**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**Universal Design: A Customer Centered Approach**

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JONATHAN VEHLOW: So without further ado, I'd like to turn things over to our moderator today, David Jones, workforce analyst with the U.S. Department of Labor, ETA. David?

DAVID JONES: Thank you, John. Hello, everyone. Thanks for joining today's webinar. My name is David Jones and I serve as a workforce analyst within ETA. Today I will be joined with Virginia Hamilton, Region 6 administrator and ETA leading subject-matter expert on customer-centered design.

Virginia and I will be joined by leaders from coast to coast. From the state of Washington, we have Dawn Karber, who serves as COO for Spokane Workforce Council; and Kevin Williams, who serves as One-Stop operator in Spokane. From the state of Massachusetts, we have Stacey Thompson, who serves as workshop facilitator for the Career Center of Lowell, Massachusetts.

We have three key objectives today. First, understand the meaning of universal design and the linkage to customer-centered design. Both Virginia and I will give a macro and micro overview for this portion in today's agenda.

Second, demonstrate how universal design has been applied in the AJC to benefit customers. For our agenda, our panel will share their experience in which they identified a challenge, the steps they took to resolve, and the impact to the customer.

Finally, we hope you can leave today's call recognizing the importance of design thinking to ensure a more seamless experience for our partners.

So let's get started. What do we mean by universal design? Universal design is simply a strategy for making our services welcoming and usable to the most diverse range of people possible. Its key principles are simplicity, flexibility, ease of access, and efficiency. It's a lens in which all aspects of interaction can be viewed. It can be applied in many areas, such as our products, services, physical environments, communications, technology, policies, and practice.

Universal design thinking is a proactive approach that anticipates the barriers our customers might face. In universal design, we think bold and big to develop services that are accessible to the largest number of people. We may find this could reduce the need for ongoing specialized assistance, individualized accommodation, and delays while accommodations are put in place.

WIOA outlines several provisions to ensure meaningful access to all customers. One way this is accomplished is establishing that all AJCs must be physically and programmatically accessible. So let's take a brief moment to revisit these two important terms.

From my experience, most people are familiar with physical accessibility, which simply refers to the extent to which facilities are designed, constructed, or altered, so they are accessible by individuals with disabilities.

The one not as well-known is programmatic accessibility. And this refers to the extent to which the full range of services are available to all customers, regardless of disability or cultural background.

For our target population of people with disabilities, I would like to inform you that DOL released in January a report titled, "Evaluating the Accessibility of American Job Centers for People with Disabilities." The report measured the accessibility of AJCs through the prism of physical, programmatic, and communication lens. The link for this report is listed within the resource page at the end of this presentation, for your continued reference.

We will do a deeper dive on accessibility requirements and this report in a webinar scheduled for next month titled "American Job Center Certifications."

The important thing to remember is that universal design is not targeted to one group, such as people with disabilities, as so many may often believe. Instead, as you will soon hear from our panel today, universal design is designing your facility and services for the average user, with a broad range of abilities, reading levels, learning styles, and culture.

Back in August 2015, the interagency partners outlined some examples of universal design principles in the joint guide entitled "Vision for the One-Stop System under WIOA." The examples listed were the following: flexibility in space usage; pictorial, written, and tactile modes to present information for those with limited English proficiency; providing clear lines of sight to information for seated or standing users; providing necessary accommodations; and providing adequate space for the use of assistive devices or personal assistants.

Lastly, at the end of the day, universal design will ensure a welcoming environment for all our customers. We believe one way this philosophy can be instilled at the local level is through ongoing cross-training and planning with our partners, to further enhance the principles of universal design.

This can occur in two key areas. First, having a shared understanding of the needs of specific populations across programs. This is very inclusive to meet the broadest spectrum of abilities, regardless of life status. Second, having a share understanding of the need of employers to provide both the quantity and quality of candidate they need for our workforce.

In jointly knowing our customers, our universal design thinking had the most important guiding framework in moving forward to strengthen the capacity, expertise, and efficiency in how we do business.

I will now transition over to Virginia Hamilton, who will share several customer-focused strategies to help make universal design a success. Virginia?/

VIRGINIA HAMILTON: Thank you, Dave. Good afternoon, everybody. It's great to be here again and talking about my obsession, which is customer-centered designed – or the way they talk about it in the real world – human-centered design.

Before I get started, I actually want to read you a couple sentences from a customer who has been trying to get unemployment insurance and into a training program, just to give you a flavor for what we're talking about here.

She writes, "Though life seemed like a mess," because she had just been laid off, "I took solace in the fact there were systems in place for this exact reason. I'd been given pamphlets on unemployment. I read the information on the Internet and I was feeling very hopeful about taking next steps. I honestly was not expecting the uphill battle that lay ahead."

