UC Berkeley
UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Employer Perspectives on the Role of Soft Skills in Subsidized Employment Relationships

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1c46k6zz

Journal

Families in Society, 95(3)

ISSN

1044-3894

Authors

Carnochan, Sarah
Taylor, Sarah
Pascual, Gina
et al.

Publication Date

2014-07-01

DOI

10.1606/1044-3894.2014.95.24

Peer reviewed

Employer Perspectives on the Role of Soft Skills in Subsidized Employment Relationships

Sarah Carnochan, Sarah Taylor, Gina Pascual, & Michael J. Austin

The dual objective of subsidized employment programs is to support employers and low-income job seekers. However, few studies of these programs have examined employer perspectives or reflected critically on the role of soft skills in relationships between employers and subsidized employees. This qualitative study examined employer perspectives on soft skills, drawing on the concept of fit from the person-in-environment perspective, as framed by personnel psychology, to interpret the findings. Employers emphasized the importance of motivation, self-presentation, and interpersonal skills. They described the effect of these characteristics and behaviors on workplace interactions, as they sought employees whose similarity offered a supplementary fit. The findings suggest recommendations for improving subsidized employment programs, as well as implications for social work education and research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- In subsidized employment programs, better communication and emotional self-regulation can be enhanced by creating pathways to treatment for mental health issues such as PTSD or depression.

- Employers should critically reflect on and address their negative assumptions about employee soft skills.

In 2009, as unemployment rates climbed, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Emergency Fund (TANF-EF) program was established as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). TANF-EF provided states and counties with funding for subsidized employment programs serving TANF recipients and low-income parents (Pavetti, Schott, & Lower-Basch, 2011). The rationale for the program was twofold: (a) to promote employment for welfare recipients and recently laid-off working parents and (b) to help struggling employers meet hiring demands (Pavetti et al., 2011). In response, subsidized employment (SE) programs were implemented in a majority of the states, in which generally positive experiences resulted in the placement of over 280,000 individuals (Farrell, Elkin, Broadus, & Bloom, 2011). Although Congress allowed the TANF-EF program to expire in September 2010, many states and counties continue to fund and operate SE programs, based in part on evaluation research that found evidence of positive impacts on the employability of participants (Bloom, 2010).

Literature Review

Positive results, as they relate to participant employability, have been limited to models with "strong links to regular employment" (Bloom, 2010, p. 15). Yet despite the findings that programs with a close link to employers in the regular labor market have stronger outcomes than programs placing individuals in sheltered or transitional employment settings (Bloom, 2010), the experiences of employers in SE programs have received very limited attention. The few studies of employer perspectives report on the employee soft skills preferred by employers, including appearance, communication, and dependability (e.g., Farrell et al., 2011; Roder & Elliott, 2013; Sperber & Bloom, 2002). While soft-skill definitions vary, most definitions emphasize inter- and intrapersonal abilities and exclude technical skills. For example, Moss and Tilly (2001) defined soft skills as "skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge" (p. 44), while Heckman and Kautz (2012) referred to "personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences" (p. 451). Soft skills are an important issue for SE programs because the majority of jobs available to the low-skilled workers who participate in these programs require soft skills (Holzer, Stoll, & Wissoker, 2004; Pryor & Schaffer, 1999), and public and private employers consistently rank soft skills among the most desirable employee traits across entry-level jobs (Cappelli, 1996; Murnane & Levy, 1997; Pryor & Schaffer, 1999).

