GETTING CONNECTED

GETTING

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Strategies for Expanding the Employment Networks

of Low-Income People

By Shayne Spaulding

INTRODUCTION

If I had a network, I didn't know it. I am very community based and I am all about giving back. So, I knew a lot of people in the community. But as far as CEOs and executives, I didn't know anyone before i.c.stars.
– Melissa, i.c.stars participant[1]

A slender African American woman, 24-year-old Melissa projects intensity and sincerity. In October 2003, she joined i.c.stars, a Chicago-based technology training and leadership development program for young adults, because she was interested in a career in technology.

Before the program, Melissa thought she knew few people she could go to for help getting a job in the Information Technology (IT) sector. Her work experience had mostly been in dead-end retail jobs.

Through i.c.stars, Melissa gained an understanding of the importance of employment networks in a successful job search. And as she learned more, Melissa found that her employment network was not as small as she had once thought.

My cousin Shirley has been in the IT field for 15 years. It never crossed my mind to ask her for help getting a job. I remember going to work with her when computers had big reels on them. I remember playing with them, but that was as interested as I was.

Now we talk regularly about work. At i.c.stars I heard that only 1 percent of IT is African American women. I knew I had to get close to her.

Not only was Melissa unaware of her own network, but when she first started the program, she was terrified of networking: "I hated it. It is just a fear I have." Through classroom exercises and practice, i.c.stars helped Melissa develop specific networking skills and strategies. For example, an exercise on "Developing Your 30-Second Elevator Pitch" helped her learn to talk about herself and her goals with people she did not know, something she found difficult. The program also helped her figure out how to deal with her fear of networking.

At first, they emphasized the importance of networking, and when I realized how important it was and I realized what my fear was, I got myself a buddy and partnered up, and we went to every networking event together.

Melissa liked going to these events with her friend because it made the process a little less scary. While this was good practice, i.c.stars staff also pushed her to try networking on her own. The executive director identified an opportunity for Melissa to volunteer at an awards dinner sponsored by Women in Technology International (WITI) honoring women leaders in the field.

Melissa worked the sign-in table, greeting people and providing them with nametags. Several attendees were people she had met through their involvement with i.c.stars either as mentors or presenters. After Melissa finished her job of checking people in, she was seated with the president of WITI, as well as several other IT executives. Volunteering gave Melissa the chance to attend an important networking event without having to pay the entrance fee. It allowed her to play a visible role and to connect with many key people in her field.

Upon graduation from i.c.stars, Melissa secured an internship in the technology department of a large company that imports and distills liquor. The position was created because of a relationship that fellow i.c.stars students had built with the company through a workplace simulation exercise, where a team of students developed a product that would allow users to match recipes with different wines and beers. The company was so impressed with the students that it decided to create a two-year internship just for an i.c.stars graduate.

While working hard in her internship, Melissa is also pursuing her bachelor's degree in IT. As an intern, Melissa earns $26,500 annually and qualifies for regular employee benefits, including the company's tuition-reimbursement program, which she will be able to take advantage of after she has been with the company for six months.

Melissa continues to work on expanding her network, although it is tough to fit in while working full time. She has two volunteer jobs, which she sees as an avenue for continued networking, and attends i.c.stars networking events whenever she can.

Through the program, I got networking skills, and now I have a big network, including my classmates, who are all good friends.

i.c.stars does many things to help participants like Melissa: it provides computer-skills training, job readiness and soft skills training, résumé and interview preparation, and job placement assistance. Such services characterize the typical employment and training organization. What makes this program different is that it also provides the networking skills and connections that can help ensure long-term success in today's labor market. i.c.stars provides participants with the opportunity to:

- Better understand the importance of networking;

- Learn valuable communication and networking skills;

- Practice networking in a safe environment;

- Network in the real world; and

- Continue to build their networks beyond graduation.

It does this through classroom exercises and planned events, and by involving people from outside the organization and incorporating networking into all parts of the program.

i.c.stars is one of several employment programs around the country that focus on developing participants' employment networks. The purpose of this report is to profile a range of strategies being used by such programs to improve the employment networks of program participants. While not all programs included in this report address networking as intensively as i.c.stars, the programs highlighted do make networking a priority.

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) spoke with nearly 100 organizations in an effort to identify these programs. While most job training programs help participants expand their employment networks through the connections that their job developers, case managers or the organizations themselves offer to employers, we found few organizations that specifi-

cally focus on network expansion. Many programs make the development of peer networks a priority either by fostering it in the classroom or among alumni, but such strategies are often aimed at providing participants with needed emotional or social support, not connections to jobs. While many employment programs address the importance of networks in the classroom, this typically consists of a brief mention of the concept, not more in-depth instruction on networking skills or exposure to people who could help expand participant networks.

The organizations selected for inclusion in this report are doing more to promote networking by using several networking strategies or integrating networking throughout their programs, not just incorporating the topic of networking into a single class. We seek both to illuminate promising approaches and to present a range of methods being used by a variety of organizations across the country. The organizations' approaches vary in intensity and strategy, but each program offers innovative ideas for helping job seekers achieve greater success in the labor market—now and in their future careers.

The report is organized as follows: In the chapter The What and Why of Employment Networks, we take an in-depth look at employment networks and how they function for low-income job seekers, exploring both the literature on the subject and P/PV's own research. We also examine the role of employment and training organizations in expanding and improving the employment networks of their participants. The next chapter, Promising Strategies, includes profiles of four promising approaches, each exemplified by the work of a particular organization. Throughout this chapter (in text boxes), we have also scattered descriptions of related efforts by other organizations. In the final chapter, we conclude with a framework for thinking about the variety of ways in which job

training programs can approach network expansion for their participants.

P/PV has also developed a companion publication, a program training guide, which offers specific ideas—including lesson plans and strategies—that can be incorporated into workforce programs. More information is available on our website, www.ppv.org.

The What And Why Of Employment Networks

The familiar phrase "It is not what you know, but who you know that matters" reflects a common recognition of the importance of employment networks for success in the labor market. This chapter explores what we mean when we talk about employment networks, why they are important and how they function for low-income job seekers.

What Are Employment Networks?

To a large extent, employment networks can be understood through the lens of social capital. Social capital refers to the connections among individuals that result in certain advantages or benefits for those individuals. As Robert Putnam (1999) describes, "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals— social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."

Employment networks are an important type of social capital. They encompass the connections that people have with relatives, friends and acquaintances who may have information about job opportunities or may be able to exert influence over hiring decisions and promotions. The direct link between social network theory and labor market outcomes can be traced to Mark Granovetter's (1973) seminal work, "The Strength of Weak Ties," which explores the ways in which the structure of social networks affects job search.

Why Use Employment Networks?

There are many reasons to use employment networks. Certainly, the frequency with which people use contacts to find jobs provides strong support for their effectiveness. Studies show that between 40 and 50 percent of job seekers find jobs through their connections with other people (Granovetter 1995). In fact, low-income job seekers may rely on employment networks even more than the average job seeker. Green, Tigges

and Browne (1995) found that more than two thirds of low-income job seekers use personal contacts to find their jobs, compared to slightly less than half for all workers.

Changes in the economy and labor market in the past 20 years have increased the importance of job networks. Since the 1980s, corporate restructuring, downsizing and the growth of contingent employment have increased job insecurity among workers at all levels.[2] Gone are the days of loyalty by a company to a single employee or by an employee to a single company. By one estimate, people hold an average of 10 jobs before reaching the age of 39 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004). Frequent job change means that the need to search for a job occurs often, and employment networks can be useful in responding to this labor market volatility.

Job seekers rely heavily on their employment networks for a variety of reasons. The most obvious benefit one's contacts can provide is otherwise unavailable information about job opportunities, which—according to Granovetter—often come from weak ties (1973). This information consists not only of news of openings but of the type of work, quality of life and potential for advancement— the kind of detail that helps people decide if a given job is a good fit. This novel information about job opportunities is particularly important given that so many jobs are not formally advertised by employers and are part of what has been termed the "hidden job market."

The problem with weak ties, however, is that while they can offer unique information about job opportunities, they do not bring much clout in terms of personal vouching. For low-income job seekers— many of whom may lack substantial work experience—it may be valuable to have someone vouch for their employability.

This kind of personal vouching may be more likely to come from strong ties, who can influence hiring decisions or vouch for the skills and capabilities of potential hires. Strong ties tend to have either unique knowledge of the candidate or a vested interest in helping him or her secure a job.