By the way, this – I'm not going to read the whole letter; it's about five pages long. What she said was she had a very, very difficult time finding information, getting through on the phone, reading all the things on the Internet. "And in fact, the most helpful information I found was not from the actual government website, but from spending many hours and days searching through information on the Internet, reading other people's firsthand accounts of how to navigate through such a confusing system, based on people's mistakes."

And then she went on to say, "It shouldn't be this difficult or as much of a maze to get answers to the resources you need." She said, "I could easily write up a page of directions for someone that's interested in obtaining training while receiving unemployment benefits. Now there's several pamphlets and automated recordings that always tell you to refer to another pamphlet if you have more questions. And people are vague and don't really give you the information that you need."

This is just one customer who has not had a good experience with the public workforce system; in this case, unemployment insurance and getting into some training. But the idea with customer-centered design is that you actually pay attention to what a customer says, like this young woman, and then try to do something about it.

So I'm just going to go through the steps super quickly about what customer-centered design looks like and give you a couple of examples. And then I'll turn it over to our panelists.

So when you're doing customer-centered design, you start with research. This letter, for example, is a great example of some research that we were doing to really better understand what was going on with UI and with our employment centers. You want to get inspired by the people you're serving. I have a lot of inspiration now, just having read that letter.

Once you have done the research and really – we'll talk in a minute about – a little bit more about how to do that – you want to synthesize what you've heard. You want to take some of those points and create insights and sometimes surprising patterns that emerge from really listening to your customers in a deep way.

You then spend a lot of time just brainstorming and ideating, coming up with millions of ideas. There's lots of data to suggest that innovative processes happen when you have lots of ideas, not because one person has the best idea. And then you spend time prototyping and testing, prototyping and testing, prototyping and testing, to get it right.

Using customer-centered design, you always start with people. You start with what they need, what they want, and what they – the kinds of services that they expect from you. And then after that you figure out, is something that we're coming up with feasible or viable to do in our office?

We also use the "how might we" question. It's a question that I love; I now use it all the time in the rest of my life. And it's a powerful question because "how" assumes that solutions exist. It's not "can we/should we/will we;" it's how might we look at something different. "Might," that word, reduces risk and commitment. You're not saying "how can we," "how will we," "how should we;" it's just "how might we." Let's think of all the possibilities.

And "we" implies that we're going to do something together. When you are using design thinking, you really want to do it with a team of people – a diverse team of people – so that, as Dave said, you're really capturing the ideas of everybody. This is not just for people with disabilities or just for millennials; it's for everyone and you want everyone in the room participating in your design process.

So I'm going to give you a couple examples of the research phase. One is observation. And I think this is particularly important for people with disabilities. This first story illustrates it perfectly.

The design firm IDEO was actually designing a new set of pill bottles. And they went into a – they were talking to a number of people who were using pills and asked an 85-year-old woman with arthritis what her experience was with pill bottles. And she said it's fine; no problem. And they thought that was a little odd and asked if they could follow her around.

And just by observing her, they saw that when she came back from the pharmacy, she would take her pill bottles into the kitchen, she had a meat slicer set up in her kitchen – deli slicer – she would slice the top off of the pill bottles and put her pills into a baby food jar. That's a great example of a workaround.

Many people with disabilities have developed workarounds because the physical space or objects actually don't work for them. But it's also true for services as well. So really observing and not just taking someone's word for it is super important.

The second is to engage and really talk to people, really listen to their stories. Ask people, like we did with this young woman who wrote the letter, to tell us their story. Tell us what happened with their experience, so that we really understand it in a deep way.

And then last, really immerse yourself in the environment. We had – we've been running training – many – actually, I see some of you in the chat room have been participating in our training, our customer-centered design training. And sponsored by the Department of Labor, we've trained over 1,000 people around the country in how to do customer-centered design. And many of them really said they'd never spent any time actually just sitting in the front of their office watching what happens to people when they come in.

What's the work flow? As Dave said, we need a welcoming environment. How welcoming are we really? How long do we make people wait? How many times do we tell people to come back? And what are people saying? Just immersing yourself in the environment in a deep way can add tremendous insight into the work that you're going to do when you are starting to really think about how to design for customers.

This last picture here is a man who put a video camera up to his head in a hospital and videotaped his entire experience. The hospital was trying to make their experience more welcoming, have the patients who were coming in navigate better and feel better. And in fact, when you look at the videotape that he had taken, most of the time the videotape showed crappy ceiling tiles because so many patients come in on a gurney or in a wheelchair. And so the idea is that you really want to immerse yourself in the environment and better understand what it's like for your customers.

