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**THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON DISABILITIES  
AND THE EMPLOYMENT OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS**

## **Developing Contacts with Employers in Employment Programs**

Yael Slater ♦ Judith King

The study was initiated and funded by  
the TEVET Employment Initiative



**RESEARCH REPORT**

RR-662-14

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

With the increase in programs over the years to integrate weaker populations or those far removed from the labor market into employment, the attitude of program implementers to employers has changed. Instead of viewing them through the narrow prism of job providers for the non-employed, employers are now seen as clients in their own right with needs that have to be learned and, if possible, met. Indeed, implementers of employment programs have begun to regard employers as active partners who can make an important contribution to training processes and preparation for work for the non-employed. Against this background, a new role was formed in the area of employer-contact development (ECD): an ECD officer in employment programs.

This study attempts to answer two main questions:

1. How are employers involved in employment programs abroad?
2. How has the field of working with employers developed in Israel, and in what ways are Israeli employers involved in employment programs for weaker populations?

The first part of the report presents several successful international examples (mainly from the US and Britain) of involving employers in the implementation of an employment program. It also presents Israel's experience in this respect, on the part of Mehalev – the Israeli Experimental Version of the Welfare to Work Program (the first stage of the Wisconsin Program). The second part follows advancements in the field of developing employer contacts in Israel, namely, in TEVET programs, and the creation of a new professional specialization. This part is based mainly on in-depth interviews with ECD officers in the field and the national director at TEVET. The interviews were conducted from June 2011 to June 2012.

## 1. Best Practice of Employer Involvement in Employment Programs Abroad and the Israeli Experience in Mehalev Programs

Employers are increasingly starting to play a role in employment programs beyond hiring suitable job candidates. They are becoming partners in planning the screening processes and training of job candidates, and the support offered them. Both abroad and in Israel, this change grew out of the Welfare to Work Program.

### *a. The experience abroad: the most common ways of involving employers in initiating, designing and implementing employment programs*

- ◆ Establishing an employment program as part of a partnership with employers and/or local employer organizations
- ◆ Input to and from employers into the design of employment programs in terms of the type of participants to be selected and the work skills to be taught
- ◆ Training participants in soft skills, general work skills and specific professional qualifications before placement

- ◆ Tours of work sites for program participants
- ◆ Lectures by employers to participants on employment-related topics
- ◆ Participation in simulated work interviews to help train participants and provide them with feedback in order to improve their interview skills
- ◆ Offering participants a period of paid specialization and practical work experience under the auspices of the program
- ◆ Assistance with placement of participants after the training period
- ◆ Assigning mentors to new workers
- ◆ Hiring employment coordinators in the Human Resources or Training departments to recruit, train and support participants of the program

***b. The Israeli experience: developing employer contacts in the Mehalev Program***

- ◆ The program strove to establish an active strategy of developing contacts with employers, and it supplied them with services to encourage them to hire program participants.
- ◆ One of the evaluation studies of the Mehalev Program (King et al., 2007) examined the partnership between employment centers and employers and found that their contact was virtually on a one-to-one basis. No attempt was made to establish an active, ongoing forum of employers. Contact revolved mainly around finding available jobs, employment conditions and, after placement, integrating participants into the workplace.
- ◆ Employment centers supplied employers with the following services: prior information on the candidates, screening, and problem-solving if participants had problems with job performance.
- ◆ Possible, though not prevalent, services provided by the employment centers were: vocational training for participants according to employer requests, assistance with funding the training, and guiding employers on working with special populations.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ The overwhelming majority of employers who received screening services and information on potential employees were satisfied with the handling of the centers.
- ◆ The ECD officers viewed the role of employers as “hiring participants” and persuading other employers to follow suit. A minority of officers favored employer involvement in constructing training programs. Employers, on the other hand, believed that they could fill additional roles, such as addressing participants on places of work, inviting them to tour work sites, and helping to construct vocational and other training programs at the employment centers. Indeed, a quarter of them supported the idea of offering assistance to fund the training.

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<sup>1</sup> Special populations include: ultra-Orthodox males, Arab women and people with disabilities. These populations are characterized by a low rate of participation in the workforce or under-employment. The term “special populations/groups” relates to such characteristics as race, ethnic affiliation, gender, age, religion, disability, culture, and sexual orientation.