While common sense and our own experiences clearly support the importance of employment networks, research on their value is mixed. On the one hand, several studies suggest that employers rely heavily on networks in hiring, particularly for low-skilled jobs. Henly (1999) examined the recruitment practices of employers hiring for low-skilled positions and found that job seekers who had a connection with employees already working at a firm were more likely to be hired than those without such connections. In this ethnographic study, 88 percent of employers reported using informal referrals to recruit workers, and nearly two thirds (64 percent) stated that internal referrals were their primary hiring strategy. These employers cited several factors to explain their preference for informal referrals including reduced hiring costs, decreased turnover, verification of qualifications and work quality, and increased likelihood of an appropriate match.

On the other hand, studies have failed to establish a consistent link between simply attempting to use one's social network and positive employment outcomes. Lin (1999) and Mouw (2004)—in their reviews of the literature—both note that a simple look at the effect of using networks per se does not account for the composition or strength of the job network used. In the following sections, we explore the challenges that low-income job seekers face with respect to the quality of their networks and the resources available for improving these networks.

What Problems Do Low-Income Job Seekers Face?

Economic changes over the past several decades have created particular challenges for low-skilled and low-income workers.[3] The weakening of unions and decline in manufacturing have meant fewer well-paid jobs for low-skilled workers. Furthermore, fewer paths to advancement now exist for workers at the bottom of the earnings ladder. In addition, there has been an increasing demand for education and technological skill at all levels of the labor market. Related to these structural changes has been a significant decline in the real wages of low-skilled workers.

To add to these challenges, many low-income job seekers lack the connections and resources necessary to secure what good jobs are available. While poor skills and low educational attainment both play a strong role in determining the labor market outcomes of these individuals, there are other barriers to success.

Network Size

P/PV regularly conducts evaluations of employment programs for disadvantaged job seekers. In surveys conducted with more than 1,700 low-income participants across three major initiatives, job seekers consistently described having limited networks available to help them with their job search. In one initiative—serving predominantly low-income women with a high-school diploma or GED who had experienced recent unemployment—the great majority (74 percent) reported having fewer than five people to whom they could turn for help in finding a job. Perhaps more startling, 40 percent of participants reported small job networks of two or fewer contacts.[4] Similarly, in a second initiative serving women who were leaving or had recently left welfare, 76 percent of participants said that they had fewer than five contacts, and 37 percent reported a network size of two or fewer

contacts.[5] In a third initiative targeting young, noncustodial fathers, participants face even more difficult circumstances: 68 percent told us that they had two or fewer people in their job network, and just three of the more than 700 fathers interviewed reported having five or more contacts.[6]

The challenges that someone with so few contacts faces in the labor market are clear. Without contacts, a job seeker cannot learn about jobs in the so-called hidden job market, leverage connections to secure jobs or gain insider information on the nature of jobs to ensure a good match.

Ineffective Networks and Networking

P/PV's research suggests that even participants who have large networks relative to their peers fail to realize much of an advantage in finding employment or working at higher-wage jobs. P/PV explored the predictors of both of these outcomes using models that control for age, gender, race and ethnicity, household composition, past receipt of welfare, previous labor market experience, barriers to employment, and the presence of large or small job networks. In each case, we found no statistically significant association between network size and positive labor market outcomes.[7] This suggests that the naturally forming job networks available to these individuals may have limited power or that they may lack the skills to use their networks effectively. Granovetter (1995) argues that job networks may not function well for low-income individuals because these networks consist predominantly of people who are unemployed themselves or hold low-paying jobs.

Briggs (1998) presents an important distinction between networks of support and networks of leverage that centers on whether one can use a job network simply to get by, or to get ahead. Although low-income individuals may have strong networks they can turn to for emergency child care or temporary work (network of support), they may have limited connections for finding out about job opportunities that lead to long-term employment and advancement (a network of leverage). Furthermore, those low-income job seekers who have a history of crime, drugs or intermittent work may have few people who are willing to vouch for them in their search for employment, creating an additional disadvantage in the labor market.

Class and Race

To a large extent, the schism between low-income job seekers and people with information about good jobs or the power to influence hiring is an issue of class. While it may be that class lines in the United States are more fluid than in many other societies, class is still a powerful force that shapes human interaction in society at large and in the labor market. People tend to associate with those who are of the same social class, and thus networking tends to occur within class boundaries. Similarly, people tend to interact with individuals of the same race—either due to basic patterns of socializing or outright discrimination—inhibiting networking beyond racial lines.

The lack of social integration is particularly apparent in low-income inner-city communities, which tend to be characterized by concentrated poverty. Wilson (1987) argues that the flight of working-class and middle-class African American families from poor urban neighborhoods has led to a situation of extreme social isolation for poor urban blacks. While this has multiple consequences for the health and welfare of inner-city residents, the most significant may be the impact it has on employment networks. As Wilson writes, "People experience a social isolation that excludes them from the job network system that permeates other neighborhoods and that is so important in learning about or being recommended for jobs."[8]

Figure 1: Bridging Ties Can Connect Otherwise Isolated Networks

Job Network 1
Accessed Through Bridge

Naturally Occurring Job Network

Contact

Contact

Contact

Contact

Job
Seeker

Contact

Bridge

Contact

Contact

Job Network 2
Accessed Through Bridge
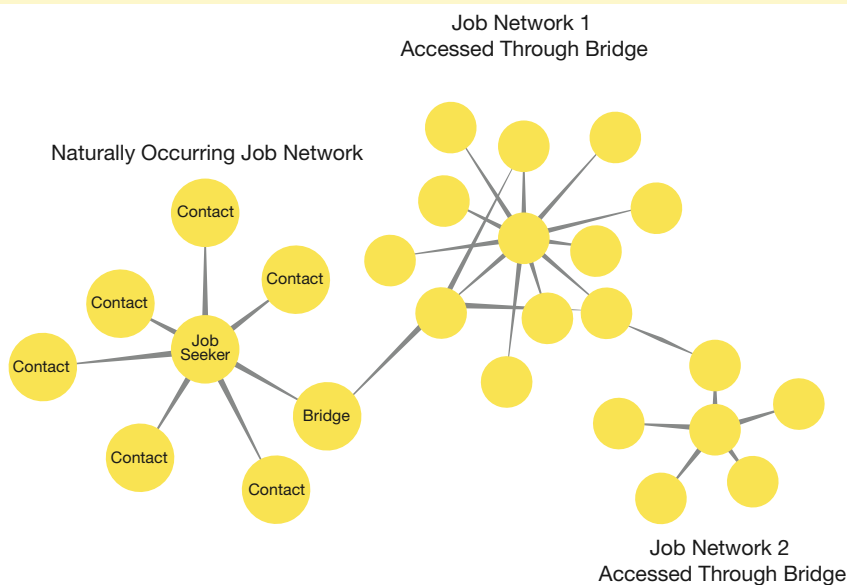
Limited Networking Opportunities

Related to the issue of class division is the problem that many entry-level or low-income job seekers do not have access to formal networking opportunities. On any given day, a scan of the Internet reveals a host of networking activities. People go to networking parties and take classes on how to network. They can join groups for people in the same industry or occupation, or people united by other common threads such as race, gender, disability or unemployment. All of these activities provide participants with the opportunity to build relationships that help their current job searches or their future careers.

Few low-income job seekers have access to these resources. Those with specific experience in a particular sector can tap into industry-based networking groups, but these activities often require a financial investment and offer little for entry-level workers. And while it may be possible to find more affordable or more generalized networking opportunities at local churches or neighborhood associations, such venues may only provide connections to the same low-wage work that job

seekers have obtained in the past. The majority of networking events and activities are geared toward helping people secure managerial and professional positions, not toward assisting those with little education or consistent work experience or helping people secure entry-level jobs.

Improving the Networks of Low-Income Job Seekers

Given the many challenges that low-income job seekers face, what can be done to improve the usefulness of their employment networks? The key may lie in the development of "bridging ties." Imagine such ties as bridges between distant social circles or socioeconomic groups (see Figure 1). Adding even one individual from a different circle to a disadvantaged job seeker's network may greatly increase their prospects for finding a good job. Because people tend to associate with those in circumstances similar to their own, bridging connections may provide access to new networks and thus to novel information about employment opportunities (Reingold 1999; Smith 2000).

Connections with workers who have considerable labor market experience, work in preferable occupations or have other characteristics uncommon in naturally occurring networks are likely to be of the greatest value to job seekers (Campbell, Marsden and Hurlbert 1986). Therefore, if we are to increase the usefulness of the job networks available to low-income workers, efforts should focus on reducing homogeneity and building bridging connections.