Once you have done this work, you've built some empathy, you really feel like you better understand your customers, you're going to gain a lot of insights. You're going to gain a lot of ideas about how you could do things differently.

This is one of my favorite images. This is David who said that he didn't know how to write a résumé, so he was just copying his friend's. And even though I'm really obsessed with human-centered design, when I first saw this slide, my first thought was, oh, well, we just need to hook him up with our services because we teach résumé writing and he just needs to go to our – one of our workshops.

And the insight that we gained as we were going through this process of customer-centered or human-centered design is that in fact he didn't need to learn how to write a résumé; he just needed a résumé. Our own mental models of what we deliver to our customers tend to get in the way of thinking about what our customers really need.

We often – I had one woman say to me that she had been talking to an employer for several years – a set of employers for several years about our offerings, what we could – she could do for them, on-the-job training, internships, recruitment. And when she really sat down and talked to these people, but more importantly listened to them and gained empathy, what she realized was that she just kept going out and offering services and they weren't services that these employers needed. The employers needed help in retaining their employees and not recruiting them.

But we tend to do that. We have our system; we know what we can do. And we don't actually really pay attention to what our customers need. So this is gaining some insight.

My other favorite heart-breaking story is teams of non-profits in Tennessee who went into each other's – they were all non-profit leaders and they went into each other's non-profits. And at the end of the second day, one of the leaders came home and wept and she said what she had thought was that the customers using her services felt like they were really community partners and a wonderful asset in the community.

And she discovered from just sitting in lobbies and listening to people that many of their customers – in fact, most of them – saw their staff as gatekeepers of information and gatekeepers of services. The only feedback that they were getting was from the successful customers who they had helped. They weren't actually listening to the customers that weren't getting the kinds of help that they really needed.

So once you've done your research and you've gained your insights, then you start thinking about "how might we." How might we solve this problem? In the case of the woman in Tennessee, their sort of general question when they started this project was, how might we improve the customer experience in our non-profits? And they refined it after they had had this insight, which is how might we be seen as assets in our community and not gatekeepers of information?

So once you have some refined "how might we" questions, you just come up with idea, idea, idea. They can be dopey; they can be fun; they can be wild. In fact, the more, the better; the wilder, the better. Because sometimes out of those wild ideas comes something that actually might really work.

I love this one. We want to simplify our invoice process so Gloria can take a vacation. One of the things that I really love about the human-centered design process that we've been involved in in the last couple of years is that the people who go through this process also have fun. They've enjoyed the work and it's reconnected them back to the energy and love that they have for their customers.

After you have some ideas, then the next step is to prototype and test. This is something we don't often do in government. Often in government we come up with an idea, we put a white paper together, we send it through clearance, a million people see it for a year, and then we just issue a policy or we change a service or we design a new office.

But prototyping and testing allows us to fail early and often. And also, when it's rough we see potential or possibility. If you hand someone a finished product, we often see flaws. For example, just in the implementation of WIOA I've asked many people at the beginning of the process, so, have you talked to your partners yet? And their response was, no, we want to wait until we kind of have our own act together.

And what I always say, as a result of really learning this discipline is, no, no, no, start with your partners messy, early, often. Don't have your act together. Because if you hand someone a finished product, it's not theirs; it's yours. And they'll tend to want to criticize it, as opposed to feel like they're part of the process.

Dave was talking about really thinking about office redesign in order to accommodate all kinds of people with all kinds of needs. Doing that kind of prototyping is very easy to do, if you're thinking about physical space. Literally, go out in your lobby and put signs up in different places and try it out. Ask customers, can you see this? There are lots of ways to use the physical environment that allows you to just find out whether something works or not quickly before you've spent thousands of dollars putting up signs that don't really seem to be in the right place.

And prototyping can also be, as I said, fun. This is an example of a team that just by using little toy soldiers and toy cowboys and so on – they asked themselves, well, what does our system look like now? They realized that they had teams of soldiers and cowboys pointing guns at each other. And that if they really wanted to be one team and seen as one team, they needed to have a different image of how they were going to work together. So the physical act of prototyping also can create some insights into the work that you need to do.

And testing, as I said, can be as simple as drawing a sign on a piece of paper, putting it up on the wall, seeing if it's in the right place. This is someone designing an app. You don't start with having already gone to some technology folks and have the app done. You just try it out on paper and ask people whether it would work or not.

