



## Compilation of Regional Peer RoundTable Calls 6.15.2021

### Attendees:

- Roz Quarto & Yvette Hernandez, Achieve Staffing
- Ayron Reeves, Blue Jacket Staffing
- Jerry Wallace, Council of Christian Reentry Ministry
- Jeremy Alexander, Diversified Personnel Services
- Marcia Nozick & Gavin Jones, EMBERS Staffing
- Jason Zerbe & Lindsay Cox, First Step Staffing
- Suzanne Warsaw, Harmon Personnel Services
- Christine Rylko & Lee Humason, Uplift Northwest
- Sherri Jensen, Valeo Vocation
- Mickey Wiles, Working Fields
- Mark Winter, WinSource

### Topic: **Digital Recruitment Marketing Strategies**

Guest presenter and Supplier Partner: **Jay Mattern**, CEO, [TerraFirma Marketing](#)

- **Jay:** At TerraFirma, we provide strategic and tactical marketing services to the staffing industry. I'm a staffing guy who wandered into marketing. I co-founded PeopleLink in 1987. We sold it in 2011 as national firm with 110 offices. I retired from PeopleLink in 2019 and bought a marketing firm that used to be my marketing firm. We want to help emerging staffing firms build a solid foundation they can layer onto as they grow, thus the name TerraFirma – "solid ground." I also have a heart for mission. I serve on the Board of the local Goodwill and continue to be fascinated by mission-driven staffing firms and want to help in any way I can. The work you're doing is so important.
- **Tom:** What are you hearing from your clients about the current market and recovery?
- **Jay:** We normally go through business cycles based on supply and demand. Those cycles are all market-induced. My clients are trying to handle this recovery like they would a "normal" return to economic activity. This is not a normal recession. Two factors have been imposed on the market – the lockdowns and the government stimulus money. Both of these external controls have caused the market to react differently. At this point, there should be plenty of people ready to go back to work but there aren't. Doing more of what we normally do for a normal market return isn't going to work here.

- **Tom:** We're all asking if it's the extra stimulus, the lack of childcare.
- **Jay:** What we're seeing here is an inflection point. It was coming before the pandemic. We have to think differently about candidate acquisition and how we approach the candidate market. We need a long game strategy to engage candidates on an ongoing basis.

**Before Covid struck in March 2020, what were the top recruitment tools or practices that gave you the best results?**

- **Ayron:** Word of mouth was working the best for us. We have a Career Academy and we had 25 to 30 candidates going through that every week. We had more people than jobs prior to Covid. Now we have more jobs than people.
- **Yvette:** I would have to agree. I was in Central Florida (with GoodSource) pre-Covid, and we had the Job Connection centers for community outreach. I didn't spend one cent on recruiting. We had more people than jobs and a 97% fill ratio. The tables are totally turned now.
- **Jerry:** We worked directly with transitional living and sober living facilities to find people seeking employment. This still works for us. It's a matter of finding employment that's conducive to the level of support they need. There are tons of businesses who need the labor. We have our first two contracts and I'm in this big learning curve to figure out the employer side. I'm blessed with plenty of people who want to work.
- **Mickey:** Similarly, we didn't spend any money on marketing. Our approach was relationship-building with our referral partners (drug treatment centers, recovery homes, sober homes, probation & parole).
- **Dennis:** Before Covid we still had difficulties filling open positions; we've never had a sufficient number of people. Majority of our contracts are cleaning and staffing, and customer base is state and federal government, so passing background checks is a challenge and passing drug test is secondary. We love doing second chance, but we've not been able to educate our customer base, especially school districts, to open their doors broader than what's accepted. They're very stringent which has caused us issues.
- **Jason:** Typically, our model has been to go out into the community to find the most vulnerable citizens, whether they're experiencing homelessness, disenfranchisement, or coming out of incarceration. We take our opportunities to them – housing facilities, shelters, soup kitchens, churches, places they're receiving services, and we would hold hiring events. We also did the traditional: Indeed, Craigslist, signage on bus shelters and subway cars, but our biggest results were in-person.
- **Suzanne:** We were utilizing a lot of "word of mouth." We're on a busy highway, so we did get a lot of walk-in traffic. We did get some from our website, maybe a third, but we didn't have much luck with Facebook posts. A lot of people were transitioning from correctional facilities. We worked with the Career Center here (unemployment office). We're just a 2-person place, so it's difficult to get out there in person. We posted flyers in grocery stores, coffee shops, cooperatives.