A survey of employers and supervisors in SE programs found generally positive perceptions of SE employees, with 80% stating that they would provide a positive recommendation for the subsidized employee; however, attendance issues and increased supervisory needs were also reported (Sperber & Bloom, 2002). More recently, despite reporting largely positive experiences, employers participating in SE programs funded by TANF-EF noted that participants needed further training related to basic skills, dress, attendance, and attitude (Farrell et al., 2011). In a study of nonprofit organizations that provided job placements to welfare recipients, 80% of the agency directors described negative experiences with employees and identified similar issues with skills, motivation, and attendance (Kissane, 2010). Survey results

Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services
©2014 Alliance for Children and Families
ISSN: Print 1044-3894; Electronic 1945-1350

2014, 95(3), 187–194
DOI: 10.1606/1044-3894.2014.95.24

187

from a recent evaluation of ARRA-funded SE programs yielded mixed findings with regard to the experience, education level, and job performance of SE employees, but suggested a need for coaching on communication skills (Roder & Elliott, 2013).

The importance of soft skills to employers corresponds with the evidence from the broader economic literature that highlights the following characteristics and capabilities: (a) character, sense of responsibility, attendance, dedication to work, and discipline in work habits (Cappelli, 1992); (b) work habits, motivation, demeanor, and attitude (Handel, 2003); and (c) critical thinking/problem solving, creativity/innovation, lifelong learning/self-direction, and professionalism/work ethic (Casner-Lotto & Benner, 2006). A smaller body of studies features contrasting employer views of soft skills among welfare recipients, with some finding positive perceptions regarding attitude, reliability, work ethic, and friendliness in comparison to other workers (Regenstein, Meyer, & Hicks, 1998), and others reporting employer concerns with absenteeism, attitudes toward work, and relations with coworkers (Holzer et al., 2004).

Studies like the above on SE programs have identified an array of soft skills sought by employers. But by relying primarily on survey designs, these studies have not explored in any depth the employer–employee relationship issues that arise in work settings as a result of soft-skill strengths and limitations. In addition, most of the employer-focused studies of SE programs lack a conceptual framework that would facilitate critical reflection on the perspectives expressed by employers. To address these gaps in the literature, this qualitative study examines employer perspectives on the role that soft skills play in the development of employer–employee relationships in the context of SE placements. The analysis draws upon the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, as framed in the field of personnel psychology, to illuminate the findings and inform implications for practice and research. The concept of fit is central to the PIE framework, defined in the current study's context as "the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well-matched" (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005, p. 281). Kristof-Brown et al. identified four domains of fit between employees and employment environments, including *person–job* (the relationship between individual employee characteristics and characteristics of the job or task), *person–organization* (the relationship between the individual and the entire organization), *person–group* (the relationship between the individual and the team or work group), and *person–supervisor* (the dyadic relationship between the individual and the supervisor).

Across these four domains of fit, the PIE framework further distinguishes the concepts of complementary fit, in which employee characteristics fill a gap in the employment environment (or vice versa), and supplementary fit, in which the employee and the environment are similar (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

This PIE framework accords well with the PIE perspective in social work practice, which emphasizes "knowledge and skills that improve the contextual goodness-of-fit, mutual transactions between, and adaptations of individuals and their environment" (Rogge & Cox, 2002, p. 49). PIE as defined in social work offers a broad, flexible practice framework that directs social workers to take into account "environmental factors impeding client adaptation and functioning" (Cleaveland, 2011; Rogge & Cox, 2002). Personnel psychology, in turn, identifies specific factors in the employment environment that may affect client adaptation and functioning, namely, relationships between individuals and various aspects of their employment environments (e.g., organization, job, group, and supervisor), and further elaborates on the concept of environmental fit by noting the distinction between complementary and supplementary fit.

Methods

This qualitative, exploratory study was conducted in partnership with an 11-member consortium of county welfare-to-work directors. The study design was based on an applied, partnered research approach guided by the research aims articulated by the consortium members. Approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Berkeley.

Study Sites and Sample

The SE programs under study were operated in four northern California counties from late 2009 through September 2010. The sites included one large urban county, one midsized suburban county, and two small suburban-rural counties. The county social service agencies provided lists of all employers who participated in their program, resulting in a total list of 370 employers. Random sampling with replacement was used to draw employer samples within each county, yielding a total sample size of 81 that included for-profit ($n = 32$), government ($n = 9$), and nonprofit ($n = 40$) organizations. Across these subgroups, there were 53 small (< 20 employees), 17 medium (20–99 employees), and 11 large (> 99 employees) employers. There was a high rate of sample replacement, yielding an average response rate of 50%. Reasons for replacement sampling include invalid contact information, employer nonresponse, and employer declining to participate.

