

CONNECT News

Community Support, **N**etworking, and Assistance for **E**nvironmental **C**areer **T**raining

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The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the US Environmental Protection Agency provides technical assistance to communities interested in developing and delivering environmental job training. “CONNECT” is HMTRI’s acronym for Community Support, Networking, and Assistance for Environmental Career Training. Each bimonthly e-publication features topics that may be of interest to program managers. This issue discusses graduate placement and tracking strategies.

Best Practices

Graduate Placement and Tracking

Securing sustainable jobs for underserved populations is the justification for EPA supporting environmental workforce development and job training programs. In a broad sense, the mission of the US Environmental Protection Agency is to attain and maintain an environment that protects the health and welfare of our citizens. Part of that protection includes insuring that communities affected by environmental degradation remain sustainable and economically productive. With the recognition of environmental justice (EJ), it became evident that many communities impacted by abandoned factories and environmental pollution were not sustainable, economically productive, or addressing the welfare of their residents. In order to address disparities in minority, low-income, tribal, and other underserved communities, EPA considered environmental justice in agency programs, policies, and activities. One such program addressing equitable development is the Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Program (EWDJT) located in the Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization

(OBLR). The EWDJT grant program supports community environmental training and certification programs and provides employment opportunities for underserved residents in brownfield communities.

It is important to understand the origins of EWDJT as it illustrates why EPA is involved in environmental job training and demonstrates the importance of graduate placement to the continued success of the program.

Understanding Employer Needs

Graduate placement is the most critical issue facing successful environmental job training programs. In fact, it is their “reason for being”. While it is the last step in a long process, it is highly rewarding but difficult to complete successfully. Incorrect market assumptions, project delays, or a dip in the economy can have profound impacts on the ability to place graduates. In this issue, HMTRI investigates best practice strategies for successful graduate placement. The first best practice is to work backwards when developing the EWDJT program plan. Working backwards allows

program developers an opportunity to design a recruitment, screening, and training plan in coordination with local employers and their anticipated workforce needs. It is a best practice to first understand employer needs before recruiting students or commencing training. Understanding employer needs includes the following:

- Minimum educational requirements
- Preferred skills, knowledge, and certifications
- Hiring restrictions and policies
- Transportation demands
- Hiring schedules
- Working conditions
- Physical requirements
- Flexibility in work schedules

The importance of understanding employer needs is greater in communities where the number and diversity of employers is limited. Entry level requirements may be extremely exaggerated when only one or two employers are expanding their workforce. Another variation on this theme is when a small group of employers commit to hiring a large number of graduates with specific skills and certifications. In these situations, the EWDJT program may choose to develop a customized recruitment and training plan to address their specific needs.

Another best practice associated with understanding employer hiring practices is the synchronization of training with local workforce demands. An example demonstrating a lack of understanding local hiring practices is providing a large cohort of graduates in extremely cold winter months when there is little remediation activity. A better approach is timing graduation dates that are synchronized with the local hiring season (usually similar to construction workers). While many remediation firms hire year round and others fill workforce demands

well in advance of their workforce needs, it is important to understand and determine when EWDJT graduates will have the best opportunities for interviews and employment.

Related to employer hiring schedules is understanding workforce needs associated with new and ongoing construction and remediation projects. Due to the complexity and size of new construction, deconstruction, or remediation projects, many employers develop detailed timelines for workforce needs skill and certification requirements. At first thought, it might appear to be a placement coordinator's dream to have employment commitments for the entire cohort. However, it can also be a trap that several EWDJT grantees have experienced. Schedules and development plans are more often delayed and sometimes cancelled than one might expect. The end result is a graduation class with no job openings that were previously committed. Example strategies used to mitigate the cancellation of employer commitments include the following:

- Don't commit the entire graduation class to a single employer or planned project.
- Provide sufficient generalized training to provide flexibility in student placement.
- Oversubscribe employers interested in recruiting EWDJT graduates.
- Expand and diversify the pool of potential employers.

Because the demand for certified environmental workers is not constant, it is essential that EWDJT programs keep in close contact with their employers' workforce needs. Best practices include the following:

- Program planners need to prioritize and adjust employer skill and knowledge requirements from cohort

to cohort depending on current workforce demands.

- Be aware when an employer commits to hiring a large number of graduates with customized skills on a conditional basis.
- Trainers need to develop a curriculum that will address a range of job opportunities.
- Regular labor market assessment updates are critical for successful EWDJT graduate placement.

