

Employer Engagement: Lessons for Employment Programs from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Many programs aiming to improve employment outcomes among people with low incomes rely on relationships with employers to develop job opportunities for participants. The 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and resulting recession changed the ways these programs engage with and garner support from employers.

This brief discusses the experiences of six programs participating in the Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project and presents key takeaways from their efforts to maintain and develop new connections with employers during the pandemic. The brief is based on information shared during regular telephone communications between the NextGen Project team and program leaders to guide the design and implementation of the NextGen Project, as well as reports program administrators use to track participant outcomes. These programs, described in Box 1, serve low-income people with complex challenges to employment, such as physical and mental health conditions, a criminal history, or limited work skills and experience. Though they serve different populations—four serve people with mental health illnesses, one serves Temporary Assistance for Needy Families participants, and one serves youth with disabilities—the programs share a common objective of matching program participants to employers in a way that is beneficial to both the participant and employer. Their experiences during the pandemic—that is, between March 2020 when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic¹ and March 2021 when NextGen staff completed data collection for this brief—offer several lessons for other programs about promising strategies for working with employers that might endure beyond the pandemic.



The NextGen Project

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families sponsors the NextGen Project in partnership with the Social Security Administration. The goal of the project is to identify and study innovative employment programs for people facing complex employment challenges. The study explores how the programs are designed and operated, their cost, and how effective they are at improving participants' employment, health, and other outcomes related to economic self-sufficiency and well-being.



Box 1. NextGen programs discussed in this brief

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programs. IPS is a program model designed to support people with mental illness in their efforts to achieve competitive employment. IPS programs apply eight principles: (1) enrolling anyone who wants to work; (2) focusing on jobs in the competitive labor market; (3) facilitating rapid job search; (4) engaging in systematic job development; (5) prioritizing participant job preferences; (6) applying a team-based approach to integrate services; (7) offering benefits counseling; and (8) providing individualized, time-unlimited support. Four mental health centers that currently operate IPS programs and a fifth that is not currently operating IPS are participating in the NextGen Project.

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Families Achieving Success Today (FAST). FAST provides employment services to participants in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (Minnesota’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program) in Ramsey County, Minnesota (St. Paul). Participants must be exempt from work requirements because they (1) have a self-disclosed mental health or physical disability, (2) have a child with a physical or mental health disability, or (3) are needed at home to care for someone with a mental or physical health disability. Services include development of customized employment plans, career coaching, therapeutic and rehabilitative mental health services, health insurance navigation, and IPS services for those who are interested in immediate and intensive job development and retention services.

Bridges from School to Work (Bridges). Bridges seeks to develop permanent, competitive placements for young adults (generally ages 17–22, up to age 24) with disabilities who are transitioning from school to work. It provides job-readiness instruction, job development and placement, and post-placement support for participants, and partners with employers who agree to hire Bridges participants. The program operates in 12 sites: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. A subset of the Bridges sites are participating in the NextGen Project.

Programs’ approaches to employer engagement before the pandemic

Before the pandemic—that is, before March 2020—each program relied almost exclusively on in-person interaction to develop and maintain relationships with employers.

- **Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programs.** Implementing the IPS model with fidelity requires that employment specialists each make at least six face-to-face employer contacts per week on behalf of clients on their caseloads; the maximum caseload for any full-time employment specialist is 20 clients in programs implementing IPS with fidelity.² Specialists in the mental health centers implementing IPS made a combination of scheduled and unscheduled visits, often “popping in” to new employers to introduce them to IPS and begin to establish rapport. Though not explicitly required, employment specialists in IPS programs also typically visited participants placed in jobs in their workplaces not only to support their success but also to supplement knowledge about the employer’s needs and obtain the employer’s perspective on the participant’s success.
- **Families Achieving Success Today (FAST).** FAST staff also dropped in on potential employer partners in a constant effort to expand their network of employers and gather information that would enable them to make the best match between a participant and an employer during job placement. Staff ended each encounter with potential employer partners by scheduling another meeting or planning to get back in contact to discuss potential placements for specific job candidates.
- **Bridges from School to Work (Bridges).** Bridges is rooted in the belief that for any relationship between the program and the employer to endure, the program must fully consider the needs of each employer. Hence, the program places considerable emphasis on ensuring a strong match between the program participant and the job placement. Bridges staff regularly visited employers in person to assess their immediate and longer-term hiring needs, market trends, and, for existing partners, their satisfaction with employees hired through Bridges. Staff also elicited this information during regular on-site visits to provide follow-up supports to participants and confer with participants’ direct supervisors to identify required accommodations and assess participants’ performance.

Key takeaways on employer engagement during the pandemic

Despite having to forgo in-person communication during the pandemic, the programs reported continued success engaging employers. They reported that job placement rates (defined as the percentage of program participants who gained employment) were similar to or only slightly below pre-pandemic rates, and employers have continued to look to these programs for employees even though pandemic-induced layoffs have created a larger pool of job candidates. For instance, according to annual outcomes reports in one of the IPS programs, the average employment placement rate for IPS participants was 49 percent in the three quarters preceding the pandemic and 42 percent in the three quarters after. According to the annual outcomes report of another IPS program, the employment placement rate for IPS participants was 81 percent in 2020, and half of those who were employed during the pandemic obtained their jobs during the pandemic. Bridges had difficulty recruiting program participants during the pandemic because many youth were concerned about working during the pandemic. As a result, the program's caseload fell by about 15 percent (comparing the period from July 2018 to March 2019 with the period from July 2020 to March 2021). Among those who did enroll in the program, however, employment rates remained strong, with about three-quarters of all enrollees placed into jobs in both periods. Lastly, FAST reported on calls with the NexGen Project team that they have seen only a small dip in the percentage of the caseload that was employed; typically, it is just higher than 50 percent, and in December 2020, it was 47 percent.