Data Collection

Employers were invited by phone or email to participate in the study; the majority of respondents supervised one or more subsidized employee(s). Three master of social work (MSW) student research assistants conducted the 30- to 60-minute phone interviews, using a semistructured instrument. Interview topics included (a) employer description, (b) employer involvement in the SE program, (c) positive experiences, (d) negative experiences, (e) incentives to participate in SE program, (f) experiences with employees, (g) interactions with the county agency, and (h) suggestions for SE program improvement. The interview guide used open-ended questions to allow the employers to introduce issues and concerns. The interviewers took extensive notes, and interviews were recorded to provide a supplementary verbatim record.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Dedoose, a Web-based, qualitative analysis software platform. Throughout the data collection period, the project staff met frequently to discuss the themes summarized in analytic memos developed by the research assistants. Following the completion of data collection, the research team worked collaboratively to develop the coding manual based on the interview topics, analytic memos, and team discussions. An eclectic coding strategy was used that integrated first-round deductive codes derived primarily from the interview instrument (e.g., Positive Experiences) and second-round inductive codes identified through close reading of the data to develop a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). The inductive codes focused on employer views of their employee(s) and the relationship or match between employer and employee. The key codes included Employee Skills (209 excerpts/76 respondents); Employee Match (191 excerpts/73 respondents); Match Strategies (199 excerpts/70 respondents); and Employee Challenges (83 excerpts/42 respondents). First-round deductive coding was carried out by the graduate research assistants, with intercoder reliability established through multiple rounds of test coding based on a single interview (kappa = .70). Second-round coding related to the analysis reported here was conducted by the first author and a research assistant. Preliminary findings were discussed with research partners at the collaborating agencies in order to validate and interpret findings as well as develop practice implications.

Study Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. First, while the four study sites were diverse with respect to county size, demographics, and labor markets, they were not selected randomly, and thus any generalizations to other SE programs should be made with caution. Second, the high rate of replacement in the sample of interviewees may have created bias in the findings; however, the rate is adequate for a qualitative, exploratory study. Finally, these findings only describe the perspective of employers and do not provide employee views on their relationships with employers or employer soft skills.

Findings

The experiences of the employers reflected three interrelated themes: (a) employee soft skills, (b) employer–employee fit, and (c) employee training.

Employee Skills

The perceptions of employers about the skills of SE employees emphasized the importance of soft skills, including motivation, self-presentation, and interpersonal skills. When employers talked about desirable employee characteristics and employees with whom they experienced difficulty, soft skills were discussed much more frequently than hard skills (e.g., job-specific technical skills). For example, one employer explained that the employee "came in with zero skills, and I recall saying something along the lines of, 'All I need is for you to show up and I'll train you on the rest.'"

Motivation. The majority of employers valued those SE employees whom they perceived as highly motivated and ready to work. They used terms and phrases such as passion, drive, initiative, enthusiasm, desire to work hard, and willingness to take on any task. One employer noted the importance of the emotional foundation for learning and productivity exhibited by some SE employees, stating, "They came in with a real desire to learn and a willingness to work hard." Another employer similarly emphasized the emotional or motivational capacity of the SE employees:

> Mentally and emotionally, they were ready to get off of welfare. They had decided, "I want to be what I know inside that I can be." As much as these girls didn't believe in themselves, what they brought through that door with them was the wide-eyed, "I want to know if I can and I'm willing to try." And that's what we hired them as. We hired our girls solely on desire for change in their life.