## 2. Employer-Contact Development (ECD) Officers in TEVET Programs

In 2010, TEVET created a new model for developing employer contacts by introducing the role of employer-contact development officer: the officer is responsible for liaising and fostering contact between employment programs and employers. The role is the product of integrating two approaches: Dual Client – which regards not only program participants but also employers as clients to be served by the program; and With its Face to the Employer – which strives to make employers active partners in the program by enabling them to identify and define jobs that constantly suffer from a lack of manpower, recruit candidates, and plan training tracks and to offer support for participants during their initial work period (TEVET, 2010). The role of ECD officer was introduced into many TEVET programs, such as STRIVE, ESHNAV, MAAVARIM, ATIDA, RIAN and MAFTEAH – all employment programs for special populations. The data in this section are based on in-depth interviews with: staff at TEVET’s head office including the Unit for Development of Knowledge and Training; the national director of ECD in the period of the study; and TEVET field staff including ECD officers in TEVET programs.

### *a. The new model for developing employer contacts*

The new model for developing employer contacts overcomes the weaknesses of the classic model. These were: The absence of a single liaison in the program for employers to turn to; the distribution of responsibility for developing employer contacts among the staff, which in effect meant no one took responsibility for it; and the difficulty of staff members to connect with employers in business language for lack of employment experience with the business sector. According to the new model, ECD officers are trained in forming relations with employers and in program marketing, and become acquainted with the labor market. This preparation makes for more professional work with employers: Since this is their only job, ECD officers have time to devote to building close links between the program and the employers, and employers have one liaison to turn to on all program-related matters. An employer who is closely connected with the program is more likely to initiate contact when jobs are available, and cooperate in ways other than just placement.

### *b. Employer-contact development roles*

Employer-contact development consists of two professional roles: ECD officers, and the ECD director. The former work in single programs while the latter works at the head office, above the programs.

#### **ECD officers**

The main responsibilities of ECD officers are: To identify employer needs regarding the regional labor market, detect trends of demand for employees, supply suitable employees from among program participants, market the program, explain to employers the characteristics of specific groups served by the program, and provide ongoing support for employers following placement.

The role of ECD officers with regard to other staff members is to acquaint them with the business sector, its needs, perspectives, incentives and working methods. On the assumption that other staff members also form connections with employers, the ECD officer is responsible for guiding and counseling them on how to conduct relations with employers, as well as accompanying them to meetings with employers.

### **National ECD director**

The national director works at the head office level. S/he maintains direct contact with program staff and employers, and attempts to match their respective needs. The work with employers includes: forming ties with large, strategic employers seen as potentially influencing other employers or serving as a model to lead to and foster change at the national level; familiarizing employers with TEVET populations; referring employers to the Israeli Forum of Diversity in Employment; inviting them to workshops on diversity and training courses held by TEVET in cooperation with the Forum; and cooperating with bodies such as Zionism 2000 and non-profit organizations specializing in integrating special groups into employment.

The work with TEVET programs includes: inviting TEVET managers and directors to meetings organized by the national ECD director with employers, disseminating relevant details about employers and the type of partnership they may be interested in to TEVET programs, developing new ECD models that take into account the changing needs of employers and incorporating the topic in the TEVET work plan.

### ***c. Training for ECD officers***

ECD officers receive basic training from program staff upon assuming the position and from the Unit for Development of Knowledge and Training at TEVET in the course of their work. Regional ECD forums (terminated at the end of 2011 and currently resumed) are frameworks of learning for colleagues. In addition, a course was held for ECD officers in employment organizations for people with disabilities.

### ***d. How ECD officers work with employers***

Employers connected with TEVET programs come from a range of industries and companies of varied size, age and geographical location. The main large employers are Bezek, Teva, Strauss, HaPoalim Bank, Leumi Bank, Derekh Eretz, Unilever, HaRibua HaKakhol, the Central Bottling Company Group (CBC), Clalit Health Services, Sandisk, Manpower, Microsoft, Home Center and Tikshuv.

### **TEVET's marketing approach**

ECD officers use two marketing approaches with employers: Win-Win and Corporate Responsibility. The former is a business approach emphasizing the profit to employers from cooperating with TEVET programs; the latter relates to their desire to contribute to society and serves their public image. TEVET's current model of developing ties with employers integrates the two strategies and the approach taken is adapted to the nature and needs of employers.

### **Creating and developing employer contacts**

Employer size plays a role in the forming of contacts. Among other things, contact with smaller employers tends to be less formal.

Program staff generally prefer contact with medium-to-large sized employers since they require many employees, are prepared to hire unskilled labor at times, have the resources to offer on-the-job vocational training, and often have a heightened sense of social awareness (some companies



have separate divisions of corporate responsibility or community liaison). The need for large numbers of workers and readiness to hire unskilled labor allows for group placement, as was the case at Mafteah and Rian. ECD officers prefer group placement: it provides jobs for a large number of participants, empowers ECD officers in negotiations with employers over working conditions, and facilitates mutual support by the participants. Small businesses may serve as the best option for participants looking for immediate work close to home.