To develop and maintain relationships with employers, however, programs had to be more strategic and devise more creative ways of connecting. The key takeaways from their efforts are described below.

Employers might be more responsive to remote rather than in-person outreach. Programs found remote communication with employers to be more valuable than they had anticipated in two ways:

- **More time with employers.** Three programs reported that local employers were willing to spend more time communicating with program staff during the pandemic than before the pandemic. Employers seemed to have more time for phone conversations or electronic communication (for instance, via email or LinkedIn) than an in-person visit, and program staff reported a higher number of successful engagements with employers and opportunities to convey their message than when they relied solely on in-person visits.
- **Access to a larger group of employers.** A few IPS programs had success connecting with hiring managers located in corporate offices outside the program's geographic area. Before the pandemic, because they were expected to conduct job development in person, program staff focused only on building relationships with employers that had a local human resources department. Flexibility with remotely engaging employers enabled program staff to expand their networks and develop local job opportunities with employers whose headquarters are outside of the state or region.

Developing relationships with new employers might be easier in person, but initial and ongoing connections can be made virtually. All the programs, with the exception of one IPS program, agreed that developing relationships with new employers might be easier through face-to-face interaction. But when the pandemic ends, several programs envision using technology to make the initial connection with a new employer, then building trust through an in-person meeting, and then continuing communication via the employer's preferred mode. Remote communication with employers might be a strategy for other programs to consider going forward. One IPS program manager noted:

“*Since [our program] is about solutions for employers, and since hiring managers have many other responsibilities, they should be able to communicate in the way that’s easiest for them.*”

A stronger customer service approach that focuses on employers’ needs can expand opportunities for program participants. During the pandemic, employers have faced unprecedented challenges that shifted demand for employees in certain industries or roles, and programs were unable to visit employers in person to discuss how demand was changing. To compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication, programs placed a stronger emphasis on identifying and responding directly to employers’ needs. Programs implemented the following practices to understand employers’ perspectives on the impacts of these shifts and what would help them thrive in the current environment:

- **Ask rather than assume what employers need.** Pose direct questions such as, “What are your challenges?” and “How can [the program] help?” Asking open-ended questions gives employers freedom to raise the issues that are most salient to them.
- **Include employers on program steering committees or advisory boards.** Programs elicited information about employer needs and ways the program could best respond by inviting employers to participate in structured groups that regularly convene to provide program oversight and guidance.
- **Take advantage of informal interactions with employers.** Managers across programs noted the value of conducting impromptu job development activities even during nonworking hours—for instance, by engaging employer managers and staff while picking up food from restaurants or grocery stores, on personal trips to retail spaces for necessities, or at routine medical appointments. Program staff can obtain valuable information from these informal interactions that they can use to prepare participants for and match participants to job openings that employers have or anticipate having in response to shifting needs.

Programs indicated that the focus on employer customer service has been fruitful. One program noted that employers who felt the program understood their needs turned to the program first to replace employees who were furloughed or laid off and didn’t return to work when businesses began to reopen. A continued focus on employer customer service after the pandemic might help increase employment opportunities for program participants.

Programs can expand their networks by leveraging employers’ networks. During the pandemic, one program that had previously conducted new employer outreach in person relied on existing relationships with employers to develop relationships with new employers. Current employer partners introduced program staff through emails or conference calls to colleagues at other employers. Programs identified the following key advantages of this type of introduction:

- A personal reference. Longtime employer partners can vouch for the program and share success stories that could entice the new employer to engage with the program.
- A ripple effect. New employer relationships beget additional introductions. An ever-expanding network of employers that have connections with one another can form the basis of an employer community that collectively informs program strategy.

Such personal connections might be valuable going forward and might prove to be as successful, or more successful, than cold-calling and in-person efforts.

Employment programs operating during the COVID-19 pandemic have learned that remote and in-person communication that is attuned to the preferences and needs of today's business community can be a gateway to connecting with and expanding their employer networks. As the world continues to feel the effects of the pandemic, strategies for developing opportunities for job seekers that benefit and are responsive to employers will also evolve. By learning from others' experiences, programs might improve their own job development efforts and relationships with employers while better positioning themselves to meet new challenges and opportunities that emerge after the pandemic.

Over the next few years, the NextGen Project will release findings about IPS, FAST, and Bridges and their impacts on participants' employment.

The project team will collect and analyze information about how the programs operate, their successes and challenges, their cost, and their effectiveness. For more information, visit the Next-Gen Project's web page at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/next-generation-of-enhanced-employment-strategies-project> or email NextGenProject@mathematica-mpr.com about receiving regular updates on the project.

Endnotes

¹ See <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

² See the Supported Employment Fidelity Review Manual, available at https://ipsworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ips-fidelity-manual-3rd-edition_2-4-16.pdf.

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