A number of employers highlighted the relationship between employee motivation and organizational mission or the nature of the job. As one employer explained, "Everyone has to be engaged in the mission first, and then understand the workings of the entire organization.…[We] trained her in all the different areas, she wanted to learn more." Another employer

described trying to "feed the employees' passions" in order to help them succeed.

Some employers spoke about the inspiration that they and other employees drew from the motivation and progress demonstrated by successful SE employees. As one employer explained, "I really liked working with them because it's new blood in our system. They are so eager to work, to learn." Another highlighted the rewards of witnessing an employee's progress: "It was exciting to have someone come in, and for us to know a little bit about that this person is trying to better themselves made it fun to teach her social skills and the things she needed to hone her work experience." In these examples, employers highlighted their view that a high level of motivation is important not only to strengthen performance but also to contribute to positive relationships with supervisors and other coworkers.

Employers reporting positive experiences frequently spoke about priority setting, emphasizing the value of reliability: "[She was] very reliable, never missed a day, always present, had the perspective that she was not going to blow this chance." Employers who did not have a positive experience were much more likely to report that their SE employees did not appear motivated and similarly emphasized priority setting as a common theme. Some employers were critical of SE employees who prioritized things that the employer regarded as insignificant: "They were interested in their social lives more than working. They didn't get it with work, didn't understand that you have to delineate between your personal life priorities and work. Your personal life priorities are secondary to what someone else wants from you at work." One employer expressed the view that employees should prioritize work over other significant issues, including family needs or life crises: "I find when people are not used to working, they will say things like, 'I have to take my mother to the bank today.' When people go into these programs, their priorities need to shift a little. Employment is major, if you have a crisis you need to put it to the side." Another employer attributed an SE employee's prior unemployment to his failure to prioritize work: "His priorities were not with working; a couple of times when we were counting on him, he decided he needed to do something else. He was probably out of work because work was not one of his top priorities."

Self-presentation. The self-presentation skills emphasized by employers included dress, language, and workplace behaviors, sometimes referred to generally as professionalism. Employers emphasized the presentation of self most notably when employees played a role in representing the organization to customers or others outside the organization. Dress was viewed as reflecting on the SE employee's desire to succeed in the job and shaped first impressions: "I went through

about six people and I knew immediately. I was looking for a certain type of person. Those two girls came in dressed for success." In other instances, dress operated as a negative screening criterion, contributing to an employer's opinion about a prospective employee's readiness for work: "I remember there was another person we interviewed; this woman was so far away from being ready to sit through an interview. She showed up late, unprofessional, and not properly dressed. I was thinking she should have been screened out."

Dress also mattered on the job, after the initial hiring interview. One employer described the efforts they made to help an employee understand expectations for dress in the workplace, emphasizing the view that dress reflects a conscious decision by an individual: "We really had to go through quite a bit in terms of our dress code because that's a soft skill, that's also a decision…but we worked that out." This employer interpreted dress choices as reflecting on the employee's judgment with respect to job expectations that were codified in a dress code.

Language was also seen by some employers as an important soft skill. For one employer, style of language raised uncomfortable questions about personal attitudes toward race:

> They were not particularly driven, but extremely pleasant, very bright, they had decent vocabularies, they weren't speaking street language. They did speak street language, I heard them, but in the workplace they didn't. That was an enormous difference! They knew when to be professional; I thought about it, I asked myself: Is this a racist statement to ask them to stop speaking street language? I didn't say anything to them in the long run; I did not know how to handle that with them.

In these two examples, employers describe contrasting experiences discussing soft skills with employees. One employer described being able to work out issues related to dress code requirements, while the second reported not knowing how to handle or talk about the style of speech used in the workplace and wondered whether the act of raising the issue would be seen as racist.

