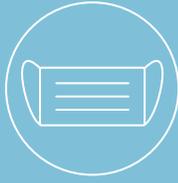
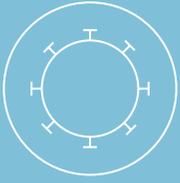


SUDDENLY
VIRTUAL



A Practical Guide for Frontline Service Providers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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HELDRICH CENTER
FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

RUTGERS

Edward J. Bloustein School
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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the public workforce system to shut down in-person operations and quickly pivot to operating in remote teams and providing services virtually. This drastic shift in operations has presented both challenges and opportunities for workforce professionals, who have been forced to rethink their work processes, tools, and service delivery infrastructure.

In early April 2020, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey conducted a survey and hosted three roundtable discussions with workforce professionals to capture the immediate challenges they are facing in the height of this public health and economic crisis. The goal of this effort was to gain an immediate understanding of the public workforce system's transition to being suddenly virtual. The Heldrich Center also wanted to intentionally create space for an open discussion with workforce professionals and begin a process to foster greater collaboration and shared experiences at the local level.

The Heldrich Center received 160 survey responses representing seven states. The three virtual roundtable discussions gathered together 31 participants from Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Overall, the survey and roundtable responses can be categorized into two main areas of adjustment – transitioning to remote teams and operationalizing virtual service delivery. While these two areas are ultimately intertwined, each presents specific challenges to frontline staff operations and the digital and management tools needed to help bridge these transitions.

There were two key findings that emanated from the survey and the roundtables: the importance of team communication, and the need to be flexible and understanding of each staff member's unique situation. Regarding communication, the majority of survey respondents and roundtable participants felt that their local workforce areas had successfully instituted communication processes such as daily calls or video conferencing meetings in order to keep the team united and aligned on expectations and work commitments. As a result of this daily communication, however, they realized quickly that they needed to address their staffs' stress levels and emotional well-being in addition to managing their workloads. This included listening to the challenges they were facing because of the sudden remote work environment, and the distractions and social isolation that staff were experiencing.

In addition to putting communication techniques into hyperdrive, local workforce professionals stated how important it was to be flexible and understanding regarding the challenges staff are facing, such as trying to balance working and homeschooling children, sharing space with a partner who is also working remotely, and/or attending to an elderly parent. Supervisors noted that they found it necessary to articulate to staff that they focus on work completion, as opposed to timekeeping.

The survey responses and roundtable discussions also identified a number of similar challenges the suddenly virtual workforce field was facing. These included:

- ▶ **Handling paper-based work processes in a virtual environment.** Frontline staff noted the challenge of having had paper files in a physical office pre-COVID-19 – files that are still in the office that would somehow have to be transferred to digital for remote access.
- ▶ **Difficulty accessing state program-specific case management systems.** Roundtable participants reported that not all staff have been given access to the program data systems they need to perform their job duties and document participants and services.
- ▶ **Lack of technology at home to support remote work.** Staff access to working technology – devices, cellular data, and reliable broadband Internet – was cited as a common problem. Many noted that, at present, frontline staff are primarily staying in touch with their existing customers via phone and email. Some local workforce areas said staff had the technology to text customers as well, citing services such as TextNow and Guide by Cell. Several staff expressed concerns about using their personal cell phones to make calls to job seekers. To address this, several roundtable participants shared that they were using services such as Cisco Jabber and Google Voice to help staff disguise their personal numbers to customers.
- ▶ **Inability to obtain client signatures.** Roundtable participants in all three sessions mentioned the difficulty of processing new customers because of the pre-COVID-19 need for original signatures that could not be obtained virtually. To tackle this, local Workforce Development Board areas were independently exploring digital signature solutions such as Adobe Sign and DocuSign.
- ▶ **No clear and safe mechanisms for processing customer personally identifiable information.** Staff reported that they were unsure about how to share personal customer information in a safe and secure way. Some local areas noted that they specifically instituted bans on emailing pictures of sensitive documents.
- ▶ **Addressing the need quickly to transfer in-person services to virtual.** Local workforce areas reported that they are individually working to move their resources online and considering all the ways they can create new content through YouTube videos, webinars, online tutorials, etc. Rethinking content development and delivery was a major challenge each workforce area was tackling.

Tools and Tips

Given the similarity of challenges facing suddenly virtual workforce professionals as identified in the survey results and roundtables, the Heldrich Center believes there is a strong need to coalesce and share resources, strategies, and materials across counties and states. As such, Heldrich Center researchers have identified and are sharing some of the tools and services that workforce professionals mentioned in the survey and during the roundtables that they are either using or exploring to address identified challenges:



Transitioning to Remote Teams

CHALLENGE: Team collaboration

TOOLS:

- ▶ [Google Classroom](#)
- ▶ [Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive](#)
- ▶ [Google Drive](#)

TIP: Some local areas reported that they have created online classrooms via Google Classroom to collaborate with their teams. Google Classroom allows for quick staff-wide communication and the ability to assign tasks to staff.

CHALLENGE: Team meetings

TOOLS:

- ▶ [FreeConferenceCall.com](#)
- ▶ [Jitsi](#)
- ▶ [Webex](#)
- ▶ [Skype](#)
- ▶ [Zoom](#)
- ▶ [Microsoft Office 365 Teams](#)

TIP: Several local areas have set up recurring daily or weekly meetings to coordinate with all staff. Drafting and sharing meeting agendas ahead of time helps to ensure all topics are discussed. Many also indicated their team meetings dually address work items and staff emotional well-being.

