



Supporting Clients During Times of Economic Hardship

Doing Job Development in an Economic Recession

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), a recession is “a significant decline in economic activity spread across the country, lasting more than a few months.” Recessions come and go. The 2020 recession ended a 128-month economic expansion, the longest in U.S. history.¹ Lean economic times, which bring increased competition for fewer job openings, can be particularly challenging for clients and the employment staff helping to facilitate the job search process. How can you continue to uncover meaningful career opportunities for clients and even strengthen your employer connections when the economy is struggling? This guide offers practical suggestions and program examples you can reference as you and your clients triumph through tough times.



“The overall economy is not poised for a quick snapback to pre-pandemic levels. [...] When the economy does get back to full health, many jobs will no longer exist, and American workers will need to find other types of work.”

– The New York Times²

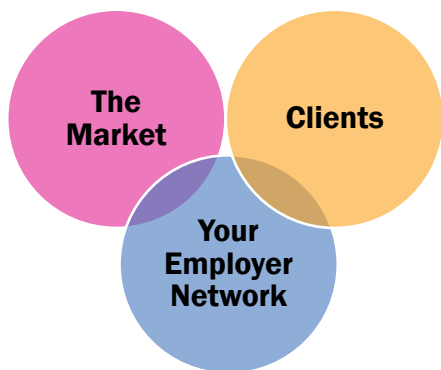
¹ Amadeo, K. (2021). [How COVID-19 Has Affected the U.S. Economy: Impact of the Worst Recession Since the Great Depression](#). The Balance.

² Irwin, N. (2020). [The Pandemic Depression Is Over. The Pandemic Recession Has Just Begun](#). The New York Times.

Responding to Economic Recessions as a Job Developer

During an economic recession, there are fewer available job openings and more candidates (some of whom have been laid off) looking for work. According to data released by the Department of Labor, in March 2021 there were 9.7 million unemployed people in the US, which is 4.0 million higher than pre-pandemic levels in February 2020.³

Recessions are challenging times for clients and job developers, but you can implement strategies to help clients weather a current recession or prepare for a future one. Getting ahead as a job developer when economic times are tough requires creative strategies and focusing on three aspects: the market, your employer network, and clients.



Know the Market

Identify Growth Industries

While it may feel like no one is hiring, some fields may even experience growth during a recession. Industries that have grown during the COVID-19 pandemic downturn include: health care; transportation, warehouse and delivery services; grocery stores and pharmacies; information technology (IT) support; and other professional services jobs.⁴

Labor market information (LMI) can be a useful research tool to identify growth industries. High unemployment rates should prompt job developers to look at industries with the most openings and greatest potential for career growth. The Occupational Information Network (O*NET)'s [Bright Outlook Occupations](#) shows fields experiencing rapid growth—those with an anticipated employment increase of 10%

or more over a 10-year period or those projected to have 100,000 or more job openings over the next several years.

Identify who is Hiring

“When COVID-19 hit us in March 2020, most of our clients who worked in the food and service industries were impacted immediately. We worked with the clients in [accessing] both alternative employment options and public benefits at the same time. Thankfully, in northwest Arkansas, we have poultry processing facilities, and maintain good working relationships with them. We reached out to these entities to secure employment for those willing clients whose jobs were impacted. As an essential critical infrastructure, they were able to hire without much delay.” - **Khalid Ahmadzai, Director of Economic Advancement, CANOPY**

Look Locally

It's also wise to research which local industries are likely to have layoffs so you can be proactive in reaching out to clients in those fields. Risky fields during recessions may include construction, vacation travel, printing services, and motor vehicle sales.⁵ But each community is unique: check current trends in your area and consider firsthand feedback from employers, clients, and other local partners.

Not sure where to start? Review Higher's [A Guide to Labor Market Information for Refugee Employment Programs](#), which offers an overview of more than 30 LMI data points and practical examples for applying LMI to refugee employment services. [Workforce GPS LMI Central](#) also provides useful information on analyzing LMI. Another option is to contact your [state labor market information department](#) with specific questions on local conditions.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021). [The Employment Situation - News Release](#).

⁴ CareerOneStop Employment Recovery. (n.d.) [Who's Hiring?](#) Retrieved March 26, 2021.