- **Sherri:** We are partnered with local homeless services partners. In the past, anytime I had a need for people I would blast a notice out to them and get quick responses. We also had a requirement that people had to be experiencing homelessness or were documented low-income.
- **Chris:** We've been in the same building for 100 years and we are well established with area social service providers and aligned nonprofits. Pre-Covid we just relied on word of mouth and never lacked for people; we had double to triple the amount of people coming in. We also did United Way job fairs and mined our own data base.

### **During the pandemic, what recruitment tools or practices did you drop or add?**

- **Mickey:** We relied on referral partners then and now. We've had some impact on recruitment but not substantial. We continue to look for ways to improve connecting with referral agencies. We still serve a lot of people who don't qualify for unemployment; they don't have the work history because they've been in prison the last few years. We have some people who might qualify but they're in recovery and looking beyond September.
- **Jerry:** We had unique situation with Voc Rehab. We took on role and got permission to provide in-person services. We masked up, got consents, delivered application documents for our program services and for employment to people's homes. We're a small organization – 4 people. We felt that was necessary to prevent everything coming to a screeching halt. Now we're trying to figure out how to adjust.
- **Ayron:** Our biggest shift was to move from traditional employment to more transitional role employing people through our cleaning service because that's where there was demand. We also began advertising on the bus line (banners inside the bus).
- **Dennis:** During the pandemic, we continued using major job boards connected to our ATS. We have the Greensheet [local ad flyer] that's oriented to specific geographic locations. We also used "Snagajob." Some people applied but numbers were way down. We used to get 20-25 people the first day and a half. Now it's one or two. We spent a lot of money in marketing with little response. We stopped spending the money a month or so ago because it was not yielding anything. People are choosing not to work. Last week we got a few phone calls from people who formerly worked for us. In Texas, our federal benefits end June 26. We can't fault people for staying home because they have family responsibilities and day cares are not open. We spend \$300 to \$400 per month on job board, before pandemic and now.
- **Jay:** I like what you said, Dennis. I think you need to have a presence on the job boards, but there's no point in spending double because you will not see double the results. Using programmatic might make the spend more effective but it's still not producing the results. The circumstances we're in are entirely different.
  - **Mark:** A couple trends I've seen make me cringe. I've seen an uptick in people switching recruiting services and not giving themselves enough runway to evaluate; try it for a month with no good internal process and drop it in a month. Also, there's unprecedented demand. Auto industry was producing 1.1 million cars per month, during pandemic reduced to 10,000 per month, and now people

are playing catchup. Demand is through the roof. We have to have that type of conversation with employers to help them manage the demand side. It's not just the worker shortage.

- **Roz:** We began making placements in December 2020. We reach out to homeless shelters and halfway houses for people struggling with addiction. They're often the only ones who can pass a drug test. As part of Towards Employment (TE), a lot of reputational work has been done.
- **Yvette:** We're continuing to strengthen relationships with referral partners, meeting with local community development coordinators, taking advantage of being part of TE which has been here for 40 years. Our referral partners are the prison system, community development orgs, TE soft skills training workshops.
- **Jason:** During the pandemic, shelters, soup kitchens and other facilities were closed to us. We had to resort to finding ways to get candidates into our office. We continue to do job boards and signage. What we've come to find is that most everyone has phones and access to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., but we need to improve and get better at communicating using those platforms.
- **Lindsay:** We were purchased by First Step in December 2019, and pandemic hit us in March 2020. It's been hard for us because we were not able to go to sites in-person. Their doors are barely opening now. Social media has helped to an extent, but we do not have a ton of followers.
- **Sherri:** With the pandemic we extended eligibility to any job seeker which brings a more diverse pool of talent. We had to get a lot more efficient at developing relationships with the local Workforce Development Council and WorkSource. We do job fairs now, job boards, Craigslist, WorkSource board, Indeed; we've migrated more to a technological platform.
- **Chris:** During the pandemic, our need for people dropped completely and we stopped hiring new people and just placed the core group in our data base.

