

Service Provider Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Working with Staff

Training Support Employment, Inc. Supports Staff Retention through Innovative Hiring and Competitive Compensation

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BACKGROUND

Training Support Employment, Inc. (TSE) is a nonprofit service provider in Ramsey County, Minnesota that provides employment support and day services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). TSE has offered integrated employment services since the 1980s and as of March 2024 no longer provides 14(c) subminimum wage employment. TSE currently serves around 300 people in employment and day services, about 150 of whom work in the community.

IMPLEMENTATION

TSE relies on its staff to provide high-quality employment and day services to their clients. Before the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE), TSE had 91 staff members. Following the significant service and staffing disruption brought about by COVID, TSE has had to modify recruitment, retention, and compensation efforts to ensure that they maintain the staff they need to provide high-quality services.

Recruitment

TSE's recruitment efforts focus on hiring staff who represent a wide variety of life experiences. While websites like Indeed and LinkedIn are a primary method of recruitment, job postings uniquely emphasize the quality of life for workers and the TSE mission. Some of their recruitment materials use quotes from staff, such as

"... and I go home, and I tell my family and friends about my day, and they say, 'you mean you get to do this for your job?'"

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TSE is selective about the staff they hire, focusing on individual factors that reflect motivation and commitment to serving people with IDD in the community. Some of the attributes TSE looks for in potential employees include passion for service as a direct support professional; a willingness to adapt, learn, and engage in community outreach; and a desire to work with local businesses to create employment opportunities. One administrator described, "TSE aims to hire high-talent staff who are invested in the mission."

In addition to hiring those who are invested in their mission, TSE leverages community connections and allocates funds for upfront investment in potential hires. For example, TSE sponsored the employment authorization and associated legal fees of an employee. TSE was able to access a broader range of potential employees by tapping into underutilized labor markets and supporting diverse hiring practices. As a TSE administrator put it, "Let's give them the opportunity to be here."

Lastly, TSE has fostered a positive community presence. As they have shifted the delivery of services away from their physical buildings to supporting people with IDD to connect and engage in their communities, they have created awareness of TSE as an exciting and rewarding place to work. With this focus on providing services in the community came increased



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community networking and a new pool of potential staff. Taking advantage of existing local business connections to share that TSE is hiring and that the organization offers a supportive culture that encourages personal and professional growth has also helped them identify new potential hires.

Compensation

Nationally, average direct support professional turnover has always been high. Community rehabilitation providers like TSE regularly note that staff compensation is a significant challenge to ensuring a stable workforce. For more than 30 years, TSE has been active in statewide advocacy efforts, organizing rallies and meetings with legislators, to promote system change to increase payment rates and dollar allocations toward staff compensation.

During the COVID-19 PHE, TSE used organizational cash reserves and resources from the federal government to increase staff wages. TSE implemented a \$5 per hour raise and a system of employee bonuses to keep wages competitive and staff motivated. Federal grants, such as the American Rescue Plan Act, Medicaid Provider Relief Fund, and the Employee Retention Tax Credit helped TSE preserve its high level of employee satisfaction. The success stories highlighted in TSE's hiring advertisements are due in part to its fair and competitive compensation.

Retention

TSE has also worked to improve employee retention. New employees who stay with TSE long-term are eligible for cash bonuses after 1 month, 6 months, and 1 year respectively. TSE has also created a system for rewarding "mission moments" — when a staff member goes above and beyond in service of TSE's mission, supervisors have discretionary funds (up to \$250 per employee) allocated to compensate staff for their exceptional work. These awards are announced in the weekly TSE internal newsletter to congratulate recipients and their achievements.

Along with Direct Support Professionals Week, TSE has emphasized a culture of celebrating and showing gratitude for its staff. For example, using some surplus funding, TSE provided personalized gifts and hosted holiday parties for staff to celebrate the prior year's successes. As the executive director put it, it's all about "never forgetting those connections that you've made working with all those people" and supporting the direct support professional staff to create the successes the organization relies on. The sacrifice and commitment of their staff is not unnoticed or unrewarded and has been vital to TSE's ongoing service success.

IMPACT

TSE's success in providing high-quality job development and placement is testament to their focus on hiring staff who are aligned with their organizational mission. It also speaks to the focus on staff as not just task-oriented workers but as mission-oriented employment specialists who find and support career opportunities. TSE observed significant improvement by paying higher wages and bonuses and creating a supportive management team that is invested in its staff. By fairly compensating its employees, TSE has been able to recover from COVID-19 PHE- related staffing shortages and continues to fulfill its expanded mission of competitive integrated employment and day services.

This staff-centered approach has contributed to TSE's success as it has created a culture of "buy-in". Fair compensation and support for staff development have improved the retention of staff with necessary expertise. In turn, the staff feel valued and invest themselves in the mission of TSE and the people they serve. TSE has successfully expanded the provision of integrated employment support services, including long-term and frequent check-ins with employers. TSE is well integrated into the local community.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REPLICATION

- » **Employ innovative recruitment strategies.** Recruitment strategies that leverage community connections are more likely to lead to new employees who turn into long-term staff members. Innovative recruiting avenues can attract a diverse group of talented staff who are excited about the opportunity to serve their communities.
- » **Create a positive work culture and support policies that motivate a committed workforce.** A culture that prioritizes staff growth creates a supportive environment that improves staff expertise and investment in the goals of the organization.
- » **Reward exceptional work.** Bonuses to mark holidays or employment milestones and rewards for a job well done motivate staff and enhance employee retention.

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