Identifying Job Opportunities

As a result of their employer outreach and labor market assessments, a few successful EWDJT grantees have been fortunate enough to oversubscribe their graduation class before recruitment and training begins. It would not be fair to say this is common among EWDJT grantees. In most cases, grantees execute their programs in a linear fashion beginning with community and labor market, training, and then realizing that graduation and employment expectations are just a few weeks away. This would not be considered a best practice but is typical in many EWDJT programs. When employers are not locked in prior to graduation, here are strategies that may assist in graduate placement.

Internships and company visitations

Often, job openings do not reach traditional marketing channels, but instead are filled internally, by recommendation, or familiarization. In some cases, positions are created when employers discover candidates having future potential value for the organization. Therefore, the more contact students have with employers, the higher the likelihood they will be offered a job. This approach works because employers have a chance to familiarize themselves with the candidate. Work-study programs, internships, part-time employment, apprenticeships, and co-op education programs are excellent

vehicles for placing students. When students work for prospective employers, information exchange occurs regarding company culture, work environment, and expectations. The closer and more familiar the prospective employer is with the program, the more likely an interview will be granted. For this reason, it is important to invite prospective employers as guest speakers, instructors, advisory board members, and leveraged supporters.

EWDJT placement efforts

Placement efforts by EWDJT staff are essential and should be written into the grant proposal. Remember the first and primary mission of the EWDJT program is employment. Grantees have demonstrated that internal placement efforts are the most effective placement vehicle. Staff members know the positive attributes of graduates as well as potential issues that might arise after employment. Instructors and program staff can provide references and introduce graduates to familiar employers. When placement managers work directly with employers, they are able to answer questions first-hand regarding student abilities and credentials. In addition to efforts from program placement staff, here are some best practices used to connect graduates with employers:

- Personal networking - Often job seekers know recent graduates who can provide a recommendation. Friends or relatives working in large organizations can provide inside information regarding possible job openings.
- Alumni reunions and mixers - Graduates mix with former graduates to network and share experiences.
- Employer open houses - Prospective employers and graduates tour facilities, exchange ideas, and discuss topics of mutual interest.

- Career events –Events specifically oriented to environmental careers, job development, and employment opportunities attract potential employers.
- Public service announcements – Traditional program marketing and program awareness campaigns such as radio shows and presentations inform employers of the availability of a trained and certified workforce.
- State and regional environmental conferences - State and local Brownfields Associations are sponsored and attended by private sector stakeholders and governmental organizations. Environmental conferences provide an excellent venue for networking and providing a resource to employers interested in EWDJT graduates.
- Random marketing - Cold calls provide pleasant surprises when used by EWDJT staff as well as by job candidates. Pools of prospective employers may be uncovered with inquires to human resources personnel who might fall through the cracks during the normal placement process.

Working with WIBs

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is made up of several agencies that promote jobs for all Americans through effective employment policies, career exploration, and job training programs. DOL supports an extensive network of job development and placement services in virtually every community across the United States. Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) exist in every state providing a range of employment services. Partnering with WIBs provides access to Career OneStop Centers, targeted employment programs, supplemental training services, and student support. The importance of partnering with a local WIB

cannot be overstated and is considered a best practice. In areas such as recruitment, supplemental job training services, and job placement, the WIB may be the single, most important community resource.

Temporary staffing and labor contract services

Temporary staffing services are often used by EWDJT programs as a pathway for job placement, both for temporary and full-time employment. Because of the nature of many environmental jobs, full-time positions may not be immediately available when graduates are seeking employment. Contract labor or temporary job services sometimes turn into permanent employment services, but primarily act as a peaking service. When work demands additional staffing, but not necessarily full-time employment, employers rely on temporary staffing services to provide supplemental assistance. This is a common practice in the environmental remediation field. Construction sites can require workers with specialized skill sets and certifications for limited periods of time. A major advantage of temporary job services is that short-term placement allows employers and graduates the opportunity to become acquainted. When graduates and employers mesh, temporary workers may be offered full-time positions when they become available.

Commercial job development and placement services

Commercial job development and placement services are abundant on the internet. While the effectiveness of these sites varies widely, they should not be overlooked as a source of job-marketing information. Some websites provide employer information by geographical area and industry. Others provide job search tips and resume development ideas.