### **Strategies to attract and engage referral partners**

- **Jay:** As mission-driven businesses, you have the advantage of working with referral partners. What I suggest, is there a way you can expand that? Can you use social media to your advantage? Can you become an "influencer" or authority and develop content that supports that position? Tell that story to attract passive partners and even businesses. Take a position on social media where you're seen as a place where referral partners are welcome, and you can help them help people get back to work. You have to be consistent with this; create a position where your organization can attract referral partners that you haven't thought of. How do people feel about that?
- **Yvette:** I agree. We've reached out to organizations that are competitors who maybe can't place people with significant barriers, and asked for referrals. We can do the same, to share positions we can't fill. We have to talk to people we normally wouldn't.

- **Tom:** Jay, are you talking about producing case studies with existing referral partners, then using video or podcast or other formats to post on LinkedIn or your website to attract other folks in those circles?
- **Jay:** Yes, exactly. You can supplement your direct outreach with an inbound program; get that message into social media channels, consistently and over time, to get your organization seen as an authority by referral partners and companies. Being more visible using various digital tools. It doesn't have to be production-level video. It's better if you have high production but you can start small.
- **Mickey:** We filmed a [2½-minute video](#). It's on our website and we've sent it around via email, and newsletters. It's gotten incredible feedback and led to free media. We've done a local NPR and other radio/tv interviews which generated a good response. Those outlets approached us. We've done a reasonable job of creating the content that Jay has talked about. I speak at conferences about second chance hiring and recovery-friendly workplaces. It gives you credibility that leads to both referral partners and employers. We did invest in a videographer, it cost us \$5,000, but now we have a ton of content we can use to make more specialized videos. It's an investment but you can maximize it. The video is also on youtube.
- **Jay:** Think about what the messages should be to capture certain segments of your target market. You can modify content for different audiences. Telling success stories and educating people about what you do are great content. Entertaining people is another important aspect of social media. It doesn't always have to be focused on "open jobs." You can do a lot with one piece of content to get a lot of traction, as Mickey has done.
- **Mickey:** We tell the story about two associates we placed. It's amazing what you can do in a couple minutes. Finding the right videographer is important.
- **Jason:** We've gotten more into video storytelling, talking about our success stories. It not only feeds our recruiting and referral pipeline, but customers and other community partners see those as well.
- **Lindsay:** These are 2-minute videos that profile candidates, what they've gained since coming to First Step. We have them answer 3 questions about how First Step has helped them. The videos have been very helpful to grow our reputation. Putting the "not for profit" information on social media has created a stronger draw. "Boosting" on Facebook has been very helpful in getting us out there. Now that we're starting to re-open, I'm going to our referral partners to let them know we have the openings. We're trying to push this more with our housing, health, and probation and parole partners.
- **Marcia:** We're planning a recruitment video as well. Where else did you share the video?
- **Lindsay:** We've had them on our social media and send them to our partners. We have Facebook pages and other social media platforms for each branch. I'll re-share from my personal page. We started doing this in January of this year. I plan to post them on our website.
- **Jay:** In regard to the video, make sure that there is a "call to action" and a way that you are able to measure the results. Also, create backlinks to your website.
- **Lindsay:** I've also reached out to someone on TikTok with 1 million followers to see if he would be interested in collaborating. He shares mission to help people who are homeless. I've asked if he can help get our name out there. It would really help us across the country.

