happens to work sometimes in our office here in Elkhart.

So we have been running into each other, which is a very nice thing, which is the focus area of engaging businesses to promote employment for people with disabilities. And so we thought we knew we started off thinking that we knew what the problem was, and our challenge statement was pretty easy. We'd heard from businesses some concerns about the increased time for onboarding and increased costs when hiring individuals with disabilities. And we've been hearing a lot of questions about liability and training time and accommodations and so forth. So we thought, well, we know what to do. These businesses are all focused on obstacles. So they're not sure; they're pretty hesitant about taking the time to consider the benefits that might come about, and they didn't think maybe the benefits outweighed the concerns. So they didn't really want to take the time to test it.

That's what we thought going in. So we thought our challenge was to tell them why they should hire our clients, and we thought that we needed to pool our resources and our efforts to give businesses information and convince them to hire our individuals with disabilities. That's what we started off with, with our challenge statement. The wording was a bit different, but that was basically our challenge statement, was to collaborate, to pool our resources in order to inform employers so that they would hire individuals with disabilities.

**Empathetic Listening**

Once we began talking with businesses, we used empathetic listening and practiced staying open to hear what they actually wanted to say without prompting them or leading them in the direction that we thought we knew about. We also tried to use the same language that we heard businesses use. And we tried to approach the the problem from the business point of view, so we focused on the questions and the concerns that they brought up generally about hiring anybody there, practices in hiring. And what we found out was that there was definitely a perception gap about what can happen when you hire a diverse workforce; the things about the extra time in the liability and so forth. And there were real concerns about productivity, staff morale and retention. We learned that businesses were also truly interested in innovation and they were open already to new ideas and new things, but the people who were involved with hiring are stretched really thin, and that was part of the base of the challenge.

But the real root of the whole thing was focusing on on that perception gap and then identifying some of those misconceptions and misunderstandings that businesses have a lot of people have about individuals with disabilities. So our focus shifted from helping us to helping them. And we changed the language of our challenge very slightly to reflect the perspective that businesses take in the hiring process.

So instead of saying we want to convince them to hire individuals with disabilities, we use the language we wanted to educate the people involved in the hiring process. And instead of getting them to hire the people that we promote, we want to help them find ways to relieve their frustration with the hiring process and solve the problems that they were naming, like reducing turnover and increasing staff morale and loyalty and maintaining a stable workforce. So the shift was very slight, but at the same time, that language was extremely important for our mission.

**Boot Camp Benefits**

So, as I said, our boot camp team met weekly, I think we missed one week during the whole period, we didn't always accomplish huge things during those meetings, but we thought it was important to remain in touch and to keep those channels open. So we met the same time every week and sometimes everybody was there and sometimes they were just a couple of us there. But the benefits that we reaped from that ongoing communication were pretty huge. First of all, I think it provided an increased collaboration between our agencies.

We've already begun to connect our agencies in other ways, those of us who are on the team. And we've also already helped other people in our agencies, respectively, to join forces with each other. That's pretty exciting and fun to watch. Another benefit was in the beginning, we thought we already knew the questions and the answers. So that whole process of learning to listen and to build empathy with businesses really changed. How we approached this challenge and I believe will change the approach that we have to future challenges as well. Also, we're coming away with a much better understanding of who our stakeholders are, the scope of our stakeholders locally, regionally and even statewide here in Indiana.

And I think we've also, through this process, been able to gain confidence to include our stakeholders in the conversation as it continues. And so with a better understanding that this has given us from the business perspective, we also the biggest benefit was our original goal, which was to help our clients more.

**Lessons Learned**

And some of the things that we've learned we can't really unlearn at this point. We've talked about that as a team; for instance, the empathetic listening. I find myself doing that in everyday conversation with people, so I believe that we'll continue to do that and pay attention to the language and the perspective of the business side as we move forward. Also, I think that something that came away with was that we need to keep in mind that our language is also difficult for others to understand people who don't work in the field that we work in.

We use acronyms all the time. We're used throwing out phrases and concepts that we work with every day. And it seems easy. But we have to make sure that we clarify those acronyms and spell out the services that we can provide to support businesses. I believe that sometimes they don't even know what we're talking about. So I think that's important.

Another thing that will be taken forward is the whole -- the value of the collaboration. We need to continue to work together to improve what happens for all of us. We have lots of ideas about how to continue the educational aspect of the work that we've been doing and how to keep businesses engaged and informed by working together. And also, I think that a realization that we've had is that we need to stay innovative ourselves. As I said, we made a whole list of ideas about how to engage businesses and they run the gamut and we haven't even touched on some of that yet.

So we're hoping and planning to continue to meet together so that we can continue the work. And I think that the biggest thing that we're going to keep is the idea that hiring a diverse workforce really helps all of us. It helps the individual; it helps the agency who is helping the individual; and it helps the business. So it's a win-win-win to hire a diverse workforce. We need to keep that in mind.