ECD officers attempt to optimize the matching of employer and employee needs. Candidates are referred to employers in coordination with a program staff person who is well-acquainted with participants and therefore has a good idea of who is suitable for a given job.

ECD officers put emphasis on post-placement support of employer and participant as well. An ECD officer will initiate contact with an employer to obtain feedback on the performance of a participant at a new job. If an employer complains about a participant, the officer will intervene to clarify the complaint and attempt to rectify the problematic behavior.

#### *e. The involvement of employers in TEVET Programs*

ECD officers develop creative forms of cooperation with employers, among other things to make certain portions of the screening procedure more flexible, which otherwise could prove problematic due to cultural pitfalls. They ensure that the training prepares candidates for positions needed by employers, to have employers hold tours of their companies, to have employers address participants on the labor market, to conduct simulated interviews with participants, to provide them with feedback, to offer mentoring for job search, and to participate in employer forums hosted by employment programs.

#### *f. How ECD officers work with other coordinators and with program participants*

In addition to contact with employers, ECD officers are in contact with the program's case manager,<sup>2</sup> the participants, other ECD officers in the same program, ECD officers from other programs, and the national ECD director.

***ECD officers and case managers:*** In some programs (e.g., Strive), the contact is close and the ECD officer and case manager work together at every stage – from the moment that information is received on an employer until placement. In other programs (e.g., Mafteah and Rian), contact is loose: the ECD officer supplies details on employers and jobs to the case manager and steps out of the picture.

***ECD officers and program participants:*** While the case manager is the contact person for participants, an ECD officer may also meet with participants to explain the business world or counsel them on how to conduct themselves in job interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> Every TEVET program has a coordinator working directly with participants, and known by various titles in different programs: case manager, placement coordinator, personal coach, employment counselor, and employment developer. In this report, the term, “individual coordinator” is used for the sake of uniformity.

***The national ECD director and ECD officers:*** The national director provides specific consultation to ECD officers turning to her for assistance, but does not offer formal training or instruction. During the study, the national director sometimes invited ECD officers to join her in meetings with employers. An ECD officer who forms contact with an employer unsuitable to the needs of the participants in her/his program may send on details about the employer and available jobs to the national director for dissemination to other programs.

***Contact between ECD officers:*** ECD officers from the same program divide the jobs they receive from employers among themselves. In contrast, ECD officers of various other TEVET programs do not generally maintain ongoing contact.

#### ***g. Difficulties faced by ECD officers***

ECD officers reported some difficulties encountered in their work, including:

- ◆ A limited number of participants: In contrast to manpower companies, the program does not have a steady stream of participants. Thus, it is not always possible to respond to employers.
- ◆ Unrealistic expectations of employers about the capability of participants: Employers may not appreciate that some of the participants have not been working for a long time and require extra preparation to return to work.
- ◆ Stigma and prejudice: Coordinators must overcome the stigma and prejudice that employers may harbor about special groups and consequently refrain from hiring them.
- ◆ False interpretations made by employers of the conduct of participants at job interviews, due to cultural differences.
- ◆ Unwillingness of participants to accept the jobs offered by ECD officers.

### **3. Conclusion**

In the employment programs implemented by JDC-Tevet, systematic, comprehensive knowledge has been consolidated regarding the most efficient ways to work with employers in order to integrate program participants belonging to special populations into employment. This knowledge makes possible the structuring, training and professionalization of the role of ECD officer. Though it cannot be proven that the participant placement rate has increased due to the work of the ECD officers, most of those interviewed in the study believed that employers are more receptive to hiring participants of TEVET programs as a result of their work and the personal contact they have made. Israeli employers are also involved in implementing the program by giving lectures to participants, organizing workplace tours, conducting simulated interviews, being open to cultural adaptation of screening processes. Unlike the patterns abroad, the involvement of Israeli employers in employment programs hardly ever proceeds in an organizational context but on the individual level.. However, there are budding employer forums related to specific programs. We have no data on the extent of employer involvement in either Israel or the US is lacking.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all the employment-contact development officers of TEVET programs who shared their professional experience and the insights they have gained over the years of their work.

Special thanks to Yael Slavin, director of employer-contact development at TEVET, for the abundant data she furnished and her valuable comments on the draft report. We would like to express our appreciation to Tami Reiser-Abend who directed our attention to important issues in the process of training office-holders of employment programs on the topic of employer contacts.

Thanks to Bilha Allon and Raya Cohen for editing the report, and Leslie Klineman for production and layout.

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