- **Jay:** That's a great idea. It'd be interesting for you to have an interview directly with that person. It would boost your credibility, too, if you were seen with that person.
- **Suzanne:** We're part of a larger Community Action group with 30 programs – fuel assistance, SNAP benefits, mediation services, family support services, early learning and HeadStart programs. We put an agency-wide call out to all 360 employees of our organization and did not get one referral back.
  - **Janet:** Have you tried presenting to people receiving the services, at a training or orientation maybe?
  - **Suzanne:** We've tried at the Family Center and attended meetings of the Franklin County Resource Network.
  - **Tom:** Do your candidates have mobile devices?
  - **Suzanne:** Yes, but they tend to not turn their voicemail on. We now have texting capability. We've been deep-mining our database. We're going back 4 years now.
- **Sherri:** I foresee us opening 2 to 3 more shelters in the next 6 months, so we'll continue with our current approach and try to get better at it.
- **Chris:** When things started to open up, we started blasting out job notices to our aligned non-profits and going to job fairs, e.g., the Urban League which also featured Starbucks and Amazon.
- **Tom:** ITR Economics is predicting that we won't reach the pre-pandemic labor participation rate until the end of 2023. We have a year-and-a-half of headwinds in communicating to get the message out and get people back to work.
- **Jay:** Here's an interesting statistic from the State of Staffing 2021. Firms were asked if they were looking at engaging in marketing automation. In 2020, 46%, and in 2021, 69% said yes. The digital revolution is for real. But if you're going to do it, do it strategically. By strategic, I mean start with the end in mind. What's your ultimate objective, how will you measure it. Pick the outcome you want, then go back and figure out the strategy or select the tool to meet that objective. What we see a lot of staffing companies doing is jumping into all these tools – Hubspot, Sense, chatbots – without seeing if you really need it. Don't do it because your competitor is doing it.

### **Strategies to attract and engage with candidates**

- **Tom:** Any best practices on initially attracting candidates, getting them to engage?
- **Jay:** With passive recruiting like social media, which is what inbound marketing is, it's a long game. We're often having one-way communications with candidates when we need to have conversations. Our business customers respond to B2B marketing which is rational and value-driven. Candidate marketing is more B2C. You are trying to influence someone emotionally to go to work for you. What we're missing is that ongoing 2-way conversation. I think we need to have a dialogue, start to build a community and hang onto them to play the long game.
- **Jeremy:** We do weekly videos with job updates that we post on Facebook. They're a minute long with a call to action at the end. We also do videos of our recruiters talking about themselves as a way for people to get to know them, to humanize them.

- **Tom:** Jason, what tools do you use to communicate with people on their mobile devices?
- **Jason:** We use ZipWhip for text messages and emails directly to people in our system. We try to get them to refer friends and family, too.
- **Chris:** We've started a referral bonus - \$50 if person referred works 40 hours. Less than 20 people have been referred and less than 10 people have completed the 40 hours.
- **Jason:** We formerly did not pay referral bonuses. With the extreme shortage, we've gone the referral bonus route with some customers. Then, retention, keeping people working while we have them. We provide transportation to workers at a nominal round-trip cost. At some of our high-volume customers, we've offered free transportation if people work all 5 days. That has worked well the last couple months.
- **Jay:** I like that approach. The trouble with referral bonuses is that [dollar] number keeps going up. Rather than paying on the front end, what if you pay on the backend, e.g. a completion bonus, or give incentives so that they continue working.
- **Lindsay:** Our long-term plan is just to get candidates on their feet and employed. We try to help them with affordable housing. The average pay rate starts about \$14 and rent can be \$1,100 to \$3,000 per month. With our affordable housing partners, rent is \$400 to \$550 per month. Our employers are not willing to pay more. It's a frustrating imbalance of pay compared to housing prices. When the eviction protection is lifted, imagine how many more families will be put on the streets. Encampments are being removed. It's heartbreaking, I can go on and on.
- **Tom:** Talking about how you move candidates to get them into affordable housing, to get them training, to get to where they're living a stable life, that's a very inspiring message. Who wouldn't sign on to that?
- **Jason:** We're here trying to give them a first step, to give them some immediate rapid income, some dignity, some routine. Sometimes the safest place for men and women to be is working for us. We have every shift.
- **Tom:** That's a strong, solid message, "here's what we're ultimately trying to do." You can use it to attract candidates, and clients, too. You want to align yourselves with clients that have similar values.
  - **Jay:** You can also have videos about culture. What Jason just said is a video.
  - **Lindsay:** I love that you said that. We did ask everyone to describe working for First Step in one word; I'm working on that video.
  - **Jay:** Another direction is to educate candidates on what you do and why. And then entertain. Have some fun.
- **Jay:** In State of Staffing, Staffing Hub discussed top 3 sources of candidates: 1) referrals 2) direct sourcing 3) working your data base. How can you re-engage and re-connect with people in your data base and have an ongoing dialogue? How can you keep engaging with them, even if you can't place them now.
- **Tom:** There are referral tools out there. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell discussed 1 out of 50 or 100 people that become "champions" for our businesses. How do we create champions from the communities that we place who will promote our services? Do you have associates you're placing that could assume the role of "influencer" to help recruit or affect behavior?
- **Marcia:** We're talking about that. It's a relationship-building thing. You find that worker who's behind the cause and has lots of friends and enlist and encourage them.

