

More than a Job, By: Dilshad D. Husain

Techniques: Making Education & Career Connections – January 1999

DARLENE LEWIS WANTED MORE OUT OF LIFE, INCLUDING A REWARDING AND PROMISING CAREER. LIKE THOUSANDS OF ADULTS SEEKING A JOB CHANGE, LEWIS'S BEST RESOURCE WAS THE CAREER EXPLORATION PROGRAM AT A LOCAL TECHNICAL CENTER WHERE SHE GOT THE TOOLS SHE NEEDED TO TAKE HER FIRST IMPORTANT STEPS.

There comes a time when you realize that you can do better, Darlene Lewis says. Her moment came last February after accepting another factory job at Pre-Mark Inc., in Piqua, Ohio. Struggling to run a heavy plastic cover for an industrial food mixer through a machine to trim its rough edges, Lewis tripped and fell.

"I knew then that I wasn't physically able to do the job," Lewis says. "It was a definite sign to change things--a sign I couldn't ignore like I had before."

But Lewis's epiphany came in fits and starts, hampered by lack of confidence and personal obligations. While working at Pre-Mark in 1990, Lewis enrolled in business courses at Edison Community College in Piqua but dropped out to take care of her teenage niece's baby. Then, after 10 years of factory work, Lewis lost her job to downsizing in 1997.

When she visited Piqua's unemployment office she learned about the Applied Tech Center (ATC) at Upper Valley Joint Vocational School and enrolled. But when Pre-Mark came calling again a few months later, she left the ATC. "Not a good move," she admits. "But I wasn't confident in my ability to learn, and factory work was what I was used to. I thought it was all I could do.

"But the second time around when I left my job, I knew the answer to my job problems was to make myself more marketable--not limit myself to factory work. I needed a career, not a job."

Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein, director of the state support project and office of student services at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, says adult career exploration programs, which mostly serve women and low-income individuals, are becoming an integral part of the nation's education system. As hot career markets shift and adults' personal needs and interests evolve, the demand for career exploration services continues to grow. Adults will change their career up to seven times in a working life span, according to the Department of Education.

That's nothing new, says Maddy-Bernstein. "People are realizing that career exploration is as important for adults as for secondary students." The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that three-fifths of the 50.6 million projected job openings in the next seven years will result from workers who change their occupation. "Chances are we won't stick to one career," she says. "So we need effective, solid places to help us explore other options."

Lewis is one of thousands of adults nationwide using career reentry programs to explore different fields. In a corporate culture where most adults switch careers multiple times, reentry centers--with assessment testing, career literature, exploration software, counseling, skills training, guest speakers, job shadowing and specific classes on job skills and different careers--are helping adults get on the fast track to Success.

A jump start

For Lewis, time was of the essence. "Factory work was out. But I couldn't spend a lot of time in college because I needed a job right away."

Debra Furnas, an instructor at the ATC, walked Lewis through the center's program. Expressing an interest in computers, Lewis took a number of assessment tests to see if she was suited for it. Furnas helped build her confidence through one-on-one conversations and career counseling. "That was the biggest hurdle, Lewis says. "I really wanted to get out of the factory and quit selling myself short. I had to make myself believe that I have a brain, that I can do more than just putting in a screw."

Lewis then took a variety of computer training classes and learned Excel, Access and Word. She also took a communications class to improve her listening skills, telephone techniques and conversation style. Her last set of classes

focused on interviewing techniques and resume writing. After nine months of classes that cost \$525 for each three-month semester, Lewis applied for a secretary position at Upper Valley JVS.

"After all those classes and the career counseling, I was still nervous and unsure of myself," Lewis says. The JVS job fell through, but Lewis kept at it and landed an administrative assistant position with Piqua city government.

Furnas holds Lewis up as one of her best success stories. "When a person has been stuck in a job for so long, doesn't think she can do anything else and ends up turning her life around and finding a job that satisfies her, you know you've done something right," she says.

Funded by the state, the ATC provides assessment and GED testing, training and classes in small business development, marketing, industrial training and human resources. There also are a variety of career workshops and interviewing and resume writing classes. For those who can't afford the classes, the center offers Pell, Ohio instructional, sex-equity and JTPA grants.

Each program gives competency certificates upon completion. If a student has 90 percent attendance and has made satisfactory progress, he or she is eligible to receive a training certificate from the state of Ohio. Nearly 10,000 men and women, mostly women from low-income brackets, come through the center each year.

