

conversation

with Art Langer

In 1999, Arthur M. Langer, Ed.D., director of the Center for Technology Management at Columbia University in New York City, began collaborating with one of his students to train about 45 Harlem residents in fixing computers.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development provided a grant to train residents in the Drew projects in Harlem, and Langer's student, an African-American man who had graduated from Harvard and had a New York University law degree, volunteered his time to do the training with the hope that the residents would get jobs in the computer industry. The student asked Langer to help upgrade the training to improve the probability of employment. For four years, every Friday evening, the residents attended a pro bono class at Columbia that included training in web development. As a volunteer, Langer helped get a number of individuals paying jobs, tracked progress and ultimately developed a research model that measures readiness for the workplace. The research was published in an academic journal, and Langer wrote a business plan for what would become Workforce Opportunity Services (WOS). He concluded that companies did not understand how to assimilate underserved inner-city and rural adults into their workforces and that universities are equipped to do only so much to help them. WOS was formed as a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization that finds talented underserved youth and, since 2010, post-9/11 veterans; identifies the educational needs of potential employees for corporations that contract with WOS; and provides training to meet those needs. WOS employs the youth and veterans until a company is ready to hire them away. Langer, a researcher and author with multiple positions at Columbia and its Teachers College, talked about the WOS program with editor Chris Vogel, CEBS.

How do you identify individuals to train?

The (research) instrument measures their readiness to assimilate into the workplace and provides indicators that strengthen their ability to succeed. It measures communication skills, cognitive skills, ethics and self-esteem. My research shows that the most important measure is self-esteem. Getting young adults and veterans to believe in themselves is critical.

Describe the work you did with Prudential, the financial services company based in Newark, New Jersey that was WOS's first client.

I took my business plan to them, and they decided to invest. We educated the original group at Columbia University through a certificate program . . . Prudential wanted five young people. Some were from Newark, some were from New York. They were hired and have done extremely well. Of the five, four are still at Prudential.

What has happened since with Prudential?

They have probably hired more than 125 people away from us. We've had staff at six locations around the country with them at one time. Most people have been trained in technology, but we have also provided training in project management, shared services and accounting work. In 2010, the chairman of the firm, John Strangfeld, asked if we'd consider working with post-9/11 returning veterans who were enlisted—not officers—who really are an older version of the high school or college kids we were dealing with until then.



Art Langer
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How have you persuaded other companies to take a chance with training and then hiring individuals from underserved areas?

A serious problem with internships and work-study programs is that most never result in a job. It's one thing for a kid to come into your company and do some work; it's another to seriously think about how to transform that individual into a long-term employee. The difference is that (during training and then working in the job as training continues) *we* are the employer, so we reduce the hiring risk for corporations. We give employers flexibility. We don't tell them they have to hire by a certain time. We do the background checks; we do the drug testing. We have a contract, in effect, with these organizations. For every 20 people, we have a client service manager who continues to coach these individuals on site and work closely with our corporate partners. Client service managers also support the line managers, giving them an interface with us on an ongoing basis. You can compare a client service manager to a project manager in that context.

How do you provide the education?

While most programs of this nature train individuals and hope they are a fit at the organization, we design the education to fit the needs of the company—This is extraordinarily important. The program is certified by a qualified institution, in almost every case a flagship public university like Penn State or Rutgers. We also do the soft skills. It's competitive to get in, so we do a precertification where we give individuals a chance to see if this is what they want to do, and we select the ones we think are best qualified along a range of issues—whether they did their homework assignments during precertification, whether they showed up every day and on time. Obviously, we have to measure cognitive ability, but that's the easy part. It's not unusual to get 200 people competing for 15 or 20 slots. Typically, in a couple of months, the students—while they're finishing their certificate—are working for us (at the client company). Some of the programs go from part-time to full-time. They may work three days a week and go to school two days, but it varies. A program may be four weeks or a year. It all depends on what we've all agreed to with the sponsoring company.

What other programs have you added?

When a client needs only one or two people, we now have an on-demand program for underserved college grads. We have associate degree students who have a little bit more experience but are still in the underserved category. It all depends on what the client is looking for and where they want us to go. For the Bank of New York, we're in Nashville. With Bristol-Myers Squibb, we're in Tampa. With Turner Construction, we're in St. Louis and in Dallas.

What kinds of support has WOS provided people to get them through training and hired by a client?

We are surrogates in every aspect of the word. There are no limits to what we're willing to do, depending on the student and the issues. We have helped their families in some cases. We have given interest-free loans, fixed cars, bought clothing. As an example, we discovered a veteran working for us was living in his car. My client service manager came to me with the issue. I looked at him and said, "So what do we need to do?" He said, "If we have \$2,500, we can get him into an apartment." I said, "Write the check."

How else does WOS support students?

After they earn their certificate, as long as they're employed by us, they get free, single coverage health care. While they're working for us, we allow them to go to college, and we pay the public (university) rate. They can take two to three classes at night. We pay for books, and we'll help them with travel. They can pick any college they want. Often, our certificate programs are worth credits. Any employer that hires away one of our students has to commit to continue this policy.

Do most students go on for a four-year or associate degree?

Most do. And they traditionally will complete once they're employed away. I had a guy who had 200 boxing fights. He was hired away by Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield in New York. He has gotten married and got his degree and now is going on for his master's degree. We have a lot of those examples. What I'm saying to the world is that the supply chain has to change. Someone going away for four years of college, walking out with

a huge debt—and the chances of finishing are so minimal—is not a systemic solution. Our employees may graduate in six years or seven years, but they get credentials along the way—a certificate from a university, maybe an associate or four-year degree, while they're working, and they will not have any debt. If you look, nationally, at community colleges, the majority of their students do not graduate, and only a fraction transfer to four-year degree-granting institutions.

How does WOS provide all this support with a fairly small staff of 40 to 50 people?

It's a variable process. For every 20 people, we have a client service manager. Also, remember that as quick as they're coming in, they're going out. We traditionally, in years past, had about 150 to 200 employees in one stage or another—being trained, in their first term, working or getting hired away. It goes up and down. We're going to be hiring five administrative people in Dallas because we're doing a huge call center job right now, so we're currently increasing. . . . One of the interesting things that has happened is that students (whom WOS calls "consultants") are being hired away at a quicker rate. The reason for that is that we're doing a better job.

Is there a particular type of job your model works particularly well with?

We started with IT . . . and since then, we branched out to call center work, insurance, shared services. Then came the transition that really proved the model. We train 100 veterans per year as truck mechanics for United Rentals. We find veterans throughout the country, we relocate them to Dallas or Atlanta, we give them their tools, and they go in for an intense 15-week education program. After the training is done

through our partnership with a vocational school, United Rentals relocates them in permanent positions throughout the United States. The company just came back to us and asked us to do truck drivers. The diversity is enormous. We just trained 11 Java developers for GE in Detroit, and it went so well they're going to expand the program in New Orleans.

How is WOS funded?

The clients are paying for it. They can make certain parts of it as a donation. At the end of the day, they're participating in the transformation of individuals. As a 501(c)(3), we do raise money, of course, and we're going to increase that. There are some other initiatives we're doing like WOS in the Community. We worked with 900 people in New York City last year—parents, children, adults—in conjunction with schools in areas like writing skills, interviewing skills, goal setting and time management. We gave \$5,000 worth of books to an elementary school. WOS is interested in assisting local communities, particularly where the corporations are resident with us. The money corporations invest in us is going back into the community—as payroll and taxes, tuition to universities, health care and, as I always state, my kids and veterans buy gifts for their families during the holidays, and we call that consumer spending.

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