- **Jay:** That's exactly right. You can't place people and forget them. The pandemic has taught that we have to engage at a much deeper level.
- **Chris:** Cara was part of our REDF cohort. They do monthly get togethers and sing and share stories and build a community that refers other community back to them.
- **Jay:** Ask your employees where they hang out digitally, what platforms they're on, how often they visit. Dig into your data base and you'll find the 20% who will refer the 80%.
- **Chris:** 60% to 70% of our hires are homeless and are not looking at electronic media. They don't have cell phones. Word of mouth works great for them, and people who do outreach to homeless encampments distribute our info.
- **Jay:** The takeaway is this is a unique recovery and we need to rethink how we do things. We've got to think long-term and humanize our approach to candidate acquisition. It's like your sales process – identify your target candidates, generate a candidate lead and then nurture it to retain leads that meet your criteria. We do this by having ongoing dialogue, not just sending a text message but having an actual human conversation. Ask yourself, how can we get more interactive with the candidates in our database? I think the most important thing here is to not give up after one try. I hear people say, "I ran an ad, and it didn't work." These things require persistence and patience. We need to be recruiting 24-7.

#### **A word about client businesses ...**

- **Mark:** Everything is happening so fast so we need to be responding just as fast. It also needs to be easy for applicants. The days of asking for a 7-panel drug test are gone. I also recommend making some cuts around your clients. Market specific jobs, not just a "standard" job. Think about your clients that have the best culture and are most welcome to the help and market to them specifically.
- **Jay:** That's a great point. Start to be more selective on who you engage with down the road. Working with your valued clients, can you work with them create a job that might be a little more appealing to people? If you're working with the right people, figure out how you can make it more appealing.
- **Mark:** Secondly, don't make it all about price, but you should be pushing for "post-Covid" rates. There should be some sticker shock. You need to be bumping up rates, by dollars, not cents. Let them talk you down.

#### **Updates:**

- **Roz Quarto & Yvette Hernandez, Achieve Staffing:** Cleveland, OH. We're working on a relaunch for Achieve Staffing. We've secured some new contracts. We're fully funded for 3 years from County Office of Reentry grant so we have the benefit of time to get up and running and self-sustaining. We focus on working with re-entry candidates.
- **Ayron Reeves, Blue Jacket:** Fort Wayne, IN. We've been doing this for 15 years and also have a cleaning services social enterprise. We stopped accepting federal funding 6

years ago and are now self-funded from social enterprise revenues and private grants. We focus on Ft Wayne market but right now we're hearing from employers throughout northeastern Indiana.

