Leveling up to business-focused job development

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Abstract. Job development requires a wide variety of skills to be effective. Utilizing a business-based approach, job developers can improve outcomes. This article explores several aspects of business-based development including the use of business language, striking the right tone, developing an elevator pitch, active listening strategies, understanding features versus benefits, doing research, under promising, and closing the sale. By utilizing these business-based sales strategies, job developers can improve their outcomes and increase job placement for people with significant disabilities.

Keywords. Supported employment, job development, business language, business mindset, sales

Job development for individuals with disabilities is very rewarding but also incredibly challenging. Given that individual choice and preference should be the driving factor in the job development process, much of what we learn about the process is focused on this aspect. How do we discover the skills, abilities, and preferences of the individuals that we serve? How do we ensure that we find the best job fit for the individual, given this information?

Despite all of our best efforts, something is missing from this equation. Once we have determined what a good job match should look like, how do we actually go about obtaining this position for the individual? This portion of job development is entirely dependent upon the skills not of the individual but of the job developer, and the skills necessary to make these matches happen are business, marketing, and sales skills.

1. Speaking the language of business

The first skill a job developer needs to develop is referred to as “code switching”, defined by Merriam-Webster as, “the switching from the linguistic system of one language or dialect to that of another.” In interactions with co-workers and those that we serve, job developers typically speak the languages of education, social work, and vocational rehabilitation, what can sometimes be described as soft, people-first, strengths-based language that sometimes slips into the medical model when we discuss specific disabilities.

Business owners, human resource professionals, and hiring managers, on the other hand, speak the language of business. They bandy about with phrases such as profit and loss, return on investment, compliance, and human capital. To truly communicate with the people making hiring decisions, job developers need to code switch to speak the language of business.

Learning business language, lingo, and acronyms could be a full time job, but developers can begin this process by switching just a few key phrases and terms to become more business friendly, as seen in Table 1. Some of the simplest ways to avoid sounding out of touch are to skip any industry-specific acronyms or terminology. For example, rather than refer to “VR”, a job developer could say “Vocational rehabilitation, a program that assists people who have difficulty obtaining employment on their own.”

Another strategy job developers can utilize to code switch to business language is to pay careful attention...
to the language used by the companies they are targeting. This can be as simple as exploring a company’s website, by reading through the “About Us” section in order to get a feel for the kind of language considered to be the “norm” in that company. Are they formal or casual? Use this as a cue to the company culture and try to approach the business in a similar manner.

Read carefully over job descriptions and other information provided by human resources. What descriptors do they use to describe jobs or tasks? Use this language when communicating with hiring professionals about job openings and opportunities.

2. Striking the right tone

Code switching is not just about the words that you say, it’s also about the tone and approach that you take. In the field of supported employment (SE), we often approach one another with a tone that says we are here to help. We are honest about our limitations and we openly discuss them in an effort to overcome as many as possible. While being honest and not ignoring limitations is incredibly important, when approaching a company or business that is not the tone that will get your foot in the door.

Successful sales people, those who speak the language of business, approach every meeting or conversation with one key mindset: they assume the “yes”. Think about the experience of buying a car at a dealership. The salesperson who approaches you on the lot assumes that you are there to buy. They treat you as a customer even if you’re just looking around. They assume that “yes”, you want to buy a car. This is the secret to their success; they assume you want to do business with them until the moment you walk away. (And many of them assume that you will be back later?)

When approaching a business or company, job developers should always assume that the hiring manager will want to work with them and will be interested in the person for whom they are seeking employment. This approach allows the job developer to walk in with a positive mindset, which will allow them to follow the second rule of sales - always focus on the positive. Again consider the experience of buying a car. The salesman will tell you about the great gas mileage, the horsepower, the comfy seats, and the fabulous stereo system. This is the focus of their approach. They won’t tell you that this vehicle was rated poorly by Car & Driver, or that the EPA gas mileage estimates are an exaggeration. Instead, they focus on what the car can do well and what it can offer you as a driver.

Job developers can use this approach when speaking with businesses. Assuming that you have developed a strong plan for the kinds of jobs you are seeking, this should be easy. Ask yourself, what is that you bring to the table? What would be great about working with you and the person you serve? Many job developers already have this skill because supported employment is a strengths-based approach. We already focus on what the people we serve can do and we need to bring this to all of our conversations with businesses.