Step-by-step

The Northern Kentucky University Career ReEntry Center in Highland mainly serves women. When it opened in 1980, the grant-funded center catered to displaced homemakers--women who were divorced, separated, widowed or had disabled husbands, says director Karen Malott.

Over the next few years the center received a number of federal and state grants, which expanded its population base and career exploration classes. "It's difficult sometimes," Malott says. "We run entirely on grants, and the grants are tied to specific populations, income criteria, academic deficiencies, gender. So we have to work our career exploration techniques around this." This year the center, serving about 400 people, has seven grants totaling \$450,000.

The center's career exploration techniques, similar to the ATC, follow a step-by-step process beginning with assessment testing and ending with interviewing techniques:

- **Career counseling**-- counselors use John Holland's career evaluation model and one-on-one counseling to determine interests and confidence levels. "Before you explore what career you want, you have to explore your own personality," Malott says. "What do I know about myself? What kind of a work environment do I like? Do I want my day strictly scheduled? What kind of tradeoffs can I make--more hours for more money?"
- **Assessment testing**-- the Myers-Briggs test and other assessment tests are used to gauge career interests.
- **Exploration tactics**-- after narrowing career interests, adults take skills training classes, attend career workshops taught by industry professionals and go on field trips to tech schools and businesses. Students receive completion certificates but aren't industry-certified. Workshops, such as a recent one on respiratory therapy, are usually a week long.
- **Career planning**-- the last stage involves classes on interviewing, resume writing and building a career plan. The center also offers workshops on financial planning, but doesn't offer child care assistance or job placement services because of strapped resources, says Candace Sellers, the center's assistant director.

Keeping tabs

The biggest challenge is tracking adults once they leave the center, Malott says. "We know when they take a job or go to college, but that's about it. We don't know if they stick to the job they picked from their exploration. It's an important piece that's missing in the allocation of our money. We could spend our money better if we knew what really worked."

Adult career exploration programs nationwide face tracking problems, says Maddy-Bernstein, who heads the NCRVE/U.S. Department of Education Exemplary Career Guidance Program. "You get something great set up, but then directors change, staff leaves and there's no follow-up on what happened to those who used the center's services. A lot of centers do six-month follow-ups, but beyond that there's not much."

Some programs that tout themselves don't offer substantive career exploration, Maddy-Bernstein says. "Pretty bells and whistles don't make a good program. You have to look at individual components, administrative support, community and industry involvement and variety of exploration techniques." Those that offer a full range of services from assessment testing to career workshops to interviewing techniques--are most beneficial, she says.

The Career Development Center at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, Calif., an NCRVE exemplary career program site, goes beyond the normal route of career exploration to offer a variety of services:

- **Career resources**-- the center maintains an extensive career library with brochures, pamphlets and software.
- **Business connections**-- with a full-time job placement technician who coordinates an annual job fair, the center has helped place hundreds of adults in various businesses.
- **Exploration classes**-- the center offers a series of career assessment, exploration, guidance and job-hunting courses that count for college credit. An emergency loan program supported by private donations helps adults buy books and groceries or pay for child care.

Debra Louie, a counselor and coordinator for the CDC, says one of the most important exploration tactics is to send adults who have zeroed in on a career to interview a professional in that field. "A lot of people will do research by books and computers and think a job is the one right for them. But until they go out and talk to someone who has that career, they really won't know."

Louie tells the story of one adult who, through assessment testing, career exploration classes and computer research, decided radiology technician was the job for her. "But when she went out and interviewed a radiology technician and found they have to give enemas, she came back to me and said, 'Girlfriend, no! I need to explore more careers!'"

With a budget of \$280,000 from federal and state grants, the CDC serves nearly 4,000 people every year. Most adults come in with little education and move on to community college. Some with bachelor's degrees seek career-specific training. "Sometimes through the career exploration they realize that they need more education for what they want to do," Louie says.

The key is to foster connections with other career counselors, university officials and business leaders, Louie says. "If we can't give an adult what she exactly needs, we need to be able to direct her elsewhere."

ATC alum Darlene Lewis has decided to pursue an associate's degree in accounting and hopefully become Microsoft certified. "At 46 years old I have a job and a new career," she says. "If someone told me during my factory days that I'd end up with computer skills and have a career plan, I'd never believe it."



Unhappy with factory work, Darlene Lewis started a new professional life with a visit to the Applied Tech Center in Piqua, Ohio.