- **Jerry Wallace, Council of Christian Reentry Ministry:** Cole Spring, KY (northern KY near Cincinnati). Faith-based nonprofit actively launching staffing business. We've been a supported employment Vocational Rehab provider for about 4 years, nonprofit for 9 years, staffing is new to us. Hoping to break through some of long durations clients spend on applications and get them directly to work through alternative staffing model.
- **Jeremy Alexander, Diversified Personnel Services:** Wisconsin. We do staffing for parent organization and external clients. Right now we're trying to get as many people working as we can. DPS has been doing staffing since the 80s.
- **Marcia Nozick & Gavin Jones, EMBERS Staffing:** Vancouver, BC. Gavin is leaving to start his own company, and Kevin is our new director of operations. We're having difficulty with our Avionte/WorkN rollout. It will probably take 6 months. We have around 400 people on weekly payroll but leaving some business on the table, so that's problematic. We're waiting for immigration to pick up. We're developing a wraparound support program, trying to develop partnerships with housing providers. Our greatest challenge is recruitment. There's a fair amount of drop-off between applicants and people that start. In May, 300 people applied but only 100 made it to orientation. Because we're so short on the top of the funnel, it's really important that we maximize the number we can get employed.
  - **Jay:** I'd say 33% is not too bad, compared to what others are doing. A lot of folks are running 15%, 20%.
  - **Marcia:** I think it's 33% that show up to orientation and out of that, half end up working, so it's more like 15%.
  - **Chris:** Did you say your online application process takes 10 minutes?
  - **Gavin:** It takes 5 to 10 minutes, depending on how tech savvy the person is. One thing Avionte recommended was that we require people's [SSN-equivalent], so we don't fill up our database with applicants who are ineligible to work.
  - **Chris:** Our folks have to apply in person at our building, fill out an application and have an interview. Of those folks, about 90% go on to have a job.
  - **Gavin:** A staffing company in Alberta we know has taken the approach of having a 4-question application to create as few barriers as possible to get people's names and contact info. For us, that approach creates a lot of work for recruiters that doesn't pan out.
  - **Sherrri:** Are you happy with the transition to Avionte and what version are you using?
  - **Gavin:** We're on Avionte Bold. For CLI [clerical & light industrial] it's been a bit painful. The design of Bold seems to be focused toward the high end of staffing. We're early adopters of Bold. Over half of Avionte's user base is still on Classic so they'll be migrating hundreds of customers to Bold in the next year and release new functionality to better serve CLI businesses. I would wait until January 2022 and see what the functionality is on CLI. Being web-based is nice, but the functionality cons don't outweigh the pros at this moment.

- **Jason Zerbe & Lindsay Cox:** First Step Staffing: Atlanta, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Nashville, Orlando. We employ homeless, veterans and returning citizens. We're having typical struggles with recruiting. One good thing we've seen is that all of our customers have raised their wages since last year. In Philadelphia, we're at \$200,000 over what we did this week last year. We're at a \$25 million run rate in this region and could use 250 more people. In California, we're having a struggle because of the unemployment support. People apply because they're required to, but they don't show up. It's been a huge struggle for us. Most of our placements are in packaging and warehouse labor. We provide transportation to and from work (\$4/round-trip) via vans and Uber. We also work to find housing for those who have been with us for a period of time. We have strong supportive services from housing partners.
- **Suzanne Warsaw, Harmon Personnel Services:** Greenfield, MA. Our biggest problem is still trying to find candidates. I went to a virtual job fair and several people stopped by, but none followed up. Our payroll client has told us people interview and then disappear. The reentry grant is saving us right now. We've been able to funnel some of our jobs to them.
- **Christine Rylko & Lee Humason, Uplift Northwest:** Seattle/King County. We're currently back to pre-pandemic levels for number of people employed and hours worked. We're serving fewer employers with more staff, about 80 clients and 100 to 125 employees. We're inundated with requests for people. We have to prioritize regular customers and those who offer more sustained employment. Average number of hours per worker is at a record high. We have two groups of workers – those who focus on stadium work and others who are close to 32 hours a week. The stadiums need 50 people a day; other clients are getting 5 workers 5 days a week. We have people who work across both groups. Our key challenges are recruiting.
- **Sherri Jensen, Valeo Vocation:** Tacoma, WA. Our average hours are 40 hours a week. We've been pushing 50 to 60 hours with two accounts. For us, diversification of our book of business is a challenge. We consistently serve 10 to 15 accounts that are higher volume. Right now, recruiting is a significant challenge. We place 30+ people a day, over 100 individuals a month. We have a new account that needs 50 people right now. Every single one of my accounts needs staff. One of our biggest customers is the City of Tacoma, to help staff shelter operations. Through the pandemic, we've been called on several times to launch emergency shelters, in partnership with existing shelters or as the primary operator. We were selected for a \$900K, 18-month CDBG grant, to partner with food banks and replace National Guard who've been called out to address wildfires. We launch that July 1.
- **Mickey Wiles, Working Fields:** Vermont. Mission driven staffing agency with recovery coaching for people recovering from substance use addiction and past convictions. We have 4 offices and we're in the middle of an expansion plan; goal is 10 offices in New England by end of 2022.
- **Mark Winter, WinSource:** Sales training, coaching and consulting for staffing companies. I'm also on the board of Valeo Vocation.