There has been considerable research in this area. Emphasizing the importance of bridging ties, Stoloff, Glanville and Bienenstock (1999) found that women were more likely to be working if their job network included people outside of their neighborhoods, who the authors refer to as "neighborhood bridges," and those with more than a high-school education, or "education bridges." In separate studies of low-income mothers, a number of authors found that having social contacts that transcend local neighborhood boundaries was associated with improved employment prospects (Johnson, Bienenstock and Farrell 1999; Fernandez-Kelly 1995; and Jarrett 1995).[9] Other research has shown that contacts' occupational status (Lin 1999; Marsden and Hurlbert 1998; Volker and Flap 1999) and demographic characteristics such as education (Boxman, De Graaf and Flap 1991; Green, Tigges and Diaz 1999) appear to be associated with one's own job status or labor market outcomes.[10] Finally, having a job network with a relatively large share of employed contacts is also positively associated with using word-of-mouth to find a job (Reingold 1999).

A Role for Workforce Development Organizations

In many ways, employment and training programs have been cast as the solution to the challenges low-income job seekers face with respect to their employment networks. Employment and training organizations can serve as an important bridge to employers and can leverage institutional relationships to help people get jobs; they become key members of a low-income person's network.

But few employment and training organizations focus explicitly on improving the employment networks of individual job seekers. Rather, they target their efforts toward building hard and soft skills, identifying appropriate job openings for participants and providing support for participants as they use formal job search mechanisms to find employment. Such organizations rely primarily on job developers who focus on connecting participants to their next job.

While this approach has numerous merits, it can be made even stronger with the addition of a networking strategy. There are many reasons why employment organizations should consider the addition of a networking component:

1) **Employment networks play an important role in the labor market.** As the literature presented here illustrates, employment networks are a key part of the labor market, and low-income people may be at a particular disadvantage. Employment and training organizations are in a good position to help low-income job seekers expand their employment networks because these organizations are experienced at providing skills training— the "how to" of network expansion—and they can foster connections to people outside the organization, including employers and others.

2) **People who come to workforce development organizations may be the most in need of network assistance.** While low-income people may use their networks more than the average job seeker, the individuals who come to employment and training organizations seeking help may be doing so precisely because they possess small or ineffective networks. Certainly, P/PV's research on low-income job seekers suggests that individuals enrolled in employment programs may have particularly small networks. Again, employment

organizations are in the perfect position to provide the networking skills and connections that people with the weakest networks need.

3) **Network strategies offer the potential to help people over the long term.** To be successful, participants will need to navigate numerous job changes throughout their working lives. The advantage of strategies that focus on network improvement and expansion is that they can help job seekers both in their immediate need for employment and in subsequent job searches. With job loss inevitable—either because of economic changes, poor job matches, participants' own difficulty in retaining jobs or participants seizing advancement opportunities—programs can play an important role in helping participants achieve long-term economic success.

4) **Network strategies can help employment programs meet retention and advancement goals.** Employment and training organizations have an interest in helping participants with future job changes, as employment retention has become increasingly emphasized in both public and private funding contracts. By giving participants the networking tools to help negotiate job loss, programs have the potential to improve retention outcomes. Furthermore, networking tools may improve participants' prospects for advancement, another performance goal that has received increased attention.

5) **Network strategies complement existing approaches of employment and training organizations.** Not only can networking strategies help programs meet multiple goals, but they can complement the important work already being done by employment and training organizations to help people find jobs. For example, many programs match participants with mentors, who serve as a source of support and guidance in the job search process. Mentoring can also be a way for programs to help participants expand their employment networks. While few programs focus

explicitly on networking, the program profiles included in this report provide numerous examples of how strategies that are currently being used can also serve networking goals.

In short, networking strategies have the potential both to improve the performance of employment and training organizations and to provide low-income job seekers with essential tools that can be used throughout their working lives.

PROMISING STRATEGIES

TEACHING THE BASICS:
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF BALTIMORE COUNTY (CCBC), BALTIMORE COUNTY, MD

Eight women sit in a semicircle facing Cheryll Cox and Jackie Campbell, two instructors at CCBC's Job Network Program. Cheryll asks the participants to brainstorm the various ways that people find jobs. They list everything from help-wanted ads to employment agencies to personal contacts, and Jackie writes their ideas on a flip chart at the front of the small classroom.

Then Cheryll says, "Think about the last two jobs you held. How many of you got those jobs through help-wanted ads?" A few people raise their hands, and Jackie records the tally for help-wanted ads on the chart. "What about employment agencies?" Again, a few hands shoot up, and Jackie marks down the number. When she gets to "someone you knew told you about it," almost all of the students in the room raise their hands.

The Program

Networking is just one of the topics covered in the Job Network Program, a four-week job readiness training for welfare recipients at the Community College of Baltimore County. It was developed in collaboration with the Baltimore County Department of Social Services in 2000. The program, which also includes intensive case management and job development services, is mandatory for county residents who apply for or are receiving temporary cash assistance. A third partner, the nonprofit HumanIm, works with participants who do not find jobs within the four-week period of the program, providing them with unpaid internships, intensive case management and job development services. Through the Job Network Program, participants learn job search skills, work on becoming job ready

and engage in self-directed job search, with the assistance of a job developer.

The Job Network Program is built on a philosophy of instruction that promotes active learning and encourages participants to rely on one another as resources. This approach and a portion of the curriculum come from a program designed by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, which aims at both helping job seekers secure high-quality jobs and addressing the issue of poor mental health among the unemployed.[11] CCBC has adapted this program to meet the needs of its clients.

The Strategies

The Job Network Program provides a good example of how a short-term program can teach low-income job seekers the importance and basic principles of networking.

Building Awareness of Existing Networks

On the day that we visited, after discussing the importance of networking, the CCBC facilitators posed some new questions to the class about their current job searches. "How many of you know someone who works in a warehouse?" Several hands went up. "How about in a hospital?" Three or four participants raised their hands. Cheryll proceeded to list different types of jobs and companies, polling students to see if they knew people in these fields. Then Cheryl paused, "Okay, how many of you have told these people that you are looking for work?" Only two of the eight students raised their hands.

This exercise illustrates that it is not only having a network of working people that is important, but it is knowing how to tap into that network that counts. As Granovetter (1973) argues, a job seeker's weak ties—those other than one's closest friends and family—are perhaps the most crucial employment contacts because they likely offer unique information about job opportunities. While the majority

of the low-income people in the CCBC class had, at one time, relied upon their networks to get jobs, they may have relied only on their closest friends and family members. The instructors emphasized the importance of relying on all the contacts available in one's network.

Fostering Peer Networking

At CCBC, staff encourage participants to rely on one another as sources of job leads. At the beginning of each CCBC class, the instructors ask students to share job leads. They also suggest that students add their names to a contact sheet that enables them to network outside the program and after the program ends. On this sheet, they write both their contact information and the kind of job they desire.

The sharing of job leads is encouraged throughout the Job Network Program. After the one-week job readiness course, participants engage in a combination of classroom training and self-directed job search, aided by one of several job developers. Every afternoon, students participate in job club, where they look at job listings on the Internet, make telephone calls to employers and read through the newspaper. In addition, participants are expected to use this time to help one another with their job searches.

Fred Keene, the job developer who is responsible for job club at CCBC's Catonsville campus, puts it this way: "Job club is designed to foster an environment of communication and networking. The idea is that there may be a job that you might not qualify for but that someone else might qualify for." Networking is particularly important for CCBC because of its emphasis on self-directed job search. While job developers are constantly building and maintaining relationships with employers, the volume of participants requires a strong self-directed job search component, meaning that students must rely heavily on their own resources to find jobs.

Networking in the Classroom:
The HOPE Program (Brooklyn, NY)

The HOPE Program is a job readiness program serving primarily the hard-to-employ, including formerly homeless individuals, substance abusers, ex-offenders and welfare recipients. At the core of the program are job readiness classes, work internships and job development services. This assistance is strengthened by an array of other services, including computer classes, mental health counseling, vocational literacy classes, GED preparation and tutoring.

What distinguishes the HOPE Program is the strong community that it fosters among participants, graduates and staff. This small program serves approximately 180 new students each year in addition to the more than 350 graduates who are receiving retention and advancement services. The organization works hard to create an atmosphere where students learn to rely on one another and on staff for support and networking. A sense of community is built as participants go through the 16-week job readiness curriculum, with students being encouraged to become resources for each other throughout the program. After students graduate, they are invited to come back to the program to participate in monthly alumni events, where they can network with each other and provide support around the challenges that they are facing on the job. The doors of HOPE remain open to participants as long as they need assistance.

The HOPE Program incorporates networking into its program in a variety of other ways. Students are taught about the importance of employment networks as a part of the readiness course. During the internship phase of the program, students are encouraged to conduct at least one informational interview with someone at their internship site. Students then report their experiences back to the class, allowing them to debrief and learn together about informational interviewing. In addition, staff regularly bring in outside speakers, often employers, to talk to participants about their jobs or to participate in mock interviews.

