

Know Who Long-Term Unemployed Jobseekers Are and Why Public Sector Organizations Should Hire Them

By Beverly M. Riddick and Maria Heidkamp

Long-term unemployed jobseekers, defined as people who have been out of work for 27 weeks or longer but who continue actively seeking employment, represent a potential pool of ready-to-work talent that is often overlooked by many employers, including agencies in the public sector.

As of March 2017, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 23.3 percent of the 7.2 million unemployed people, or nearly one in four jobseekers, were classified as long-term unemployed. This represents a considerable decline from the 45.1 percent peak long-term unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2010, but is still far too high for a healthy economy.

These jobseekers include people from every profession, industry, level of education, age, ethnicity and community. They are often highly educated and bring an array of skills and experiences gained over an extended period of time. They qualify as outstanding potential employees for their likely engagement, loyalty and team spirit from being offered work after going so long without it.

New Jersey has one of the highest rates of long-term unemployment in the country, being home to more than 73,000 such individuals. About half of these people are over age 45. The New Start Career Network (NSCN), housed at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, is working with employers in the public and private sectors to bring these qualified job applicants to the attention of hiring managers. Since its launch in October 2015, NSCN has provided free coaching and access to job search and skills training

to more than 2,100 jobseekers. More than 40 percent of NSCN members have four-year college degrees; another quarter hold graduate degrees.

Looking beyond New Jersey, most long-term unemployed jobseekers across the United States worked during the years when organizations incorporated more technology resources into operations. Their mastery of new computer and technical skills shows that they are adaptable. Indeed, these jobseekers are willing and able to learn new techniques and procedures in order to remain productive.

Less tangible, but equally important, credentials are their motivation, high level of commitment to their employers and strong drive for achievement. These employees can also be good mentors to younger colleagues in the organizations. Many have pursued certification and training in related fields, demonstrating skills transferable to working in other groups.

All too often, these highly qualified and talented workers are overlooked by hiring managers. In some instances, employers assume that if someone was laid off, it was for a reason. This ignores the reality of widespread downsizing during and after the Great Recession, which affected many capable, high-functioning workers.

Long-term unemployed candidates' gaps in employment may result in their being screened out by applicant tracking systems. And, sadly, age discrimination may play a role in excluding the most-experienced applicants. Finally, especially for those who had



a long tenure in their previous position, many of these candidates have outdated job search skills.

Hiring managers in the public sector would do well to give more careful consideration to candidates from the ranks of the long-term unemployed. Working with other agencies and nonprofit groups, managers can identify and prescreen qualified candidates, thereby lowering their recruitment costs and shortening the hiring process. Older jobseekers may be classified for consideration in some diversity and inclusion programs.

With their extensive backgrounds, these candidates are able to tap their experiences and professional networks to advance the objectives of the organization and contribute innovative solutions to new challenges. Building a multigenerational team also enhances diversity among colleagues.

Best practices for recruiting long-term unemployed candidate include the following:

- First, review screening and hiring procedures to identify any processes that may exclude long-term unemployed candidates.
- Review all job announcements and ads and remove references to employment status that would inappropriately discourage long-term unemployed candidates from applying. Examples include "must be currently employed" and "actively employed."
- Revise applicant tracking systems so they do not screen out resumes based on employment status or age.

- Train hiring managers to focus on assessing applicants' skills rather than recent job activities. This permits jobseekers to refer to experiences they have had throughout the entire course of their careers.
- Focus on transferable skills. Analysis, teaching, organizing projects and writing add value in all contexts and organizations.

Long-term unemployed jobseekers are eager and prepared to get back into the workforce. They bring a wealth of experience, a thirst for learning new skills, team focus and mentoring to the public sector. It is time to make every effort to include them in the search for motivated job candidates in the public sector.

Beverly M. Riddick is executive director of the Ready to Work Business Collaborative, an initiative to help employers achieve their goals by hiring highly capable candidates who may have been inadvertently overlooked in traditional recruitment. Maria Heidkamp is director of the New Start Career Network. This initiative of the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University provides free assistance to long-term unemployed jobseekers who are 45 and older in New Jersey. You can reach Riddick at beverly.riddick@rtwbc.org. Heidkamp is available at heidkamp@rutgers.edu. –