⁵ Autenrieth, N. (n.d.) [Gaming the System: 6 Recession-Proof Jobs \(and 5 Jobs That Put You at Risk\)](#) TopResume. Retrieved January 28, 2021.

Strengthen your Employer Network

Focus on the Hidden Job Market

While researching growing industries may provide some new leads, keep in mind that a very high percentage of jobs (some say up to 80%) are in the “hidden” job market – in other words, available jobs that have not yet been posted publicly. These openings are often due to changes in life circumstances, such as employees who retire, move on, or are fired. Job opportunities like these are available even during economic recessions.⁶ In times when job applicants are in greater supply, employers may be less likely to invest their resources in advertising positions.⁷

Identifying jobs in the hidden job market is an effective strategy because there is less competition for positions before they are made public. The best way to find these jobs is to stay in touch with current contacts and to expand your network of new contacts—the more employers and professional contacts you talk to, the higher your chance of uncovering hidden jobs.

Connect with Employers

When COVID-19 impacted Chicago’s economic landscape, Heartland Alliance scheduled phone calls with employers to find out how safety protocols and job roles have changed. These updated employer needs will be incorporated into their job readiness training, so clients are better equipped for current job conditions.

“Keeping people engaged in training has been really important. We’ve leveraged expertise with vocational training to provide industry-specific training for refugees. We have taken the approach of trying to listen to employers to find out what their needs are right now. Even if we can’t meet those needs immediately, we have this buffer time to focus on upskilling or training to meet their needs eventually.” - **Katy Fohrman, Program Manager of Refugee Employment Services**

Stay in Touch

Reach out to current employers to show support and get a sense of how they are doing, both personally and professionally. Ask how their business needs have changed and what they anticipate for the future.

Ask for referrals. If employers trust that you have their best interests at heart, they will likely be glad to connect you with other employers who might be interested in working with you. The employer typically facilitates the connection with an email or phone introduction so there’s no cold call involved.

Leverage technology. Social media can be a good way to communicate with employers during a recession.⁸ Consider making more frequent LinkedIn or Facebook posts to stay at the forefront of employers’ minds and offer alternative methods of contact.

Offer additional resources. As competition increases for job openings and some companies look toward layoffs, it makes sense to see if there are challenges you can creatively think through with employers. For example, would interpretation services or translated documents ease any challenges they are experiencing?

Be creative. You may feel uncomfortable reaching out to an employer frequently if you’re simply asking about new job leads, but here are some resourceful ideas:

- **Employer appreciation:** St. Vincent Catholic Charities Refugee Services gives employers a refillable candy jar with their agency’s logo as a “thank you” after employers hire their clients. Staff then drop off candy refills every month or two, and employers often offer up news of job openings without being asked.
- **Networking events:** Jewish Family Service Seattle hosts an annual [CLEVER networking event](#) to match refugees and immigrants with local professionals. They adopted a virtual format in 2020 due to COVID-19, providing sessions on specific industry panels as well as networking skills like LinkedIn, professional communication, and stress management.
- **Volunteer opportunities:** Invite employers to get involved in your job readiness program. Mock interviews, resume workshops, or guest speakers can offer practical experiences for clients and keep employers engaged.

⁶ Anderson, A. (n.d.) [Job Development During a Recession](#). DTG-EMP. Retrieved February 23, 2021.

⁷ Hering, B. B. (n.d.) [How to Find Employment During a Recession](#). LiveCareer. Retrieved January 27, 2021.

⁸ WorkforceGPS. (2020). [Tips for Engaging Business During Economic Recovery](#).

Grow Your Network

Discovering new potential employers and tapping into the hidden job market requires networking – and a lot of it! Make a list of people in your personal network; your organization’s network of volunteers, partners, and board members; and clients’ networks. Then, call or email to let them know you’re researching potential job opportunities and career pathways for clients. One businesses strategy during a recession is to forge new alliances to weather the economic conditions, so it may be the perfect time to talk with potential new employers about teaming up.⁹ Here are some more creative ideas for making new connections:

- Look for public speaking opportunities
- Find or host an industry-specific professional group meeting
- Offer a training or class, such as cultural awareness training for employers
- Join a gym or take a class related to a hobby
- Host a speaker that will appeal to employers
- Browse Facebook and LinkedIn to find potential new connections
- Look for a volunteer who can offer a free professional headshot photo session for employers

First Impressions Count

Once you’ve identified potential new connections, consider your approach in these unique circumstances. During a recession, employers who are not currently hiring will be more hesitant to meet if they think you are simply looking for current job openings. Prioritize getting to know them and their company above pushing information about your agency or qualified candidates. It’s even more important to ask questions that help you identify an employer’s key motivations and needs—for example, “What are the most important characteristics you look for in job candidates?” Emphasize that you’re not just looking for current openings but want to learn as much about the company as possible, so that you can keep an eye out for good candidates in the future.