Dealing with the Fear of Networking

In interviews, CCBC staff were asked why they thought participants were hesitant to tell people they knew that they were looking for work. Several felt that the resistance may have to do with fear. Robert Howe, a Job Network Program job developer at their Essex site said, "People are afraid of going out of their comfort zone." Fred Keene thought it had to do with embarrassment, pride and taboos, particularly in the African American community, against "putting problems from the house out on the street." He added, "The tendency is to keep it in, instead of using every opportunity as an employment opportunity."

CCBC works to overcome this fear through an exercise called "Inoculation Against Setback" in which participants work with the group to identify their fears and develop strategies for addressing them. First, the trainers ask the group to name potential obstacles that may prevent them from performing particular job search activities. For example, fear of rejection may prevent job seekers from making necessary phone calls. As a group, participants brainstorm strategies for overcoming these barriers. Participants are asked to weigh the different options and commit to trying one particular problem-solving strategy. Then they try out the strategy outside the program and report back to the group on how it worked for them. At this time, participants reevaluate the strategy in light of the experience they have gained and begin the process again.

Demonstrating How Networks Function

As they help participants learn how to make every opportunity an employment opportunity, CCBC is really teaching participants about how networks function. Using the University of Michigan curriculum, CCBC instructors show the following diagram on "expanded networks":
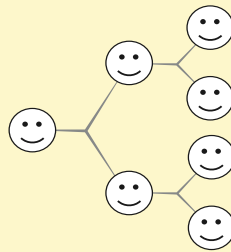
Source: Curran, Wishart and Gingrich (1999)

Instructors stress that by building a relationship with a single person, you can benefit from that person's entire network. As Jackie said, "If you let people know that you are looking for a job, they will start looking for you."

CCBC teaches students that previous employers may be a good source of connections and suggests that participants talk to past employers about their job searches. "You never know what kinds of connections these people will have," remarked Cheryll to her class. The curriculum includes a role-play on how to approach past employers for job leads. In this exercise, the job seeker asks her former boss at a day-care facility whether he has contacts in the picture-framing business, a field she would like to explore. The employer initially says no, but after probing by the job seeker, he realizes that his brother, a woodworker, may be a good contact.

Job leads can also be unearthed through informational interviews, a key networking strategy discussed in the popular "how to" literature on the subject. Informational interviews provide job seekers the chance to make connections, to find out valuable information on a particular industry or occupation and to learn specifics on how to get into that industry or occupation. CCBC, again, uses role-play to teach participants how to conduct an effective informational interview.

CCBC's coaching on how to develop job leads is important because it is critical for the immediate job search, and because it provides participants with skills that will be essential in future job searches. Even if participants are placed in immediate jobs by their job developer, the nature of the current labor market suggests that they will lose their job or move on to other work at some point. Basic knowledge about the importance and function of job networks will be crucial in their future careers.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE: STREET TECH, SAN PABLO, CA

All the guests have been greeted. Everyone has a nametag, a program and a drink. Straight from work, businesspeople stand around in their crisp suits. The main purpose of this party is to give participants in the Street Tech program—who are hosting the party—the opportunity to practice networking. Outside guests have also come to get help on how they could become more effective networkers. They will hear from Susan RoAne, an internationally known corporate speaker and the author of several books on networking.

Trainees stand together fingering the business cards they hope to exchange. Everyone knows this is a "networking party," an event to help the trainees develop and practice networking skills. But how to break the ice and get the networking going?

At Street Tech, a technology training program in San Pablo, California, there is a decidedly creative solution: The MC steps up, throws a hip-hop video on the big screen and instructs the crowd to follow the moves. "Step to the side. Three steps back. Shake it." It's loud, it's fun and everyone's ready to talk when the music fades.

The Program

Street Tech is a nonprofit organization offering low-cost computer training, certification and job placement to adults from disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Street Tech students undergo an intensive three- to six-month technical and life-skills training program, for 9 to 15 hours per week, after which they are transitioned into entry-level computer technician, help desk and network administration jobs.

Street Tech offers a variety of technical skills training programs to its participants.

Students can obtain A+ or Microsoft certification. They can also participate in the Computer Apprenticeship Training, which teaches participants how to refurbish old computers (and then donates the computers back to the community).

Staff at Street Tech say the soft skills that participants learn are just as important for success in the IT field as technical skills. Street Tech has strict attendance and dress-code policies to help reinforce these soft skills. While these skills are infused throughout the program, they are primarily learned in the job readiness class, which is taught by an executive from the industry.

In job readiness classes, the instructor teaches critical communication skills, with an emphasis on how to work well with a team—something that is essential in the technology industry. According to staff, networking skills are also crucial for success because so many jobs in the field are contract- and project-based; one never knows when a job might end and another job search might begin.

The Strategies

Making the Most of the Networking Party

Approximately 100 people attended the Street Tech networking party that P/PV observed, including current students, graduates, staff and businesspeople. More than half were people drawn from outside the organization. The event gave everyone, from students to industry executives, the chance both to learn about networking and to actually make connections with people in the field.

The networking party—and the skill building that occurs in preparation for it—is one of the primary ways that Street Tech helps students prepare for their current and future job searches in the turbulent IT sector. Networking events are common in the industry, and Street Tech's networking party gives students a taste of what to expect. Students do many

things to prepare for the networking party, including:

- Designing their own business cards;

- Practicing how to shake hands and maintain eye contact when they are talking to someone;

- Working on courtesies like "pleasure to meet you" and "thank you for attending";

- Developing a 30-second "commercial" that explains their skills and job goals; and

- Researching the companies and organizations of the individuals who will be attending.

Staff also help students get ready by peppering them with the types of questions they may be asked during the party, including queries about the program, their classes and why they chose a career in technology. In the weeks before the event, staff offer suggestions on how to pace interactions and how not to bombard the first guests who arrive.

The learning does not stop with the networking party. After the event, staff meet with students to debrief and help them reflect on and learn from the experience. During a focus group, one student described how the networking party was helpful:

> *Well, for me, [the party] was a big thing because I'm kind of shy and standoffish, can be, and it kind of forced me to put myself out there and introduce myself and just learn the whole idea behind networking. I've never had to do it for any reason. So it was a good exercise and, you know, it drove my confidence up. Now I put myself out there all the time.*

Teaching Communication Skills

At the core of effective networking are strong communication skills. Street Tech reinforces this constantly; students must stand when they speak in class and everyone is required to participate in class discussions. Instructors will call on students who are not speaking up to make sure that they are engaged and to help them practice critical oral communication skills.

Asked about his experience with Street Tech, one student reflected on the importance that communication and networking skills would have in the future, when he might not have the help of a Street Tech job developer:

> *Street Tech is all about encouraging you as an individual to be more outgoing and to seek things out yourself. They will present you with opportunities, but eventually you have to be the one who's going to go out there, and seek opportunities and be someone who can be outspoken and loud and clear and present yourself and your ideas and what you want and communicate.*

Maintaining Relationships

One of the important parts of maintaining a strong employment network is staying in touch with both old and new contacts. Street Tech works with participants to help them develop an individual database of contacts. Students input both the people in their existing network and the new people they meet—through events like the networking party—into their individual databases. Participants are encouraged to follow up, as appropriate.

An equally important part of maintaining a network is not burning bridges with the people in your life, whether they are co-workers, former employers or other kinds of acquaintances. According to one student, this was one of the most important lessons he took away from the program:

> *Initially, maybe I wasn't such a people person, I'm not sure, but I've come from a pretty rough background. I was like blue-collar most of my life and the type of person where, if somebody upsets me, you know, I sock 'em. So having gone through this program and learning, it's*

kind of, you know, learning how to do things a different way and the importance of maintaining relationships. It's maybe not such a good idea to be one who easily burns bridges.

Job seekers who do not realize how past employers or other people in their lives can serve as important resources may be left with a network that is limited to their closest friends and family. When participants have burned bridges in the past, the need to expand their employment networks becomes even more acute.

Reinforcing the Reciprocal Nature of Networking

Like CCBC and the HOPE Program, Street Tech seeks to expand participant networks by fostering strong peer relationships. Through the program, students become a network for each other and for the graduates who follow. This sense of community is reinforced through the organization's "giveback program," which requires all students to sign a contract at the beginning of the program, agreeing to donate time to Street Tech as mentors

and trainers. As a student in the A+ certification class said:

I like the way Street Tech puts it because they always call themselves Street Tech family because—and it's still a work in progress—but what they try to do is like everyone's on the same playing field. So you are networking with people who are in [the Microsoft Certification Program], people who have graduated from Street Tech. So there is networking regardless of where you are in the scheme of things.