3. Develop an elevator pitch

So you have mastered the art of the code switch and are ready to take your show on the road, but what do you actually say when you have the ear of an employer or hiring manager? In the non-profit world, we are often advised to tell a compelling story. This works incredibly well when seeking donations for an organization, but approaching a business with an eye to hiring is a completely different challenge. If you tell a story about someone you serve, it sounds like you are asking for a favor or for charity. To truly change the landscape of job development, we have to stop asking for charity and present the business case. The best way to begin doing this is to develop what is known in the world of sales as an elevator pitch.

An elevator pitch is a very short, carefully crafted statement designed to get the listener to ask you questions. Imagine yourself alone in an elevator when the HR director of Company X, a company you know would be a wonderful fit for someone you serve, gets on. You have anywhere from 20 seconds to 1 minute, depending on the speed of the elevator, to get this person’s attention. This is your very literal elevator pitch. A statement of no more than 30 seconds that explains who you are, what you do, and gets the other person excited about all of it.
Table 2

Keys to a Solid Elevator Pitch

- Use clear, simple language
- Don’t “bury the lead” - start with something catchy
- Give them a reason to listen
- It’s about THEM, not about YOU
- Practice makes perfect!

The key to a good elevator pitch is to have a really clear vision of your goal in mind and to be able to articulate this goal in a compelling way, using tips shown in Table 2. The pitch needs to indicate a few key things. Who are you? What do you do? How can you be of service to the person you are pitching? It is absolutely vital that your elevator pitch be not about what you need but about what you can offer to the listener. For example, “My name is Jackie Royer and I run a program called the Employment Collaborative. We are able to offer, at no cost to you, access to hundreds of qualified candidates ready to work today. We provide a single point of contact that allows your company to streamline the recruiting process while receiving training and resources that will help you to diversify your workforce.”

The above elevator pitch is straightforward. It utilizes common business language and focuses on the services that we can provide at no cost. This pitch is all about the listener, what they might need or want from us. It does not provide much detail but instead leads with the core of what we are able to offer, free services to help staff your company. The listener is given just enough to peak his or her interest without burdening them with unnecessary information.

You will likely want to have a handful of elevator pitches in your pocket that are tailored to specific settings or audiences. Some pitches may be general, such as the example above, and some might be very specific to the person you serve. Regardless of the pitch, keep in mind that all elevator pitches should be designed around the goal of getting your listener to ask you just one question. Once you get someone talking, you will have an easier time letting the conversation develop naturally.

4. The art of active listening

Most people, particularly those in the world of social services, would like to believe that they are already good listeners and that they practice this art every day. While this is almost always true when working with the people that we serve, it is actually rare to see someone truly apply this skill to working with an employer in the job development process. Our tendency is to talk so much about the people we serve and the services that we offer that we often forget to listen to the needs of the employer. To be truly successful in job development, you must stop talking and start listening.

When you meet with an employer, there are few key ways to ensure that you are actively listening. After you give your elevator pitch or initial selling speech, stop talking and start listening. Ask the hiring manager or HR person, “what questions do you have for me?” Ask them about their current business needs, what positions do they need to fill frequently or have a difficult time filling? When they answer, listen. Take notes, mental or otherwise. If they use language, acronyms, or industry terms you don’t understand, don’t just smile and nod. Ask them to clarify. After they finish answering a question, try to restate what they have said to make sure you understand what they want and need.

As the employer speaks, listen carefully so you can identify their true needs and wants. If they indicate that they frequently have openings for a custodial position, ask them more questions. Why do you frequently fill this position? Do people leave or do they get fired? Ask about the rate of pay and hours. As you ask questions, you may begin to learn something about the employer or the position. Perhaps the position pays lower than market or has hours that are very undesirable. Perhaps they use a temp service to hire for this position. Maybe they don’t do a very good job of choosing the right people for the job. These are all issues that supported employment and job development services could help to solve but you won’t know how to approach the sale unless you find out exactly what it is that they need.

