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Job Service North Dakota

Situation
Job Service North Dakota (JSND) is a state agency that offers workforce development services for the people of North Dakota. Its mission is to provide "customer-focused services to meet the current and emerging workforce needs of the state." To fulfill this mission, it delivers four primary services: matching employers with workers, enforcing state and federal unemployment insurance regulations, funding workforce training and providing labor market information.

Critical Issue
To receive federal job training programs funding, JSND is required by the U.S. Department of Labor to comply with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). A key new component of the WIA is accountability, which includes requirements for customer satisfaction. State employment agencies such as JSND must now continually evaluate their customers' level of satisfaction with their services and make changes to meet customer needs.

Solution
To identify and respond to changing customer needs, JSND developed and conducted an initial customer satisfaction survey. Coincidentally, at approximately the same time, the U.S. Department of Labor introduced a model for collecting satisfaction data via a telephone survey following the Malcolm Baldrige criteria. JSND was able to base its survey on the Department of Labor model and meet new requirements for evaluating compliance levels and effectiveness of services.

Initial Data Collection
For the initial survey, JSND developed three questionnaires: one for internal customers, another for applicants and a third for employers. External customers were asked whether they are likely to return to the agency and if they would recommend JSND services to others. Employers' responses enabled JSND to identify changes needed in its service delivery system (e.g., what different methods or strategies do employers use to find employees).

"We're using data to improve our services and ensure the public is getting what it pays for."

-- Nelse Grundvig, analyst, JSND

JSND evaluated a number of different options for collecting data, including outside vendors. Although some states use private telemarketing firms to gather data, JSND decided to gather its own data. "Working with an external firm requires initial planning time. We evaluated data entry software packages that could be used in-house, which we hoped would speed the process," said Nelse Grundvig, analyst, JSND.

JSND needed a user-friendly tool because staff members conducting the survey would not be intimately familiar with the software application. SPSS Data Entry met the ease-of-use requirement. One reason is that SPSS Data Entry enables JSND to create scripted surveys which interviewers can see right on the computer.

"All the interviewer has to is select a dropdown box with the appropriate response, so there's less likely to be an input error," explains Grundvig. "Plus it's impossible for the interviewer to accidentally create extra fields and create problems for the database as can happen with other programs. The data is accurately reported at the time the person is responding to the question on the phone."

Additionally, data collected using SPSS Data Entry is immediately saved to an SPSS data file, making it instantly ready for analysis without the need for a separate data export step.

"After looking at a variety of programs, we found that SPSS Data Entry met all of our criteria," reports Grundvig.

Preliminary Findings

- High overall level of satisfaction reported among training program attendees: 8.3 on a ten-point scale
- Identified lack of awareness about products and services among employers

JSND initially surveyed a representative sampling of both existing and potential customers. It used SPSS software to help evaluate customer satisfaction and determine which program changes would improve customer satisfaction. Grundvig charted responses to highlight trends and patterns, for example, among specific customer groups. Both applicants and employers were asked questions about the effectiveness of programs and services. These preliminary findings were then reported to senior management, who determined where to channel resources to improve efforts.

JSND found that attendees of the job training program were very satisfied. The average overall satisfaction level was 8.3 on a ten-point scale (ten="very satisfied"). In addition, almost 66 percent of the applicants reported satisfaction with the job training process, and more than 75 percent agreed they received a satisfactory amount of individual attention. Also, more than 50 percent of the responding employers reported being satisfied with JSND's job training programs.

"You often get mixed reactions when you mention government programs, but we're finding that these people believe we're offering a very good service that is very helpful to them both in the short and long term," explains Grundvig.

However, JSND also found that employers often have unrealistic expectations of JSND services. "We need to do a better job of informing employers of what we can do," says Grundvig. "Results of the survey showed that some employers had unrealistic and incorrect expectations of the services we provide."

As a result of the survey, the agency is in the process of creating programs to educate employers on how to access and use its services. JSND also built awareness among employees by developing a video explaining each service, including applicant services, business services, workforce programs, employment statistics, tax and benefits and administrative services. The video was shown to all current employees and became a part of the new employee orientation process.

JSND's approach to improving its services represents a paradigm shift in how program change is implemented by a government agency, as Grundvig explains: "One of the complaints about government is that it's not responsive to the needs of the people who use its services. We're using data to improve our services and ensure the public is getting what it pays for."

Grundvig believes this represents a fundamental change in the way government does business. "Change is now being driven by what the customer wants," observes Grundvig. "Traditionally, government services have only had to quantify how many people have received services and how many dollars are spent on those services. They haven't been held accountable for meeting customer needs.

"Today we are being asked to continually measure customer expectations and levels of satisfaction over time and use this information to improve our products and services. For the first time, we are asking the public how we've done—whether we've made a difference in their lives or have helped businesses to remain profitable by providing the services they need."

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