Print and internet workforce searches

Internet and help wanted ads often appear when there are a large number of openings and a limited number of job seekers with specific credentials. New or large public

projects can spike the demand for workers with specific skills or certifications such as 1910.20 Hazwoper. A web search for environmental workers is a simple way of locating local career opportunities. Trade magazines such as the *Brownfield Renewal Magazine* sponsored by the Brownfield Renewal Job Board often provide job-opening announcements.

Environmental Careers in Non-Environmental Jobs

Because environmental work may be grouped with or incorporated into traditional occupations, placement managers and program graduates should not restrict their search to only jobs with environmental titles. Large organizations not normally involved in environmental remediation may need individuals with knowledge of environmental and/or brownfields issues. Insurance companies, banks, realtors, architects, shippers, landscaping, and governmental organizations are just a few examples of those who may have a limited demand for people with environmental knowledge.

- Welders may need asbestos training when working around insulated piping.
- Painters may require lead testing, remediation training and confined space certifications.
- All trades working with potential hazardous exposures are required to have 1910.120 certifications.
- Many construction and deconstruction occupations require environmental remediation skills and certifications.
- Handling and transporting hazardous materials requires environmental certifications.

Since many environmental jobs are embedded in traditional occupations, placement efforts need to extend beyond jobs having environmental titles. Potential employers must

be approached with graduate certification, skill, and knowledge attributes that may be relevant to current job openings.

Sending Students on Interviews

A best practice for EWDJT placement managers is preparation before sending graduates on job interviews. Preparation includes the following:

- Effective marketing to prospective employers demonstrating the unique recruitment, screening, and training provided by the EWDJT program. Getting an employer's attention is much easier when the prospective employer is familiar with the EWDJT program or has previously employed a program participant. The process is even better when employers have an opportunity to interact with prospective candidates.
- Effective presentation of program graduates' unique and specialized skills and credentials. Resumes are easy to handle and transmit in either printed or digital format. Job candidates must demonstrate that they have sufficient knowledge, skills, and experience required for successful performance.
- Effective job selection by matching student abilities and issues with job opportunities. Good matches are often about the job seeker's preferences, abilities, and expectations. When a mismatch exists between employer and employee expectations, employment is usually short term. Job seekers should be prepared to discuss performance issues and expectations. Above all, job seekers should be good listeners. The prospective employer will provide background information, expectations, job performance measures, and compensation associated with the vacant position. At some point criminal history, drug use

and incarceration may need to be addressed. Many EWDJT programs work with ex-offender populations and are extremely successful placing graduates in good jobs. Program staff must be sensitive to employer attitudes and company re-entry policies.

A dark side of job placement relates to jobs that may not be safe, healthy, or otherwise unsuitable for graduates. All too often, job openings exist for a reason. Poor management, unsafe, or difficult working conditions, substandard pay, or unrealistic expectations can lead to positions that are consistently vacated. If the job has been vacated many times before, employer expectations may be too high, or there may be issues with supervision or working conditions. Applicants need to pay careful attention to the history of the job opening. The placement challenge is to place graduates where they will be respected and appreciated. Another best practice is to never ever send a graduate on an interview unless there is an expectation of a successful match.

Graduate Tracking and Assistance

Time and effort for placement, and especially for tracking, can easily be underestimated as its fulfillment extends years after graduation. Ultimately, the goals of placement and tracking are to:

- Find sustainable jobs for students.
- Maintain contact with graduates, tracking their career paths.
- Provide post-placement services as needed.
- Use alumni as program advocates, mentors, and role models.
- Develop close relationships with employers and students.
- Build a culture that welcomes, values, and promotes continued participation

in the EWDJT program after graduation.

Sometimes incentives are necessary to maintain an up to date tracking program. The best EWDJT tracking programs build and maintain an ever-expanding alumni program using some of the following strategies:

- Encourage social media participation for all program participants continuing past graduation.
- Maintain and update current email and contact information.
- Maintain a regular newsletter with employment opportunities and current events.
- Track pre-apprentice candidates into union employment.
- Continue social events that include alumni and current participants.
- Offer incentives including refreshers and professional development activities to all graduates.
- Ask graduates to serve on the advisory board.
- Engage graduates as mentors and program advocates.
- Provide extended employment and placement opportunities to all graduates.

As part of their contribution to the EWDJT program, graduates should accept responsibility for tracking. Likewise, program staff must develop a tracking instrument and process by which graduates can report and maintain contact.

Join Our Listserv

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and has provided environmental workforce development technical assistance since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Initiative.

CONNECT notes presented represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EWDJT grantees. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such.

For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact Heather Ballou at hkballou@eicc.edu.



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