Interpersonal skills. Some employers spoke about the personalities and interpersonal skills of SE employees, as well as the ability to successfully regulate their emotions in the hiring process and on the job. For example, one employer described positive experiences with multiple employees based on their personalities: "Of the people that we chose, all four had great personalities and were outgoing.…We received feedback from managers in the departments about their great work ethic and ability to get work done.…Everyone was really happy with the work accomplished." In a similar

comment, another employer highlighted an employee's energy and personality: "She was high energy and very nice…a lot of initiative and an engaging personality." It was common to hear employers speak of motivation and personality as related attributes, raising the questions whether mood or affect influence an employer's perception of an employee's level of motivation. While personality was seen as important, it was not always enough to outweigh poor job performance:

> The person in the office manager position was actually quite friendly, and we liked her personally, she was a "happy spirit" in the office. It seemed like she was doing alright in her job (asked a lot of questions, interested in her work and doing it correctly), but she ended up not passing fingerprinting either. Later, after she was fired, it took a lot of time to fix the mess that she made in the office, so it turned out she wasn't very good at her job requirements.

Communication skills were viewed as a central aspect of an employee's interactions with customers and coworkers: "He already had a good sense of how to deal with customers. He was very personable, his communication skills were good." An SE employee's ability to ask questions emerged as a particularly important component of communication in the workplace. Difficulties emerged where these skills were not in place: "He didn't like asking questions if he didn't know how to do something, and he would end up doing something wrong." One employer described the efforts s/he made to assist the employee in developing communication skills, particularly related to instructions and asking for help:

> There were some communication issues—not listening to instructions. He didn't understand what was being asked of him, so he wouldn't follow through. He would cover things up because he didn't understand a lot of the work. I worked with him on how to communicate, what to do when things are running behind, how to do things, how to ask for help.

The capacity to regulate emotions in the workplace was highlighted by several employers as a factor in workplace relationships. One employer noted the stresses experienced by an employee who was a single parent, and how these contributed to difficult interpersonal interactions: "She was presentable in many ways; she just had a volatile personality…she had flare-ups of frustration—wouldn't work from our point of view in the long run because she was volatile." In contrast, another employer describing an employee viewed as

"exemplary" noted that she was "professional, responsible, reliable, even keel, easy to get along with."

Employer–Employee Fit

Many employers described the development of a match or fit in the relationship between the employee and the employer that was needed for the SE placement to be successful. In some instances, the employee–employer match developed quickly during the interview phase, whereas in other cases, the match developed gradually over the course of the placement. Successful matches involved an interplay among employee characteristics, employer investment, and clear expectations. The matches that developed quickly were attributed by employers primarily to employee characteristics, while employer factors and employee characteristics were both viewed as contributing to successful matches that developed over the course of the SE placement. When describing immediate or early matches, many employers referred to the personality traits of employees that engendered a positive emotional connection. For example, one employer reported, "I interviewed her here, and I really liked her.…She had a great personality and blended well with the rest of the people here." In this situation, soft skills played an important role in the hiring process, facilitating a positive initial relationship between employer and employee that led to her being hired.

Employers reported that successful matches that developed over a longer period of time reflected the positive personality characteristics and professional workplace behaviors of the SE employees. In contrast, significantly less emphasis was placed on employees' level of hard skills. Personality traits and behaviors that employers viewed as negative were key factors in unsuccessful matches between employers and employees, whom employers described as "not employment ready" and unmotivated. However, even where SE employees experienced multiple challenges in the workplace, achieving a match was sometimes possible when the employer and SE employee were committed to developing a successful employment experience. One employer explained, "There were loads of challenges, but there was a high degree of commitment from the team to succeed in the program. There are a lot of folks who are very talented, very smart, and just need an opportunity."

The expectations of employers and employees were important contributors to a positive match. Employers who reported investing in efforts to convey clear expectations to employees regarding soft skills tended to report more positive experiences even where there were initial problems. For example, "I spoke with the employees regarding our expectations for the workplace before the program started. We did have some hiccups.…There was some soft skill development to be

had…but they learned." Several employers who agreed to participate in the SE program with the expectation that some SE employees might experience limited employment skills reported more successful placements, as illustrated by this employer:

> I was making sure they were comfortable with what they had to [do], helping them to adapt to coming to work every day. I acknowledged that this was an adjustment for the employees. I knew some hadn't been in the workforce for a long period of time or had only had one job.