It is through this family environment that Street Tech reinforces the reciprocal nature of networking. Networking is not just about getting jobs from other people but also about recognizing what you have to offer others, including providing connections and important information.

And you know, there's always job openings, like say you're working somewhere or you know somebody, you can always refer your friends to them, which is good. That's what networking is all about.

Relying on Alumni for Network Connections:
Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. (Portland, OR)

Oregon Tradeswomen is a membership organization focused on increasing the number of women and minorities entering the construction trades. In addition to advocacy and youth programs, the organization operates the Pathways program, which is aimed at providing participants with an introduction and connections to the trades.

As an industry, the trades are known for employers' reliance on employment networks in hiring. The problem for women and minorities is that they do not tend to be a part of these networks. In addition, information about how one can get a job in the trades is not easily accessible to the average job seeker.

Oregon Tradeswomen helps participants establish contacts in the industry by encouraging them to go on informational interviews, often with other women who have graduated from Pathways, who can serve as key allies in the workplace. The organization also helps participants make key connections to union representatives and employers. Oregon Tradeswomen works to educate participants about what it takes to get a job in the trades by providing them with crucial information about the field, including informing them about how union hiring works and about the unwritten rules of the workplace.

Building Contacts

Street Tech gives participants the chance to uncover job openings for themselves and for their colleagues by providing them multiple opportunities to connect with employers and others who can assist them in their careers. Besides the networking party, Street Tech offers:

- Mentoring–Street Tech pairs a group of three to four students with IT professionals who act as mentors on specific technology projects.

- Presentations by IT Professionals–Street Tech brings in representatives from the IT field to speak about their experiences.

- Field trips–Street Tech organizes field trips to technology companies so that students can envision their future work environments.

Such activities serve multiple purposes; not only do they provide participants with connections, but they also help students increase their knowledge of the industry and give them the opportunity to practice networking.

Leveraging Technology

By using the Internet to help participants expand their circle of contacts, Street Tech sets itself apart from most employment and training organizations. In the past several years there has been a proliferation in the development and use of networking software. Such software is used on dating websites like Match.com, social network websites such as Friendster.com and business networking websites like LinkedIn.com. All of these sites allow users to get connected to people they do not already know for a range of purposes.

In early 2004, Street Tech partnered with LinkedIn.com to offer online networking to its participants, who tend to lack both strong social networks and access to online resources. LinkedIn.com donated its time in the development, launch and maintenance of a website whose purpose is to ensure that every disadvantaged job seeker who enters the Street Tech program will have immediate access to a broad social and employment network. Once students have signed up for this free service, they can invite other people to join their online network, giving all the students access to these new contacts.

The result is that any one student can have as many as 10,000 contacts in his or her network, although Paul Lamb, the former executive director of Street Tech, guessed that most participants will have several hundred people they could actually go to for help.

An important feature of the service allows employers, typically those who have hired Street Tech graduates, to join the network. Employers who participate are able to conduct searches for qualified students, examine résumés and check references. Students and graduates can also contact employers directly through the network. In addition to making direct employer contacts, students can use the system for online mentoring, to collect information on particular occupations or on the IT field, or to set up informational interviews.

BUILDING BRIDGES: STREETWISE PARTNERS, NEW YORK, NY

Diane had always been interested in interior design.

> *I can just look at a room and know what needs to be done to it. And I was interested in it too because, you know, I have four kids and it was something I knew that they could relate to. That was important to me. Also, I see that it is a field that you can stay in as you grow older.*

Diane had some administrative experience; she worked for a homeless organization in New York City after going through its job training program (Diane herself had once been homeless). But Diane had no experience in the field of design, nor did she know anyone who could help her get that kind of job.

Then she discovered StreetWise Partners, a program that pairs low-income job seekers with mentors—young professionals mainly drawn from the financial, consulting and computer industries. Not only did the program help build Diane's confidence and give her important computer training and soft skills, it also helped her build relationships with a variety of people who could help her in her career.

> *You get exposure to so many different types of people in so many different jobs. And because it is 13 weeks long, friendships develop with people you never would have talked to.*

The Program

Most mentoring programs, whether they are designed for disadvantaged youth or for corporate employees, are aimed at providing participants with guidance and support. These are also the goals of StreetWise Partners, but the program seeks to provide clients with something else as well—critical skills and connections necessary for success in the business world.

Founded in 1997 by a group of young corporate professionals, StreetWise Partners' mission is to increase opportunities for low-income job seekers by bridging the gap between the corporate sector and the low-income community. StreetWise Partners works directly with approximately 200 low-income job seekers per year in its various programs. Each program follows a core model that matches job seekers with one or two mentors who meet regularly with participants in a classroom setting and informally outside the classroom. Programs include the following:

- Working People Back to Work: This program pairs low-income clients with business professionals who serve as career mentors and assist in soft skills development and office-based technology training. Each client is paired with two corporate volunteers or "partners" who work with them over a 13-week period. Training includes workplace simulations using Microsoft Office applications, job searching, interviewing, workplace protocol and time management skills that are essential to obtain and maintain employment.

- Career Ventures Program for Young Adults: StreetWise Partners operates a 13-session program with a particular focus on disadvantaged young adults aged 18 to 24. The curriculum for this training program is a modified version of the program described above.

• Career Match: StreetWise operates two retention programs, one for adults employed in general office administration and one for adults employed in the IT sector. These programs focus on salary negotiations, dealing with conflict in the workplace, strategies for career advancement and other retention-related topics.

StreetWise Partners does not attempt to duplicate the work being done by traditional employment and training organizations. Rather, it adds value to these organizations, recruiting the majority of its participants through referrals from employment and training organizations and government agencies. StreetWise Partners offers graduates from these programs valuable corporate connections—through volunteer members and corporate partners—that they might not otherwise be able to access.

In addition to its direct services to job seekers, StreetWise Partners offers assistance to community-based organizations by providing volunteers who can conduct mock interviews with job seekers or give presentations on specific industry trends.

StreetWise Partners provides training and ongoing support to the 400 mentors who volunteer each year. The organization is explicit about the networking component of the program. For example, a web-page description of the Working People Back to Work program states that "volunteers proactively promote clients within their companies and make critical introductions that may eventually lead to a job." However, most volunteers are drawn to the program not by the expectation that they will directly find someone a job, but by the opportunity to give back and form a meaningful relationship with someone in need.

The Strategies

Building Relationships

Walking in on a Streetwise Partners class, one could immediately sense the buzz in the room. In a large conference room at PricewaterhouseCoopers, participants sat with their mentors at laptops that had been set up around the large conference tables. Participants worked on their résumés with the help of their two mentors. It was only the third time they had met, but the relationships had already started to solidify.

The energy in the room and the promising relationships that are developed are in large part attributable to the structure of the program. StreetWise Partners fosters the development of relationships by providing structured classroom time and a curriculum that can be adapted to meet each client's needs. While participants develop or hone computer skills, relationships begin to form, creating the space for safe networking. Mentors are also encouraged to meet with their participants outside the classroom, providing a welcome balance to the time spent in structured activities.

There are several reasons for matching each participant with two mentors. First, it increases the likelihood that at least one of the volunteers will make a strong connection with the job seeker. Second, matching an individual with two mentors means that there will always be a backup if, for some reason, a mentor is unable to attend one of the Saturday sessions. Third, the job seeker can benefit from building multiple relationships and further expanding his or her network. Finally, the paired mentoring may actually help to attract mentors, who often volunteer because they too want to network either for professional or personal reasons.

Building Networking Skills

StreetWise Partners dedicates classroom time to teaching networking skills. Activities include identifying the people in one's network, understanding the importance of informational interviews and learning about the "30-second elevator pitch." The 30-second elevator pitch is important because it can help participants make a good impression when they have an unanticipated networking encounter. In a session P/PV observed, the guest speaker outlined the key components of the 30-second pitch, which he said should include:

• Who you are;

• What you are looking for;

• What your experience is; and

• Why it is important to the company.

He also suggested that participants come up with three strong points about themselves to highlight in their pitch. For example, he said that he introduces himself as "smart, honest and hard-working." After the speaker introduced the concept, participants spent time developing their own speeches and then delivered them to the class, which provided helpful feedback.

Providing Multiple Connections

Streetwise Partners, like many employment and training programs, uses mock interviews to help build confidence and strengthen interview skills. After a day of formal instruction and practice with mentors, participants spend a full day on mock interviews. Volunteers from participating corporations come in for the day to conduct the interviews. By bringing in

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Faith-Based Mentoring:
Family Pathfinders (Texas)

Family Pathfinders, a program that operates throughout the state of Texas, does more than just add individuals to a job seeker's network; it actually creates a network by linking job seekers with a group of individuals whose mission is to help families successfully transition off welfare. In this state-sponsored program, teams of four to eight volunteers from a single church, civic organization or business are matched with a family who is receiving or has recently received Temporary Assistance for Need Families (TANF) benefits.

