

115 jobs and counting: Local non-profit helps unemployed get back to work



Career strategist Robyn Winters, right, advises TampaBay-Job-Links client Barry Pitegoff about the next steps in his career transition.

Today everybody knows somebody who is looking for a job – a neighbor, a friend, a child, a spouse. Tampa Bay’s high rate of unemployment and need for job creation have been front-page news for years.

“It dawned on me one day that so many people I knew were unemployed,” said Blossom Leibowitz, co-founder of TampaBay Job-Links (TBJL). “And I thought, if we can get the community to come together on this issue, we can really make a difference.”

TampaBay-Job-Links is now celebrating 115 jobs landed since it opened to the public almost three years ago.

“This has been a community effort,” said Sheila Solomon Rudd, executive director of TampaBay-Job-Links. “Our mission is bringing community together to help people find jobs. We couldn’t do this without our talented staff and exceptional team of volunteers.”

The brainchild of Leibowitz and fellow Tampa Jewish community leader the late Jack Roth, the non-profit organization, was modeled after the long-established employment division at the Jewish Family Services agency in Columbus, OH, and was begun with the support of the International Association of Jewish Vocational Services’ 32 member agencies.

“The face of unemployment is changing and it’s not what you might think,” said Andi Jacobs, TBJL board president. “Our job seekers are professionals. They are well-educated men and women who for one reason or another have been edged out of the workforce. Many can’t pay their bills, go to the doctor, or have their car repaired, and their home may be in foreclosure. While they were at one time contributing members of the community, 38 percent of our candidates are now receiving some form of public assistance. This has a devastating effect on them, on their families, and on the community at large.”

So what do you do when you’ve been in a job for 20 years and the stability you thought you had disappears?

This is the situation that David (not his real name), CFO and manager of his Tampa based family-owned business, had to face in 2008, when his company was unable to bounce back from a devastating fire and a dramatic decline in the construction industry. David decided to forge a new career path for himself by returning to school, but wondered how he would fare against graduating students 20 years younger. “I didn’t know how I could compete with them,” said David. “But I knew if I could get past the interview, I would excel.”

Through TampaBay Job-Links career transition service, David was able to build his confidence.

“I got to practice interviewing, and having professionals look over my résumé gave me the confidence that my résumé was good,” explained David. “When I felt uncomfortable attending networking events, a TBJL staff member came with me, introducing me to people and helping me to break the ice.”

David worked with a TBJL career development strategist to create his résumé and to improve his interviewing and networking skills. He said he also received ongoing guidance and encouragement. “After applying for countless IT positions to no avail, I had started to lose confidence. It was a horrible and devastating time,” David recalled.

Finally, his big break came. David was invited to interview with a large tech company. The TBJL team worked alongside David through the extensive interview and assessment process. After several weeks, David was offered a full-time position.

Unlike most workforce development organizations, TBJL takes a holistic, individualized approach to helping candidates acquire lifetime employability skills. Job seekers receive one-on-one coaching from a professional career strategist. TBJL also offers a series of programs and workshops to hone job search know-how and

build self-confidence, including assistance in résumé writing, development of interviewing and networking abilities, and training in the use of social media.

Recognizing there are often barriers to employment, TBJL works with its clients to eliminate as many of these challenges as possible through referrals to other Tampa Bay community resources and through the professional expertise of local TBJL volunteers.

These specialist-volunteers do everything from conducting informational interviews and reviewing résumés for skill gaps to providing a wide range of pro bono professional services such as legal advice, dental care, auto repair, make-up application, hairdressing, and tailoring. “A lack of income and self-esteem can lead to many different kinds of issues. We recognize that many of these challenges need to be addressed before a candidate can conduct a successful job search,” said Solomon Rudd.

In addition to its individualized career development services, TBJL also provides a service to local employers. “Our employer partners are also our clients and a critical component of our organization,” said Anysia Welsh, the director of business relations for TBJL. “Our employer partners contact us with their job openings, and we provide them at no charge with qualified, prescreened candidates.”

“TampaBay-Job-Links was a great resource for my small company and an aid in hiring a new employee,” said speech pathologist Enid Gildar. “The referral process was very efficient, and we were able to hire the first candidate sent to us. What a valuable service for an employer in our community.”

Another employer partner, Richard Cohen, began his association with TBJL as a job seeker when he and his wife moved to Tampa in 2012 and now use its services as the owner of a consulting firm. “Not only does TBJL provide the assistance and education to support those in search of employment, it is their knowledge of the Tampa business community and their connections to all areas of Tampa life that benefited us the most,” he said.

With a professional full- and part-time staff that has recently grown to five, including two part-time career transition specialists, TBJL has at present aided more than 230 job seekers and has helped more than 115 find employment.

“We don’t promise to find our candidates jobs,” said Solomon Rudd. “Instead, we coach them one-on-one and guide them in conducting an effective job search. And we open doors to opportunities when and where we can.”

Co-founder Leibowitz hopes to win grants and increase donations to further grow the organization. “It holds us back because we have only two full-time employees,” she said. “If we could maximize our potential, there’s no telling.”

TBJL welcomes any member of the community interested in volunteering, donating, or providing employment leads to contact TBJL at (813) 344-0200 or job-links@TampaBay Job-Links.org.

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