Employee Training

When asked about strategies for improving SE programs, many employers stated that subsidized employees would have benefited from county-provided training in soft skills. One employer emphasized clarifying expectations about reliability, communication, and priority setting:

> I don't know what the county already provides. I would suggest: give basic information about what the employee is expected to do, how important it is to be on time, show up when you're supposed to, the need to communicate when you're not able to, make the employment opportunity a real high priority.

As this employer noted, while employees may have circumstances requiring them to miss work, communication skills play an important role in minimizing the impact on the employer. Other employers focused on managing family demands when making suggestions for training, with one employer recommending role-playing as a technique: "If I were the training agency, I would sit down with them and go through an employee handbook, role-play with them, ask them 'What would you do if your kids got sick?' They should prepare them. They had no experience. The training doesn't have to be a big deal." Another employer recommended helping employees address family needs: "If they could get resources for families, such as parenting classes, resources to help with stress and anxiety."

The training offered by the employers varied and was often an important factor in achieving a match with the employee. One employer talked about acting as a teacher and a role model: "The employees that worked for us, they know that we're here to teach them…they're learning from us and see us going the extra mile…you're only as good as your teacher." Many employers provided on-the-job training, while some wrote new training curricula, included SE employees in intensive training seminars, or sent them off-site for training. A number of employers commented on the "investment" they made in the SE employees and their dedication to supporting their professional development, while one described the demands for time and patience that SE employee training placed on the employer:

> Most of them, they have to be with an employer that has time to train them, because they come very untrained. You have to have a lot of patience to put them through. If you can't do that you're going to get frustrated. You have to understand they come from a different background with no experience.

Discussion

To summarize, employers spoke positively about those participants whom they perceived as highly motivated, with an emphasis on priority setting and reliability. Employee motivation was seen as related to the quality of workplace relationships as well as to job performance and skill development. For example, employers noted the fun and excitement associated with assisting motivated SE employees. Employee self-presentation, specifically style of dress and language, was an important factor in the hiring process and on the job and was viewed by employers as an indicator of motivation and judgment. Employers found it challenging to work with employees whom they felt did not present themselves appropriately in the employment setting. While some employers reported being able to communicate with their employees about expectations for workplace dress or language, others found that they were unable or unwilling to do so. Interpersonal skills, including a cheerful demeanor, effective communication skills, and emotional self-regulation, were important factors in hiring decisions and in ongoing employment relationships. Personality was described as a key factor in workplace relationships, enabling SE employees to blend in with supervisors and coworkers. Soft skills contributed significantly to the development of a positive match between employer and employee, both in the hiring process and on the job.

From a PIE perspective, the employers in this study were primarily concerned with the fit between the SE employee and supervisors and work groups, as they emphasized compatibility in these interpersonal relationships. They expressed somewhat less concern about the relationship between the employee and the overall organization, although this may have been related to the limited duration of many of the SE placements. Person–job fit was also seen as less important, as employers tended to minimize hard skills specific to job tasks. The type of fit most often sought by employers was focused on the soft skills of employees that were supplementary in nature rather than complementary. Employers valued and were more comfortable with SE employees who were similar to other individuals

in the organization, believing they could blend in and get along with others and more easily understand the organization's mission. Very few employers viewed SE employees as bringing complementary soft or hard skills or characteristics to fill a gap in the organization.

Implications for Practice, Research, and Social Work Education

The desire among employers to hire employees who offer a supplementary soft skill fit based on their similarity to other individuals in the organization raises multiple concerns for the future of SE programs. Employers may make incorrect negative assumptions about the soft skills of welfare recipients and other low-wage workers participating in SE programs. In situations where SE employees differ from employers with respect to race, ethnicity, or culture, there is an increased likelihood of incorrect assumptions about the potential for soft skill fit (Moss & Tilly, 2001; Zamudio & Lichter, 2008).