Team members work with an individual family to develop an action plan for how the team and sponsoring organization will support the family's efforts to become self-sufficient. Depending on the situation, the team provides "needs-based support service, role modeling, mentoring, friendship, information about community resources, help with problem-solving, encouragement and networking."

There are currently 145 active teams in eight geographic areas, 104 of which are faith-based. More than 1,000 participants have been served since the program's inception. Team members meet with the family on a regular basis—both making a commitment of one year—and attend bimonthly or quarterly meetings with other teams.

While it may seem as if eight people are a lot to assign to one family, this structure provides participants with an already assembled network. Each individual in the mentoring team takes on a different role. For example, the person who is good with numbers may be assigned to help the participant with budgeting. The volunteer who is the biggest "people person" becomes the team leader and is the main point of contact for the participant. The participant will interact with the rest of the team as needed or as much as she desires.

Family Pathfinders offers more than just connections to individual mentors on the team, however. The power of the program comes from the opportunities to connect with other people from within the participating institutions, whether they are churches, businesses or civic organizations.

other volunteers, the program allows participants to practice with people who take them out of their comfort zone rather than just practicing with their mentors, with whom they already feel comfortable.

The mock interviews are just one way that StreetWise Partners helps participants expand and make the most of their employment networks. As Diane remarked about the various people she met through the program, "By the end, you have a network of individuals who can help you."

By forging connections with many different people, including their own mentors, other people's mentors, fellow participants and representatives from outside companies, the program provides multiple opportunities to build contacts. It was through these relationships that Diane was able to secure her current job as a samples librarian in a design firm; she found out about the job from a StreetWise graduate working at the same firm.

Offering Ongoing Connections

While Diane loves her job, she continues to work toward achieving her long-term career goals. She is enrolled in a correspondence course leading to certification in interior design. Her ongoing contact with the program helps her to stay focused. She emails her mentors almost daily and gets together with them at least once a month over coffee or lunch.

> *[My mentors] are very supportive. Their attitude is "What can we do to help you?" They say if there is something you want to learn, we can set up a time to work on it. And the thing is they have more work experience. Even though they are younger than me, they motivate me by what they are trying to do with their careers.*

This positive experience has spurred Diane to participate in the Streetwise Partners' job retention program. "I am a single parent, and I need outside adult support," said Diane. She hopes to gain this support through the additional mentor who has

been assigned to her, as well as through regular meetings with other graduates. In these meetings, they talk about a variety of work-related topics, including salary negotiations, how to be a better employee and other strategies for career advancement. And, of course, the meetings are also an opportunity to network.

Connecting With Employers: i.c.stars, Chicago, IL

Every afternoon at 4 p.m. i.c.stars students gather at the conference room table in the corner of their exposed brick loft. A couple of students are busy in the kitchen preparing the refreshments for this daily event. The others collect their things at the table and excitedly prepare questions for that afternoon's invited guest.

The small floral-patterned demitasse cups that are set at each seat are an indication that this is not your run-of-the-mill meeting. This is the daily "High Tea," where students drink tea and eat cookies while connecting with and learning from people who work in the information technology industry. Speakers throughout the year have included Stephanie Covall-Pinnix, the president and founder of a small start-up technology firm called Evolution Partners; Laurel McGrath, the chief information officer of American Express; and Kevin Gates, a manager at Microsoft.

Speakers are treated well. The moment any visitor enters, two or three students rise from their workstations to greet them, take their coats and offer them coffee or water. The designated host—a position that rotates among the students—then leads the visitor to a separate room to get ready for that afternoon's tea. The host chats with the speaker, finds out about his or her job and tells the speaker what to expect during the tea. Every guest is let in on a little hint: "The students won't drink the tea until you do. It is a matter of courtesy."

When it is time for the tea to begin and everyone is gathered at the table, the host offers a brief introduction of the visitor and what he or she does. Then, one by one, students introduce their neighbors to the guest, each highlighting an employment strength in their fellow stu-

dent—"Jason is a great programmer" or "Tanisha is the person you talk to when you need to solve a problem"—while pouring them a cup of tea. When everyone has been introduced, it is time to hear from the guest and for everyone to drink tea.

The Program

As described in the introduction to this report, i.c.stars is a technology training program in Chicago. Participants spend the first three months of the program working on projects that are simulations of real business problems. Executives from local technology firms and Fortune 500 businesses play the client companies in these exercises, where teams of three or four students act as technology firms bidding on work for the fictitious clients. Thus, students learn technology, leadership and business skills, not through classroom lectures, but through hands-on activities that mirror work they might eventually be doing in the technology field. Students spend the last month of the program in an intensive job search.

i.c.stars is highly selective, requiring a high school diploma or GED for participation, as well as a demonstration of consistent work experience. However, when making acceptance decisions, the program also takes into consideration students' levels of need and experience with hardship. The program provides a stipend of $600 per month to help students cover some of their expenses during this time-intensive program.

i.c.stars stands out in the way that the organization infuses networking into every aspect of its program, from intake to graduation and beyond.

The Strategies

Constantly Teaching Networking Skills

Daily high tea is just one way that i.c.stars gives participants the opportunity to learn and practice networking skills. Students learn to introduce each other and ask guest speakers about the work that they do. Because the hosts at the tea are rotated, all students get the opportunity to interact one-on-one with speakers and to follow up with them after the event, a critical networking skill. Other classroom exercises—such as the 30-second elevator speech, which Melissa, the participant profiled in the beginning of the report, found so challenging—also help participants hone their skills.

Bringing in People from the Outside

Students get to practice their networking skills with a wide variety of people. Nearly 60 speakers came to talk with students at high tea during a recent program cycle. Speakers typically include graduates of the program, Chamber of Commerce representatives, IT staff from Fortune 500 companies, the heads of IT firms and city officials. Students are expected to do background research on each guest speaker so they are well prepared to ask intelligent questions and to get the most out of the presentation.

Executive Director Sandee Kastrul estimates that i.c.stars has approximately 3,600 people in its network and about 120 active volunteers at any given time. In addition to the high tea speakers, the program also recruits volunteers to act as mentors or to conduct mock interviews. While these activities are primarily aimed at providing guidance to participants and preparing them for a successful job search, they also provide students with additional opportunities to interact with employers and others. These individuals are usually active supporters of i.c.stars and thus allow students to expand their networks in a way that feels relatively safe. Alumni remain involved in the program, volunteering as speakers or mentors; they also provide participants with an important avenue for networking.

An Organization That Is All About Networking:
EXCEL! Networking Group, Inc. (Merrifield, VA)

Founded in 1993, EXCEL! is a membership organization aimed at providing professional networking opportunities to people with disabilities, who often lack connections to critical employment networks due to mobility issues and discrimination. EXCEL! is entirely operated by a group of volunteer members and has no paid staff.

EXCEL! hosts monthly networking meetings at a local church, inviting a variety of speakers to talk about employment opportunities and issues related to the employment of people with disabilities. Guests have included recruiters from the federal government, private sector employers and career counselors with expertise in networking. Each meeting starts with a round of introductions in which attendees share why they have come to the networking event. Before and after every gathering, participants have the chance to talk informally and exchange business cards.

Additional resources include a listserv, website and monthly newsletter, which keep members updated on program activities as well as job opportunities. Recently EXCEL! developed a partnership with a local Rotary Club to provide mentors for interested EXCEL! members. In addition, EXCEL! received a $40,000 grant from the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities to develop a replicable model of an employment networking group for people with disabilities.

Sending Students Outside the Organization

Less "safe" are the numerous events students are required to attend and the "outside" networking opportunities that they are expected to take advantage of. During career month, participants must attend at least one networking event per week. Staff instruct students to do research on networking events, pointing them in the direction of local technology networking websites. IT executives who are involved with i.c.stars also invite students and staff to their company's events.

Another way that students at i.c.stars gain understanding of the IT field is through job shadowing and informational interviews. The program encourages participants to set up trips to companies or interviews with key IT staff to better understand their future work environments. What is interesting about i.c.stars' approach is that it does not organize these activities for students. Rather, it encourages students to take the initiative in contacting graduates or people they have met through the daily high teas.