5. Features vs. Benefits

You’ve gotten past the elevator pitch, you’ve listened actively, you’ve identified the employer’s true needs. Now, it’s time to really sell. You have all of the information necessary to ensure you are selling a complete, customized “package” to the person in question. This is the point in the process when you need to consider features versus benefits, a classic sales dichotomy.

Features are all of the observable and obvious characteristics of what you are trying to sell. For example, the features in a car are horsepower, gas mileage, seat fabric, stereo system, and size of the trunk. While most people really DO care about the specific features of
Table 3

Features vs. Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have 3 years of experience.</td>
<td>I won’t need much training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have great attendance.</td>
<td>You won’t have to cover my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I stay in jobs a long time.</td>
<td>Lower costs for staff turnover.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Features are attributes that can be seen or heard.
Benefits are the result of the features and are hard to see.

Although job development should focus on the concrete skills and abilities of the people we serve, hard numbers and lists of skills don’t move people to action. Sales people frequently talk about selling by addressing a “pain point” for your customer. What is that makes this person’s life or job more difficult? What benefit would our service or job seeker offer that could alleviate this pain or irritation? A hiring manager who learns that by hiring your job seeker or working with your agency they could stop the cycle of hiring and firing for a particular position will sit up and pay attention. Paint that picture for them, and help them to imagine their work life without constant turn over, interviews, and hiring. If you can use the benefits you and the job seeker bring to the table to address a pain point, you will have their undivided attention.

6. Doing your homework

Once you have targeted an employer, and perhaps scheduled the oh-so-important first meeting, it is absolutely vital that you do your homework. If you happen to work in the same area in which you grew up or went to college, you probably feel that you know a lot about the local companies. You’ve seen them all of your life, watched their commercials on television, perhaps visited their storefront or used their services. Don’t let this fool you into believing you “know” the company. As a potential customer or consumer of services, you only know what the company wants you to know. Even if you’ve shopped in a store every day for the past five years, doing research to see what more you can learn will help you to have a better, more tailored approach.

Fortunately, we have access to thousands of data points about nearly every company or business available at our fingertips via the Internet. Most companies have a website or Facebook page that you can visit. When you do, make sure that you dig deeper than the customer level. Explore the site to read about company history, core values, affirmative action statements, and anything else that you can find that isn’t trying to sell you a product. This information gives you a great starting point to learn where the business started and what they are doing today. If the company provides any direct customer service, try searching on review websites such as Yelp, Angie’s List, or even the Better Business Bureau. What are people saying about the company? A general search may also lead you to find comments from former employees about working for the company. All of this is valuable (free!) information that can help you to determine if it is worth spending time building a relationship with this company. If you determine that a company is a solid match for the needs of the people you serve, all of this background information will allow you to speak their language, address the needs of the company, and to be more prepared to present a solid case for employment.

7. Under promise, over deliver

Perhaps the single most important relationship building strategy is also the simplest, under promise and over deliver. As passionate people dedicated to a great cause, we get excited about what we do and the people we serve. We tend to share this enthusiasm with companies, which is wonderful, but we can also make the mistake of promising something that we simply cannot do.

We cannot guarantee that the job seekers that we represent will be perfect employees. We cannot guarantee that they will be on time every day or never call in sick.
We cannot guarantee that the job seeker will be the most productive, accurate, and dedicated employee the company has ever had. While we may believe these things to be true, it is vital that we don’t promise the employer any of the above. In the world of sales, this is known as over promising, guaranteeing that something will be true even when we have little or no control over the overall outcome.

Consider the following scenario: you are having the carpets in your home cleaned. The company you contact tells you that, after they come to your home, your carpets will look brand new and last 10 more years as a result of their cleaning services. This sounds great so you hire them. When they complete the work, your 15-year-old carpet looks 5 years younger, not brand new, and the hallway carpet is still a little torn in the corner. The company lied to you! Your carpet has not been magically transformed and is, essentially, the same carpet only cleaner. Logically, you knew this would be the outcome but because they company promised you such stellar results, you’re disappointed. Next year, when it’s time to clean the carpets, you decide to just rent a steamer at the hardware store and do it yourself. By over promising, the company has lost your repeat business.