Provide new employer connections no more than two points of contact within your agency. Even if additional support from a case manager or interpreter is required, ensure that communication is streamlined to keep contact and follow-up simple for the employer.

⁹ Strauss, S. (2019). [Worried about a recession? Here’s 5 ways small businesses can weather a downturn](#). USA Today.

Ideas for Expanding Your Network

During the 2010-2011 recession, expanding to new industries was key to job development at St. Vincent Catholic Charities Refugee Services. The agency went from partnering with only a handful of employers to gaining more than 100 employer contacts over a brief period. One way was through referrals from one employer to another: “It was a matter of trying to build up our industries. We couldn’t just rely on the employers we already knew. When employers saw how easy [working with our agency] was, we started getting referrals [to other employers].” - **Denise Sullivan, Job Development Coordinator**

At Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan, cultural diversity trainings have been critical in expanding their network of employer partners: “Employers have loved these classes and word got around in our community, which led to more opportunities to present. A large health group in the area brought in our training staff to conduct a cultural diversity course for their staff so they could be better equipped to serve the refugee and immigrant population.” - **Gabrielle Nye, Job Developer**

Focus on Clients

Consider Non-traditional Options

The challenges of a recession may prompt you and clients to explore options outside of full-time, permanent placements. Gaining even short-term or temporary work experience can boost clients’ confidence and add to their U.S. work experience, making them more competitive for future opportunities.

- **Gig Work:** Does your client have skills for remote work, or access to a car for shorter-term gig work? Consider [TaskRabbit.com](#), [Guru.com](#), or food delivery services. Inform clients of associated risks and requirements

(for instance, additional car insurance) and support them in making their own decisions.

- **Microenterprise options:** For clients with entrepreneurial aspirations, perhaps this is a good time to investigate microenterprise options. Learn whether there is an [ORR-funded Microenterprise Development](#) program in your area; if not, research [other local programs](#) serving aspiring entrepreneurs.
- **Apprenticeship programs:** Several industries offer registered apprenticeship programs, where candidates can get a paid job from day one while working toward a nationally recognized credential. Check the [Apprenticeship Job Finder](#) for open positions in your area. If educational and language prerequisites prove challenging, you may want to also explore [pre-apprenticeship programs](#).
- **Pre-apprenticeship programs:** Jobs for the Future's guide, [Getting Started with Pre-Apprenticeship: Partnerships](#), gives an overview of how to create a pre-apprenticeship program through partnerships with employers, colleges, unions, community-based organizations, intermediaries, and state and local governments. Read more about benefits of pre-apprenticeships under [Explore Pre-Apprenticeship](#) on [Apprenticeship.gov](#).
- **Job Creation:** Job creation or "job carving" involves knowing clients' skills and employers' needs well enough to propose a job opportunity that may not yet exist. One example is adding a greeter position at a gym or retail store.¹⁰ See [When Existing Jobs Don't Fit: A Guide to Job Creation](#) and [Job Carving: A Guide for Job Developers and Employment Specialists](#). [SourceAmerica](#) offers more ideas.

Let Clients Shine

Leaner times call for renewed focus on helping clients present themselves in the best possible light.

Pay close attention to the application process. When a client needs to submit a resume, ensure it is flawless and customized to the industry and position of interest. Work with your colleagues to reassess your client's interview preparation, ensuring that clients make

positive first impressions. Encourage personal touches like thank you cards after meeting with employers.

Incorporate employer feedback into your job readiness training. Employers may make adjustments to cope with a recession, like shifts in responsibilities, safety protocols, or overall business strategy. Ask current employers for input on how to adapt job readiness training to best suit the changing landscape.

