

Service Provider Promising Practice

YEAR OF PUBLICATION:
2024

TOPIC:
Provider Best Practices
Working with Staff

How Udac Changed its Culture to Support Staff Recruitment and Retention Strategies

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BACKGROUND

Udac is a Minnesota based provider serving about 100 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) each year. During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency and at the height of the workforce shortage crisis, Udac made the decision to stop providing facility-based 14(c) special subminimum wage employment services and move toward community-based programs that support individuals to work in integrated settings and engage in their communities. As part of the transformation process, Udac reviewed their organizational culture, leadership, and mission, and implemented several strategies aimed at hiring and retaining high-quality employees and supporting them to acquire the necessary skills. While the transformation took place amid a nationwide workforce shortage in the human services field, Udac's leadership team knew that hiring and retaining the right employees was central to the transformation process.

IMPLEMENTATION

During their organizational transformation, Udac prioritized strategies that helped change the organizational culture and focused on recruiting and retaining high-quality employees. Here, we describe the strategies they used.

Creating a culture of continuous learning.

Udac began their transformation process by examining their organization's culture. Guided by a quote from Peter Drucker, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," the executive director of Udac explained that if the organization was

going to change, they needed to ensure it had a supportive culture:

"If you have a strategy that's visionary and a culture that's not supportive, you need to deal with culture. ... you must change your organization's fundamental way of thinking and its philosophy for sustainable change."

Udac intentionally examined their leadership, culture, and organizational structure.

One significant change was establishing a weekly all-staff meeting to support collaboration, training, and skills development. The outcomes of this were better communication practices, the creation of a cohesive team, and a transparent environment. The culture became one where employees can discuss what they are learning, share current activities, and collaborate to identify potential solutions to challenges. Udac offers staff meetings in person and virtually, and records the meetings, ensuring all employees can participate, even if they can't attend in person. Employees are supported to share examples of situations where they felt uncertain about what to do and brainstorm solutions as a team, with the leadership team leading by example and presenting their own challenges and seeking

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input. As the executive director explained, this practice *“gives people permission to say, ‘I don’t know how to handle this.’ So, we establish a transparent environment that allows people to take risks and grow their skills.”* Additionally, on a rotational basis, middle managers present case studies on topics related to community inclusion, which enables the organization to learn from real-life experiences.

Next, Udac implemented a plan to help new and current employees gain the necessary skills to provide high-quality services and supports for their clients.

Recruiting talent. Udac understood that providing quality services is dependent on having employees who can effectively support people with IDD to fully integrate into their communities. The executive director noted,

“We recognize that we cannot have a quality program without talented, quality employees who really understand how to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities become part of their community, instead of just going and doing activities. In the words of a NEON conference I attended, ‘supported loitering’ is not community inclusion and not what we are committed to doing.”

Udac also needed employees who could work with people with IDD *“not just to get a job, but to develop a career with the employer and really be able to move into that organization fully and as a full member of their community.”*

To support this outcome, Udac modified its human resource practices to focus on recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining employees who were “committed to getting people involved in their community, becoming part of organizations, [and] representing themselves through self-advocacy.”

As the executive director shared, the organization has moved away from “simply hiring to hire.” Instead, they “set out to deliberately look for talent and retain that talent.” This strategic hiring initiative has enabled Udac to recruit qualified and talented

professionals who are committed and able to serve the needs of the individual and advance the mission. These qualified employees want to work long term and grow with the organization, which minimizes the costs associated with staff turnover.

Supporting opportunities for professional development. The changes in Udac’s hiring processes have been coupled with opportunities for growth and advancement within the organization. Udac intentionally provided career progression opportunities for employees. The executive director explained, *“When we demonstrate to them how they can progress through the organization ... with increased accountability and responsibility, they’re excited about that.”* In addition, employees are instrumental in the development of various initiatives, such as business internships and community participation projects, aimed at promoting employment, career development, and meaningful community engagement for people with IDD. The opportunity for employee growth was in part an outcome of the organization’s improved skills development program.

Udac introduced a structured employee skills development program aimed at providing opportunities for direct support professionals in entry level positions. This program allows employees to build skills relevant to the field, including in customized employment, benefits counseling, person-centered planning, professional certifications, and more. The executive director explained, *“We built a progressive skills development job description ladder for employees. There’s not a lot of opportunity, if you’re a direct support professional to advance ... we stepped back from that and said, ‘there is skill development and career advancement that can happen.’”* This program enables employees to progress from an entry-level associate position to instructor, who mentors and trains colleagues, and ultimately to a practitioner case manager, responsible for coordinating a full caseload of individuals. The skills development job

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description program emphasizes a culture of continuous learning and skills development for employees that is rewarding. Their advanced skills provide better support for people with IDD, turning jobs into careers and community activities into community inclusion.

Paying competitive wages. Udac found hiring and retaining talented employees to be a significant challenge as “everybody is scrambling for employees right now” and the “salaries for this complex work are dismal.” To ensure their wages were a little more competitive, Udac actively pursued grant opportunities and engaged in philanthropic efforts to supplement the state funding rates. “We do a lot of grant writing and a lot of philanthropy to make sure that our wages are competitive in the community,” noted the executive director. However, Udac was quick to note that relying on grants and philanthropy to fund organizations and pay salaries is not a sustainable model and has advocated in their state to increase their funding rates so that providers can attract and retain talented and qualified employees. Udac also made changes to their organizational budget to prioritize their employees. The leadership shared,

“We have streamlined and prioritized the expenses of the organization and transferred this savings into our employees’ salaries, which is a successful strategy, because without them, we don’t have a quality organization.”

IMPACT

Udac’s focus on improving employee recruitment, hiring talent, and employee retention was directly related to their organizational transformation process. Udac used various strategies to implement this transformation, including developing purposeful hiring practices; hiring for skill and motivation; implementing skills development programs; establishing career progression tracks; fostering a culture of collaboration, transparency, and communication; and paying employees competitive wages. Udac succeeded in creating an environment that encourages reflection, learning, and growth. Providing employees with a conducive environment to develop skills and to grow in their careers has in turn enabled them to better support individuals to engage with their communities, advocate for themselves, and develop their careers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REPLICATION

Prioritize organizational culture. Recognize that a supportive culture is critical to implementing any strategy successfully. Udac fostered a culture where employees felt safe to admit uncertainties and seek help, promoting continuous learning and growth. In addition, leadership modeled the desired cultural changes.

Improve communication practices. Udac was able to alter their culture and mission more successfully through using direct and clear communication practices with their employees. Udac created a forum for employees to discuss what they are learning, talk about current activities, and find solutions to ongoing challenges. Udac supported professional relationships that emphasize continuous learning and growth.

Invest in practices that improve recruitment. For Udac, this included hiring the employees who are a good match in both skills and passion, aiming to minimize turnover and the associated costs of staff training.

Invest in practices that improve retention.

By providing skills training, paths for career advancement, and paying competitive wages, Udac was able to maintain healthy staffing levels during a nationwide shortage. Greater employee retention reduced operational overhead and allowed further investment in employees.

Recognize that a supportive culture is critical to implementing any strategy successfully.

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Promising Practices is an initiative of the Access to Integrated Employment Project, funded in part by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration on Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services. Access to Integrated Employment is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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