In job development, we need to be cautious not to fall prey to this tempting trap. Instead, we need to be careful to promise only what we are 100% certain we can deliver, and if we are savvy, we will only promise slightly less than what we know we can do to ensure we can deliver. Now, it is time to close the sale. For most people who are new to sales, this is by far the scariest part of the process. Prior to this, it was just a conversation but now it becomes a “sale” and that takes many of us in the world of social services outside of our comfort zone. By remembering just a few simple tips, however, you can take the scary right out of closing.

First, closing a sale is really about one simple thing: asking. You’ve given your pitch, you’ve listened, you’ve answered questions. To close the sale, you simply ask the person to take the next step. For example, imagine you are sitting in front of the manager for a dry cleaning business. You just finished answering questions about your services and there is a pause in the conversation. To close the sale, you might simply say, “Now that we’ve talked through what I do and what my job seeker can offer, would you like to meet him?” Simple, straightforward, and truly not scary. In fact, this statement is made even less charged by avoiding the terms interview or hire. You’re not actually asking them to make a hire, you are simply asking this manager to meet someone. This is pretty much the same thing as asking them to set up an interview but by softening the language, the same point is made and you don’t feel pushy.

Second, closing a sale is much easier when you know exactly what it is that you want the person to do next. Before going into a meeting an employer, you should have some idea of what outcome you would like as a result of the conversation. For example, if you are meeting with a company for the first time and are unsure if they have jobs that will be suited for the people you serve, your goal for the conversation might be to take a tour of the facility. In this case, at the end of your talk, you might say, “I feel like I’ve learned a lot about what ABC Dry Cleaning does and I’d love to learn more. Would it be possible for me to see things up and running? I’d really love to tour your shop.” Again, this is simply asking the next logical question. If you know
from the beginning of the conversation that this is a possible goal, you can make sure you lead the conversation in this direction. In some cases, you can actually make “the ask” without having to say the words. For example, you might begin asking questions about what the cleaning area looks like or how the machines run. These leading questions may very well lead you being asked to take a tour without having to say the words.

Third, closing is also less scary when you have a back-up plan if you happen to get a no when you ask your question. Let’s go back to our first scenario with the dry cleaner. You ask them to meet the job seeker and they say, “I’m not sure I have time this month.” If you are not prepared, you might be tempted to say okay and end the meeting. Don’t fall into this trap! Before you go to the meeting, have a back-up plan in place. In this case, perhaps your back-up plan is to ask them to look at the resume. You might say, “I totally understand. I know you are very busy this time of year. Why don’t I leave his resume with you and then check back in next week to see if a window of time might have opened in your schedule?” This is a simple, straightforward way to take a positive step without pushing for more than the employer is ready to offer at this time.

Finally, in many cases, taking small steps works to give you the outcome you wanted all along. In other cases, the employer will still say no. Recognize that this is absolutely okay. Even the very best sales people cannot close every sale. Some companies may not want to work with you, even if you have done everything possible to offer them what they need. Being able to accept no gracefully is as important as making the initial contact. For example, imagine that you follow up with the dry cleaning manager after leaving behind the resume only to be told that they are no longer interested in working with you or hiring your candidate. A smart sales person would respond by saying, “I totally understand and really appreciate your time. If the needs of your business happen to change in the future, please don’t hesitate to contact me.” By respectfully and gracefully accepting the rejection, you have proven that you are a professional and left the door open to a future relationship. They may never call you but your reputation in the community will be positive and professional, exactly what you need to be successful with other companies.

9. Conclusion

Using business basics and sales strategies in the job development process can add a new layer to your practice. Speaking the language of business and striking the right tone with the employer sets you on a level playing field: you aren’t asking for favors, you’re asking to be a business partner. By listening carefully and fully considering the needs of the company, you learn a great deal about the company while still being respectful of their priorities and needs. And by knowing how to close the sale and follow up, you are operating in a way that is familiar and comfortable to businesses. This is how companies interact with other people in the business world: professionally, reliably, and with integrity.

By adjusting your practice to include business-friendly sales strategies, you are opening up opportunities that will allow you access to a broader base of local companies and will help you to develop the most important sales strategy of all - good word of mouth. If you follow the simple strategies detailed here, you will become a respected business partner in your community, not just a job developer asking for a favor or charity. If you truly embrace the idea of partnering with companies, you may be surprised to find just how many doors will open to admit both you and the people you serve!