Organizing Events for the Industry

i.c.stars organizes five major events for the industry each year. The organization uses these events as its primary source of revenue, with 50 percent of funds generated in this way. The events also provide current students and graduates with additional opportunities to network. Sandee Kastrul remarks:

> *i.c.stars has a reputation for throwing the best parties in the industry. These events are not about parading the charity. People are there to do business. It is all about associating your name with i.c.stars.*

Staff and volunteers say that one of the most successful events was the High Tech Carnival held in Spring 2003 and organized by i.c.stars staff, volunteers, participants and alumni. This well-attended fundraiser was aimed at providing networking opportunities for people in the

industry. Booths were staffed by industry leaders who engaged participants in various activities, each costing a certain number of prepurchased tickets. At one booth, people could have tea with the senior vice president of a bank; at another, a representative from the Chamber of Commerce helped people with their 30-second elevator pitches. One of the most popular booths was staffed by a venture capitalist who talked through business plans while teaching people his favorite hobby, woodworking. The event provided the opportunity for people to make connections, but allowed them to do so outside of the tedium of a typical networking function. As one volunteer who helped to organize the carnival put it, "The whole idea is that people are more likely to build relationships if they are having fun together."

Such events serve multiple purposes: they offer established people in the industry and i.c.stars participants the opportunity to network, and they provide a major source of funding for the program. Furthermore, they serve to strengthen the connections that individuals in the technology and business community have to the organization, increasing the likelihood that they will contribute to the organization in some way, whether it be by hiring a graduate, volunteering or donating money.

Networking Beyond Graduation

By constantly involving graduates in program activities and inviting them to events, i.c.stars provides participants with ongoing opportunities to network. An active alumni association, which meets monthly, gives students the chance to support one another in their transition to work, to give back to the i.c.stars program and to network. An elected board plans alumni activities and fundraisers for the program.

Students may also find postgraduation support and networking through an exercise that begins in the last month

of the program. Students are guided through the process of building their own personal board of directors to act as their supporters as they transition out of the program and into a career in the IT sector. They are first asked to write their own mission statement—"What are you on this earth to do?" They then hone this mission to focus on a career path. The next step for students is to choose people they think will help them in achieving their mission. These include people with the "talent to lead and inspire" (the chair of the board), people who are "visionaries" and people with expertise in specific areas. This exercise is designed to create a network of support for alumni that is focused on helping graduates achieve their personal and professional goals.

CONCLUSION: THE NETWORKING CONTINUUM

Each of the programs profiled incorporates networking in different ways and to different degrees. While some, like CCBC, focus more on teaching the basic principles of networking, others place an emphasis on actually connecting participants to people who can help them in their career searches. Just as the individual strategies vary, so do the levels of intensity. A low-intensity program may only offer a few network-focused activities. A higher-intensity approach involves multiple strategies, with each new strategy building on the last.

The various approaches identified here represent a continuum of service provision. At one end of the continuum are programs where the importance of networking is simply discussed in a job search class. At the other end of the continuum are programs where the focus on networking continues well beyond graduation. (See Figure 2.)

The following is a summary of how the programs featured in this report incorporate each strategy on the continuum.
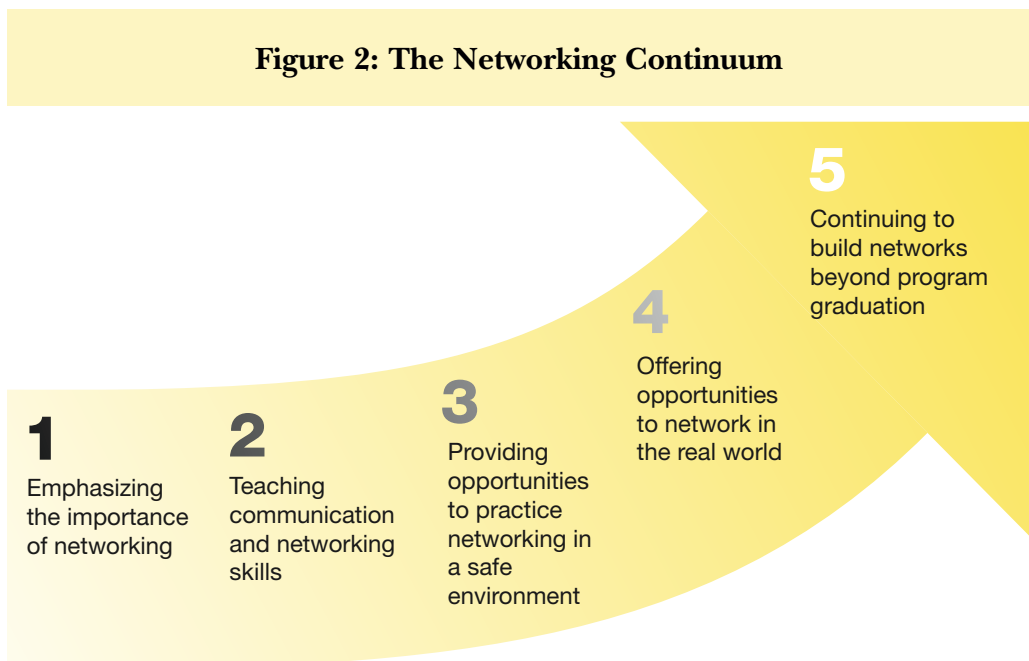
1. Emphasizing the Importance of Networking

While research shows that most low-income people find their jobs through people they know, many do not understand how networks function or their importance. In our conversations with participants in programs across the country, they said repeatedly that the programs had been instrumental in helping them understand the importance of networking and what it involved. As one student remarked about i.c.stars:

> It really stressed, like, the importance of it, because before i.c.stars I didn't—if you asked me what networking was, I'd say it was putting two computers together or something. But it really opened up to how it's important toward getting a job now.

Some programs address the importance of networking and basic concepts in one or two classes. At CCBC, instructors use several classroom exercises to drive the message home. In other organizations, the importance of networking is reinforced throughout the curriculum. i.c.stars Executive Director Kastrul describes their approach as follows:

Figure 2: The Networking Continuum

1 Emphasizing the importance of networking

2 Teaching communication and networking skills

3 Providing opportunities to practice networking in a safe environment

4 Offering opportunities to network in the real world

5 Continuing to build networks beyond program graduation

It is drilled into their heads that [networking] is all about building relationships. The concept of networking is much deeper than just a single networking event or class—it is built into the entire curriculum.

As part of teaching the importance of networking, programs can also help students gain a better understanding of how employment networks function. While most job seekers use their contacts to secure jobs at some point in their lives, they may not be aware of the depth and breadth of their own employment networks. P/PV observed this when students in CCBC's job readiness program said that they had frequently used their contacts to get jobs but had not told many of the working people they knew that they were looking for employment. Programs can help participants become more aware of their networks and how to use them.

2. Teaching Communication and Networking Skills While Building Peer Relationships

Peruse many a community college catalogue and you will find courses in networking. There are consulting firms and self-help books dedicated to the subject. An array of resources exists to help people develop their networking skills both because it is so important in today's labor market and because of the challenge it poses for many people. Beyond helping low-income job seekers recognize the importance of networking, programs can help their participants gain the concrete social skills needed to network successfully.

Building Skills

At a basic level, effective networking is about the ability to build and maintain relationships with people, whether they are people you know well or hardly at all. In large part, this hinges on effective communication skills. Many job training programs address communication skills, but typically they focus on how to communicate in an interview or in the workplace. The emphasis is not on communication skills that help build relationships and turn them into job opportunities.

Effective networking may require specific skills such as:

- How to start a conversation with someone you don't know;

- How to build a relationship with someone you don't know well;

- How to talk about your self and your job search without sounding pushy;

- How to introduce people to one another;

- How to exchange information, including contact information for later use; and

- The importance of following up with people whom you meet.

Employment programs can help job seekers learn these skills. StreetWise Partners and i.c.stars work with participants on developing and practicing a 30-second elevator pitch. This can be a useful way of getting participants to feel comfortable talking about themselves and their employment goals. Other programs provide participants with scripts to guide them through the process of finding job leads through people they know. Street Tech and i.c.stars discuss the importance of following up with people that students meet, even if they do not know how that person might be able to help. At both programs, students design their own business cards to hand out to people as they attend different networking events. At Street Tech, students are encouraged to keep a database of contacts and to follow up with an email after they have met someone or obtained someone's business card.

Reinforcing Skills Through Peer Networks

Effective communication and networking skills can be reinforced in the classroom as participants build strong peer networks.

Most of the programs profiled here—such as CCBC, the HOPE Program and Street Tech—encourage the development of strong peer networks. While it may be argued that this approach reinforces past, potentially ineffective, job search behavior, an emphasis on networking among students is important for several reasons. First, peer networking can help expand small employment networks. Second, if some participants are able to secure better jobs through the program, they can serve as important contacts for other participants in the future. Third, peer networking can teach and reinforce the importance of reciprocity. Finally, by fostering strong peer networks in the classroom, programs give participants the opportunity to practice critical networking skills.