On the other hand, although motivation, reliability, cheerfulness, and emotional self-regulation are typically viewed as soft skills, they may actually be more difficult for some SE employees to develop than job-specific hard skills. SE program participants are often welfare recipients who have a history of poverty along with disproportionately high rates of mental illness, stress, and trauma (Danziger, Kalil, & Anderson, 2000; Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs, & Wiley, 2011; Sweeney, 2000). When managing the multiple life stressors and competing demands associated with trauma and poverty, prioritizing work over commitments to individuals in a family or social network becomes extremely difficult. Symptoms of depression in the form of feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and poor concentration may inhibit the cheerful, confident demeanor preferred by many employers, thereby compounding the challenges faced by SE employees (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2008).

Given these multiple challenges, social service agencies need to devote substantially more attention to soft-skill training and support in SE programs that focuses on employer–employee relationships. In the most effective models, soft-skill training is embedded into all aspects of the curriculum that should simulate current workplace environment and job expectations (Houghton & Proscio, 2001). The findings of this study suggest the need for additional strategies for strengthening SE programs that focus on assessing and providing treatment for mental health issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder or depression in order to strengthen effective communication and emotional self-regulation. It is also essential to provide supports to address family demands, including child care, to facilitate reliable workplace attendance.

The study findings highlight the valuable role that employers can play in SE programs, especially developing high-quality job placements tailored to motivate and inspire employees. This study further identified four processes that facilitated successful workplace relationships: (a) identifying the particular soft skills required based on workplace and job characteristics, (b) clarifying soft-skill expectations with SE employees initially and throughout the placement experience, (c) establishing employer–employee communication processes related to job performance and competing family demands, and (d) working with employers to identify and address negative assumptions in order to promote stronger workplace relationships. The employment services staff working in public sector SE programs can promote more successful job placements by working with employers on these processes before and during the placement.

The importance that employers assign to relationships in hiring and employment retention calls for a commensurate level of attention from social work educators. According to the Council on Social Work Education (2008), social workers should be knowledgeable about "human behavior across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and wellbeing." Schools of social work and in-service training programs would be strengthened by an increased focus on employment settings and relationships as a critical social system. Relevant curriculum might focus on assessment for specific employment settings and methods for facilitating employer–employee relationships, including communication and conflict resolution strategies.

This study points to three directions for future research. First, in order to balance the employer perspectives highlighted in this study, studies should explore the perspectives of SE employees. In order to design effective and appropriate programs, it is essential to understand the experiences and perspectives of service users with regard to soft skills and soft-skill training. Research is needed to increase our understanding of the role of life experiences such as trauma and competing family obligations in the development and performance of soft skills. Second, it is important to consider the role of cultural assumptions and values in work settings, to help identify optimal matches that build on employee strengths. The parallel soft skills and relational behaviors of employers also merit investigation, as study findings point to the centrality of the employer–employee relationship in SE programs. Third, the relationship between soft skills and long-term employment outcomes needs to be assessed, including job retention and wage impacts, in order to

ensure that SE programs with soft-skill components result in stable, high-quality jobs for SE employees.

References

Bloom, D. (2010). *Transitional jobs: Background, program models, and evaluation evidence.* New York, NY: MDRC.

Cappelli, P. (1992). *Is the "skills gap" really about attitudes?* EQW Working Papers. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce.

Cappelli, P. (1996). Technology and skill requirements: Implications for establishment wage structures. *New England Economic Review*, May/June, 139–154.

Casner-Lotto, J., & Benner, M. W. (2006). *Are they really ready to work? Employers' perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st Century U.S. workforce.* New York, NY: The Conference Board/Partnership for 21st Century Skills/Corporate Voices for Working Families/Society for Human Resource Management.