Encourage flexibility. Remind established and newly hired clients to be flexible. In an economic downturn, they may be asked to take on responsibilities outside of their typical job description. Flexibility in tough times can go a long way in avoiding potential layoffs.

Providing Online Training Options

"St. Vincent Catholic Charities Refugee Services recently recorded job readiness and beginner ESL videos with interpreter voiceovers. After clients watch the videos, interpreters and staff follow up by phone to check understanding. This resource has encouraged clients to continue learning job readiness and ESL skills during the pandemic. The readily accessible videos also ensure clients can access trainings in a timely manner moving forward, if classes fill up as arrivals increase." - **Denise Sullivan, Job Development Coordinator**

Adapting Apprenticeship Programs for a Changing Economy

The Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare (BACH) apprenticeship program saw a higher attendance rate at virtual information sessions. This allowed BACH to distribute clear messages to candidates about the program and how to apply. This led to more applicants and a smoother recruitment process as everyone understood the recruitment process in advance. "Applicants were more informed due to the online platform necessitated by COVID-19, which led to stronger candidates." **Kiera McCarthy -Apprenticeship Program Manager**

¹⁰ Condon, C., Enein-Donovan, L., Gilmore, M., & Jordan, M. (2004). [When Existing Jobs Don't Fit: A Guide to Job Creation](#). *Institute for Community Inclusion, The Institute Brief*, 17.

Explore Career Stepping Stones

Recessions may be good times to help clients with [credential evaluation](#) or vocational training. Check [CareerOneStop.org](#) or your local [American Job Center](#) for more. The Department of Labor's [SkillsCommons](#) is a library of free learning and program resources for job-driven workforce development.

You can also consider offering in-house vocational training informed by employer needs and anticipated growth industries. In addition to helping clients learn new skills, training is a valuable incentive for employer partnerships. See Switchboard's toolkit [Launching and Strengthening Career Pathways Programs](#) for more.

Volunteers and Interns

The strategies in this guide are intended to supplement your current employment programs without exceeding your bandwidth. Explore maximizing your team's capacity through volunteers and interns. While staff should be the primary contacts for employer partners, volunteers and interns can help with a variety of tasks, including: researching labor market information to identify local trends; writing thank you notes for employers; assisting with job readiness training, and researching non-traditional work options in your area.

Conclusion

Job development during a recession should focus on the market, on your employer network, and on clients. It also requires keeping a positive attitude and overcoming negativity about limited job options or more qualified candidates. Demonstrate confidence in clients' work readiness and in your own abilities to seek out quality opportunities.¹¹ These efforts will promote stronger employer ties, creative networking strategies, and expanded options for clients' career pathways that will far outlast economic ebbs and flows.

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Additional Resources

Labor Market Information

[The Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker](#) aggregates private and public data from multiple sources.

[The Employment and Training Administration \(ETA\)'s Guide to State and Local Workforce Data](#) links to state and local employment and economic data.

[The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(BLS\)'s Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) is an essential source of career data.

Employer Resources

[Layoff Aversion Tool](#), created by the ETA, contains questions for businesses to brainstorm possible effects and solutions for layoff-related challenges.

[Brené Brown](#) offers a host of resources that can be helpful in creating cultural awareness trainings.

Non-traditional Employment Options

[Strategies for a Down Economy: Part Time or Short Term Work](#) is a RefugeeWorks blog post from Caritas of Austin that shares some examples and benefits of part-time and short-term work options.

[Apprenticeship Business Engagement Tools](#), hosted by WorkforceGPS, can help improve your ability to work with employers to expand the use of apprenticeships.

COVID-19 Recovery Resources

[Supporting the Apprenticeship Ecosystem in an Economic Downturn](#) discusses supporting apprentices and employers during the pandemic.

[Chmura's COVID-19 Economic Vulnerability Index](#) measures the pandemic's negative economic impact.

[EMSI's Three Steps to Support Economic Recovery: A Guide for Economic and Workforce Development Organizations](#) examines how communities can move forward, support local businesses, and spur recovery.

[Virtual and Remote Learning and Service Resources](#) hosted by WorkforceGPS include tip sheets on job search topics like virtual job fairs and virtual interviews.

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¹¹ Anderson, A. (n.d.) [Job Development During a Recession](#). DTG-EMP. Retrieved February 23, 2021.