

HANDLING OBJECTIONS DURING JOB DEVELOPMENT: FEEL, FELT, FOUND

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My friend Terri, from Texas, attended a community business fair the other day. While there, she spied a local print shop owner. Since Terri was representing a young man with autism who gravitated towards printing types of work, she decided to ask a few questions of the business owner. Terri was immediately confronted with the objections that the work was too dangerous and that employing someone with a significant disability would lead to increased liability and Worker's Compensation insurance costs. Terri is quite experienced and knows when and where to pursue objections. She also knows that there are many more employers than there is time, so she moved on to more promising leads. And, a public place, in this case, was neither the time nor place to continue the conversation, so she politely excused herself. In another, more private and structured setting however, a job developer would have to deal with the objections.

All sales people experience rejection. And, no matter how thick our skins get, none of us really ever enjoys the experience of being told no. Therefore, avoiding disappointment and negativity is a prime motivator for many of us who develop jobs.

Perhaps the most important lesson many of us have learned over the years is that job development is not exactly sales. It is more a melding of customer needs: the customers in this case being the job seeker, the funder of the job development activity (e.g. Vocational Rehabilitation, Work Force Development, Mental Health, et al.), and the employer. Satisfying all three customer segments is the ultimate in success and begins with understanding the needs of the individual job seeker. This approach is less sales intensive than it is needs-directed. The process involves satisfying multiple customers by recognizing their common needs and potential gains. Sales meets negotiation, meets relationship building, meets broad-based support to all parties in this multi-layered reality. Anytime complex circumstances are present though, objections and the need to manage them are inevitable.

As mentioned in previous articles appearing in this column, person-centered planning and written vocational profiles are critical in determining career choices, support needs, and natural support opportunities. Once a thorough profile is completed, the job search can begin in earnest. Having a good, consumer-driven job development plan helps minimize objections from the job seeker and the funder, but the employer, that major link in the chain, still awaits.

The "prospecting" phase draws upon the job developer's and the job seeker's personal and professional networks first. Approaching individuals already familiar with the job seeker or the job developer "warms" up a potentially cold call. Since family members and business associates (i.e. suppliers of goods and services to the job development agency), are typical resources for many applicants, with and without disabilities, this is always a good and potentially fruitful starting place.

If, however, such leads are not abundant, making appointments, conducting informational interviews with business people, and serious prospecting begins. The anxiety builds as the suggestion of hiring is placed firmly on the table. And, it is at this juncture that the skillful handling of objections becomes critical.

One tried and true technique for handling such hiring objections is the **Feel, Felt, Found** formula. For instance, let's say an employer complains, as happens all too often, that Worker's Compensation or liability insurance will increase if an employee with a disability is hired. One response might be:

"I understand how you *feel*. No one would want harm to come to anyone and we would not recommend Beth for the job if we *felt* there were major safety concerns. Still, when I started working with companies, helping solve their recruitment and training problems, I *felt* these concerns needed investigation and serious consideration. What I, and our many customers, *found* is that Worker's Comp rates and liability insurance premiums do not increase. In fact, safety records for people with disabilities, according to several studies conducted by companies such as the DuPont Corporation, are actually as good or better than those for people without disabilities."

Consider another all-too-typical job development scenario. The employer raises a concern during the interview that their entire operation will now have to be made wheelchair accessible or that outrageous expense will be incurred due to accommodations. The response might unfold in a conversational tone that iterates:

"I understand how you *feel* about the potential costs of accessibility. In fact, some smaller companies, and those not open to the buying public are not actually required to be fully accessible. Many retailers I have worked with, for instance, *felt* that with the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, their profits would suffer. But, what they have *found* is that with minor expense, some of which can be off-set with tax credits that I can help you with, revenues increased. This is because of the number of new customers now able to access their stores. Let's face it, most of us are going to live long enough to require a walker or a wheelchair, and that means that millions of other folks, potential customers or star employees are waiting to benefit your business. And, actually, the cost of most accessibility measures or job accommodations is relatively small compared to the benefits. Why don't we investigate what it would take to make these changes possible?"

Certainly, no approach fits all circumstances. But, having a few rational negotiation devices at the ready helps the job developer organize their thoughts, remain calm, and present a cogent and logical counter to common objections. Job development does not need to be a brutal series of rejections. Instead, finding the common interests of all parties, and logically addressing concerns with honesty and the facts gets consistently good results.