3. Providing Opportunities to Practice Networking in a Safe Environment

It is one thing for participants to practice networking among peers; it is another thing entirely to meet and try to build relationships with people who may be very different from participants. Several programs we visited have developed ways for participants to practice networking with people from outside the organization.

Involving Graduates

Graduates can be called upon to provide safe networking opportunities by mentoring current students, conducting mock interviews, giving informational interviews or allowing participants to job-shadow them at work. For example, Oregon Tradeswomen asks participants to conduct informational interviews with program graduates. By providing participants with the chance to connect with graduates who have similar backgrounds and understand the program's goals, programs can instill confidence around talking to people participants do not know. Furthermore, these connections may be important contacts in participants' job searches.

Mentoring

Mentoring has traditionally been about providing people with support and guidance, rather than with employment opportunities. But even mentoring that is aimed at providing support, like the mentoring offered through StreetWise Partners or Family Pathfinders, can be useful in the expansion of employment networks. Participants in these programs have the opportunity to expand their employment networks within the safety of a mentoring relationship. Mentors can also serve as critical bridging ties to other, possibly stronger, networks.

Practice Networking Events

Networking does not come easily to most people. Special events can offer opportunities for safe networking. Street Tech's networking party is just one example of such an event. The fact that the guests know that the networking party is designed to give students the chance to practice networking makes the event less scary. And by offering outsiders something of value—at the party we attended, it was a lecture on networking and the chance to network with other people in the industry—the program was able to draw enough people from the outside to give students the opportunity to really practice.

4. Offering Opportunities to Network in the Real World

Even after they have honed their networking skills, many low-income people face a substantial challenge in looking for gainful employment: they do not know people who can help them get good jobs. As one woman who had participated in StreetWise Partners put it:

> I might have one friend that might have been able to tell me about a job, this friend who worked at Mount Sinai [Hospital]. She was the only person I knew who had a position similar to the one I was looking for.

Employment and training organizations can play an important role in increasing the size and diversity of their participants' networks.

Involving Employers and Others in Program Activities

One way to accomplish this is to involve employers and others in various aspects of the program. i.c.stars uses its high tea as a primary way to provide participants with exposure to people outside the organization. Similarly, Street Tech invites employers to speak to current participants about their work. The HOPE Program also brings volunteers from the IT sector into the organization to conduct mock interviews.

Informational Interviews and Job Shadowing

Informational interviews and job-shadowing opportunities can serve the dual purposes of giving participants the chance to learn about various occupations and allowing them to forge relationships with people in key positions. CCBC provides participants with a script to guide them in conducting informational interviews. i.c.stars encourages participants to set up informational interviews and job shadowing with people they have met through the program. The HOPE Program encourages participants to conduct informational interviews with someone they work with at their internship.

Industry-Wide Networking Events

Today, middle- and upper-income job seekers have access to a variety of networking groups and events that tend not to be geared toward entry-level job seekers. Some of these activities may not be appropriate or beneficial for low-income job seekers, while others may be useful but not accessible. Job training programs can do two things to address this issue: they can organize their own events or they can provide entrée for their participants into already existing networking groups and events.

The Internet

The Internet has become a powerful networking tool. Several of the programs we examined are beginning to think about ways to help their participants tap into the wealth of networking resources available online. Street Tech, in collaboration with a premium business-networking website, designed an online resource to meet the employment networking needs of participants. Email can also serve as an important tool for building and maintaining relationships.

5. Continuing to Build Networks Beyond Program Graduation

The importance of networking does not stop once a participant graduates from a program or secures a job. Research suggests that job insecurity has increased in the past two decades. Retention is one of the biggest challenges facing employment and training organizations. In fields such as information technology and the trades, where work is often on a contract basis or time-limited, networking may be even more important. Organizations can continue to expand participants' networks after they are placed, with the goal of helping them keep their jobs, advance to better positions within their company or find better-paying jobs elsewhere.

Programs can employ many of the same strategies used with program participants to help graduates with networking. These activities provide opportunities for retention support, while at the same time giving participants the chance to make new connections. Such strategies include:

- Inviting graduates to attend events and participate in program activities;

- Offering alumni meetings to address postgraduation needs and to provide opportunities for networking;

- Pairing graduates with mentors who can provide them with employment support as well as network connections; and

- Providing continued access to online networking opportunities.

Enhancing Program Effectiveness

These strategies offer the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness of employment and training organizations, offering a powerful tool not only in their participants' current search for employment but in future job searches. Network building certainly cannot replace the important work of job developers in employment and training organizations. Job developers provide critical connections and can vouch for job seekers. Nor can networking supplant needed hard and soft skills training. Many job seekers will need to build skills and work experience before someone will be willing to leverage their influence to help them get a job. However, networking skills and connections will be vital to participants as they navigate the various job changes that are bound to occur throughout their working lives.

Network building can strengthen existing strategies used by workforce organizations. Many of the ideas presented in this report, such as mock interviews and mentoring, are activities already being used widely by employment and training programs. To make them more effective networking tools would require minor adjustments or a shift in focus. Other strategies—like organizing a networking party or organizing events for a particular industry—may require more substantive investments of time and planning, but could add substantial value to the menu of services already provided.

P/PV's companion publication, *netWORKS*, offers practical and economical ways to incorporate network building into existing programs using current staff. Information about this guide is available on our website, www.ppv.org.

There are many different ways that organizations can incorporate networking into their programs. The type or intensity of the intervention selected will likely depend on the nature of the program and the characteristics of the population it serves. A job readiness program for the extremely disadvantaged will likely want to pursue a different strategy than a sector-based training program for participants with more skills: One might emphasize basic skill-building along with providing general connections to people who can act as bridging ties; the other might place less emphasis on skill building while stressing the development of connections within the targeted industry.

Whatever the strategies chosen or the level of intensity, networking skills and contacts, along with the traditional hard and soft skills taught by workforce organizations, are essential components in the job seeker's labor market toolbox. Programs have the potential to add value to the employment services they offer by focusing on the expansion and improvement of low-income people's networks.

ENDNOTES

1 All participant names have been changed.

2 For a further discussion of the changing labor market, see Cappelli, Bassi, Katz, Knoke, Osterman and Useem (1997).

3 For a summary of the challenges facing low-income workers, see Kazis (2001).

4 Data are unpublished from P/PV's Sectoral Employment Initiative.

5 Data are unpublished from P/PV's State Workforce Policy Initiative.

6 Data are unpublished from P/PV's Fathers at Work Initiative.

7 Our measures of job network size are categorical variables, necessitating the creation of dichotomous summary variables for large and small networks to be used in our models. We tested a variety of definitions of network size and none yielded a statistically significant association with labor market outcomes.

8 See Wilson (1987), p. 55-62.

9 See Chapple's (2001) review of this literature for additional details.

10 Mouw (2004) offers an alternative interpretation of the observed relationship between occupation status of network members and labor market outcomes. To the extent that members of the study samples tend to work in the same occupation as their contact, the relationship between prestige levels of the two individuals will tend to be positive regardless of whether a causal link between contact occupational status and one's own status is present. If, however, higher-prestige job contacts do help one to land more prestigious jobs, one should observe the same relationship even if same-occupation relationships are not included in the analysis. Mouw drops individuals whose contact has the same occupation, runs the same analysis and finds no evidence of an association between contact's occupational status and that of the subject. Mouw also refines this work by including measures of whether the contact used to find the recent job works in a higher- or lower-prestige occupation than the respondent's previous job. This work shows that those who used a higher-prestige contact did no better, though those who used a lower-prestige contact fared worse in their current job relative to those whose contacts worked in occupations with similar prestige levels.

If a causal relation between network quality and outcomes exists, Mouw argues that we should expect to find that individuals with superior job networks use them more frequently. That is, someone with a high-quality job network should be more likely to obtain a job via a network contact than someone with a limited network. Mouw found no such relationship and argues that some of the observed relationship between job network characteristics and labor market outcomes may be attributable to a bias resulting from the tendency for similar individuals to associate with one another. The studies finding such an association may not, for example, measure the effect of job networks per se, but instead pick up other similarities that we cannot observe or control for in the available data (such as culture, work ethic, language or other personal traits) that friends tend to share and that also affect labor market outcomes. If individuals who have had success in the labor market tend to prefer to befriend other individuals in similar positions, one might observe a correlation between job-network quality and labor market outcomes even in the absence of any true benefit tied to job networks.

11 The JOBS curriculum is available online at http://www.isr.umich.edu/src/seh/mprc/PDFs/Jobs%20Manual.pdf

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