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. (2008). *Managing depressive symptoms in substance abuse clients during early recovery.* Appendix D—DSM-IV-TR Mood Disorders. In *Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 48.* Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK64063/

Cleaveland, C. (2011). Borders, police, and jobs: Viewing Latino immigration through a social spatial lens. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 92*(2), 139–145. doi:10.1606/1044–3894.4095

Council on Social Work Education. (2008). *Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards.* Retrieved from http://www.cswe.org/NR/rdonlyres/2A81732E-1776–4175-AC42-5974E96BE66/0/2008EducationalPolicyandAccreditationStandards.pdf

Danziger, S. K., Kalil, A., & Anderson, N. J. (2000). Human capital, physical health, and mental health of welfare recipients: Co-occurrence and correlates. *Journal of Social Issues, 56*(4), 635–654.

Farrell, M., Elkin, S., Broadus, J., & Bloom, D. (2011). *Subsidizing employment opportunities for low-income families: A review of state employment programs created through the TANF Emergency Fund.* OPRE Report 2011-38. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Handel, M. J. (2003). Skills mismatch in the labor market. *Annual Review of Sociology, 29*, 135–165.

Heckman, J. J., & Kautz, T. (2012). Hard evidence on soft skills. *Labour Economics, 19*, 451–464.

Holzer, H. J., Stoll, M. A., & Wissoker, D. (2004). Job performance and retention among welfare recipients. *Social Service Review, 78*(3), 343–369.

Houghton, T., & Proscio, T. (2001). *Hard work on soft skills: Creating a "culture of work" in workforce development.* Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

Kissane, R. J. (2010). Administrative challenges facing nonprofit worksites providing work or work-like experiences for welfare recipients. *Sociological Perspectives, 53*(3), 373–396.

Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology, 58*, 281–342.

Moss, P. I., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Stories employers tell: Race, skill, and hiring in America.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Murnane, R., & Levy, F. (1997). The new basics. *American School Board Journal, 184*(4), 26–29.

Pavetti, L., Schott, L., & Lower-Basch, E. (2011). *Creating subsidized employment opportunities for low-income parents: The legacy of the TANF Emergency Fund.* Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy/Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Pryor, F. L., & Schaffer, D. L. (1999). *Who's not working and why: Employment, cognitive skills, wages, and the changing U.S. labor market.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Regenstein, M., Meyer, J. A., & Hicks, J. D. (1998). Job prospects for welfare recipients: Employers speak out (*New Federalism: Issues and Opportunities for States*, No. A-25). Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/publications/308016.html

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2013). *Stimulating opportunity: An evaluation of ARRA-funded subsidized employment programs.* New York, NY: Economic Mobility Corporation.

Rogge, M. E., & Cox, M. E. (2002). The person-in-environment perspective in social work journals. *Journal of Social Service Research, 28*(2), 47–68.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Schmidt, L. A., Zabkiewicz, D., Henderson, S., Jacobs, L., & Wiley, J. (2011). On the declining health status of welfare caseloads: Emerging dilemmas for serving the poor. *Social Work in Public Health, 26*(2), 189–211.

Sperber, L., & Bloom, D. (2002). *An analysis of Vermont's Community Service Employment Program.* New York, NY: MDRC.

Sweeney, E. P. (2000). *Recent studies indicate that many parents who are current or former welfare recipients have disabilities or other medical conditions.* Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Zamudio, M. M., & Lichter, M. I. (2008). Bad attitudes and good soldiers: Soft skills as a code for tractability in the hiring of immigrant Latina/os over native Blacks in the hotel industry. *Social Problems, 55*(4), 573–589.

Sarah Carnochan, PhD, MSW, JD, research director; **Sarah Taylor,** PhD, MSW, assistant professor (California State University, East Bay) and consultant; **Gina Pascual,** MSW, graduate student researcher; and **Michael J. Austin,** PhD, professor of management and planning, Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services. Correspondence: scarnochan@berkeley.edu; Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services, School of Social Welfare, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720.