CHALLENGE: Staff reporting of daily work assignments

TOOL:

- ▶ [SurveyMonkey](#)

TIP: One local workforce area reported using SurveyMonkey for staff to report their daily work activities.



Operationalizing Virtual Service Delivery

CHALLENGE: Reaching customers by phone without revealing a personal cell phone number

TOOLS:

- ▶ [TextNow](#)
- ▶ [Guide by Cell](#)
- ▶ [Cisco Jabber](#)
- ▶ [Google Voice](#)
- ▶ [Google Hangouts](#)

TIP: Staff reported being able to more reliably reach customers via phone or text. Many acknowledged that their customers were more likely to have a cell phone than a computer.

CHALLENGE: Secure document sharing and original signatures for customer paperwork

TOOLS:

- ▶ [DocuSign](#)
- ▶ [Adobe Sign](#)
- ▶ [Neocertified](#)
- ▶ [Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive mobile app](#)
- ▶ Virtual Private Network (VPN) – needs to be set up by individual IT departments

TIP: Only a few Workforce Development Boards made the decision to purchase secure document technology in order to alleviate the issues associated with virtual intake and secure document sharing. A majority of survey respondents indicated this issue is affecting service to existing customers and staff's ability to bring in new customers. E-signature technology allows for documents to be sent, shared, and signed in a secure manner.

CHALLENGE: Hosting a virtual job fair

TOOLS:

- ▶ [HireCanvas](#)
- ▶ [vFairs](#)

TIP: Some local areas reported that their job developers/job placement specialists were looking into virtual platforms that could support hosting a virtual job fair. These staff were also reaching out to employers to gauge their level of interest in participating in a virtual job fair.

CHALLENGE: Producing online content for customers

TOOLS:

- ▶ PowerPoint recordings
- ▶ Zoom recordings
- ▶ [YouTube](#)
- ▶ [Talkhiring.com](#)

TIP: A majority of local areas reported they were in the process of looking into the ways they could transfer their existing content online, such as uploading PDFs and PowerPoints. Some areas were in the beginning stages of hosting virtual orientations, workshops, and one-on-one assessments via Zoom. Others mentioned they were working on hosting live virtual workshops and recording them. One staff member mentioned using Talkhiring.com with customers as a mock interview tool. She was able to access her customers' recordings to help them practice and give feedback on their interviewing.

Since most areas are still familiarizing themselves with the various tools, they are focused initially on basic functionality – for example, using Zoom for team meetings. However, as they gain experience and the crisis continues, they noted needing to further explore more advanced uses, such as using Zoom for live webinars and the Zoom breakout room option for small group discussions. The ongoing demands of remote teaming and the need to offer more than basic services during an extended period of social distancing will require new skills and innovative uses of technology.

Next Steps

It is clear that public workforce professionals and the services they provide are needed now more than ever. As frontline staff continue to adapt to a new virtual world, the survey responses showed a new dedication to matching the quality of virtual services to the same high quality of in-person services. Survey respondents and roundtable participants mentioned time and time again their commitment to ensuring there is not a disconnect in the experience of customers who are in need of assistance.

The survey and roundtable discussions also showed the similarity of issues facing local workforce areas and how each area is undertaking problem-solving, albeit in siloes. As part of the Heldrich Center's COVID-19 response efforts, the center is committed to identifying policy, program, and service delivery issues as they arise as a result of going suddenly virtual, along with working together with the workforce field to brainstorm solutions and communicate them quickly to program operators and policymakers.

To accomplish this, the center is sponsoring several immediate collaboration and issue identification opportunities facilitated by its Program Development and Technical Assistance team, which has been operating a "high-tech, high-touch" initiative virtually for long-term unemployed older workers in New Jersey called the [New Start Career Network](#). Toward that end, the Heldrich Center is offering:

- ▶ **Access to the center's free online Community of Practice** where workforce professionals can ask questions, share ideas, and take part in online learning to build their skills in providing virtual services and operating in remote teams. The link to join the community is [here](#).
- ▶ **Online professional development opportunities**, including "Lunch & Learn" sessions on using various technology tools, virtual sharing sessions to showcase promising practices from the field, and coaching and practice sessions for staff that are implementing new practices and tools.
- ▶ **Monthly roundtable discussions** with workforce professionals to share new ideas and support collaborative problem-solving and the creation of new connections.
- ▶ **Conducting and disseminating research findings through issue briefs** and [Medium blog posts](#) to quickly share what is happening in the field and identify challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for immediate action.

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds and workforce professionals, who are delivering vital services to millions of newly unemployed customers, evolve their use of technology, the Heldrich Center will continue to closely collaborate and quickly share new and innovative uses of technology to manage remote teams and provide virtual services. This brief is a first step in what will be a longer journey to recovery.

Acknowledgments

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- ▶ Career and Technical Education
- ▶ Data Collection and Analysis
- ▶ Disability Employment
- ▶ Job Seekers in Transition
- ▶ Program Evaluation
- ▶ Trend Analysis

Learn more: www.heldrich.rutgers.edu