I would just say – and I'll hand this over to Spokane in a minute – that there are lots of positive outcomes to starting the work that you do by talking to and understanding what your customers need. Universal design, human-centered design, customer-centered design, it's really all about not you and what's convenient for you or, wow, this is going to be a lot of upheaval if we have to redesign this physical space. Or wow, we don't – our policies work pretty well; we should probably not change them too much. But really, to completely shift your mindset towards starting with your customer and then moving to what we showed at the beginning, the feasibility and possibility of making these changes.

The thing that's not on here which I really love about the work that we've been doing the last couple of years is that, to a person, the people who have been involved in learning and practicing customer-centered design have said that it reconnects them to their hearts. We all in the workforce development field are not in this field because of the high pay and glamorous working conditions. We came into this work because we wanted to help people. And re-centering your focus on your customer allows you to reconnect with your heart and with the love of doing that kind of work.

So with that, I'm going to turn this presentation over to my partners from Spokane.

DAWN KARBER: Thank you, Virginia. Hi, I'm Dawn Karber; I'm with the Spokane Area Workforce Development Council. And I'm joined by Kevin Williams; he's the One-Stop operator for our One-Stop Center. And we're really excited to be here with you today.

We got involved with customer-centered design because of Virginia, so I am honored to be on the call with her today. I heard her present two times with so much enthusiasm that by the second time I knew that there was something to this and we needed to spend some time figuring out how customer-centered design could impact our center.

A little bit of history about Spokane, in case you're not familiar. We are in eastern Washington. We have a population of about 470,000. We have a single One-Stop Comprehensive Center and 18 affiliated sites. And we did move into an integrated center – what was called an integrated center in 2007. And for us, what that meant is that all of what's now the WIOA required partners moved into the center and – actually, it's the four required programs – moved into the center and started working together but they still served customers in programs. And that's still what it looks like today.

And our board – the local workforce board – did not want that to continue. And so when we discovered human-centered design or customer-centered design, we knew that was a product that could – a tool that could help move us into a fully-integrated center. And we started exploring what that might look like.

The challenge that we started with was that we wanted to transform our One-Stop center into a world-class site; we wanted all teams to work based on function and not programs; and we wanted to eliminate duplication, increase the customer experience, and bolster staff expertise. So a huge challenge and one that we think that we're working towards through human-centered design. We're going to be able to accomplish all of our goals. We're shooting for September of this year at this point.

So I'm staffed to our local board. And one of my jobs is to collect feedback from the board and then, of course, implement their desires throughout the WorkSource system. And what we heard loud and clear from our board is they wanted an American Job Center – a One-Stop center – that was warm, welcoming, accessible to all customers. They wanted world-class talent development services. And they wanted world-class customer experience and customer service from all of our staff in the One-Stop center.

So in order to get us there, first we trained a small group of staff on human-centered design through the class that Virginia mentioned – the IDEO course. And then our second step was to hire a One-Stop operator who was a single person rather than a consortium.

So for those of you who work in the One-Stop system, you know that frequently One-Stop centers can be managed by a consortium. And we'd been managed that way for many, many years. And this year we decided to switch to a contract that was a single person, so a single One-Stop operator. And that really allows the board and the board staff to contact one person and talk about how the center's going to look and how it's going to be redesigned, rather than having to pull a team of individuals together to make decisions.

And we started this contract July 1st. Kevin started with us in the fall of 2016. And I can say already, now that we're six or seven months in, this is one of the best decisions that we've ever made. Second best was to complete the customer-centered design course. So both of those things happened in late 2016.

What's happened since then is that we started training all of our staff on customer-centered design. And Kevin has started working on figuring out, from customers and from staff, listening to them, what they really want and their ideas, as well as implementing those through prototypes. And he'll talk to you about that in just a minute.

So where we started is data collection. And we learned that through the customer-centered design challenge in the course. And we learned how to provide great interviews – customer interviews, one-on-one – as well as how to conduct electronic surveys that really gave us the most information possible. So we moved from a time of asking customers how they liked our service, to really digging in and hearing from them how they were experiencing our services and what could be better and any ideas that they had.

What we found when we started collecting data is fairly typical, I believe, across the country. So our One-Stop customers said to us that we had great staff – we have great staff. The One-Stop center was amazing if you gave it a chance. Although many people said they thought it was the unemployment office and that they didn't realize we offered employment services.

They did say they thought that the One-Stop center was only for low-income jobseekers, that it had a governmental feel, and that the services that we offered were confusing because we used terms that most people weren't familiar with. So we had core services and basic services and we talked about WIOA and – (inaudible) – and WorkFirst and national emergency grants. All of these things the customers were not able to relate to.

So what we were able to do from that point is listen to their feedback about how they interacted with our services and they told us a lot more. And what we did with that was started implementing prototypes, which Kevin's going to tell you about. We are working on two phases of a redesign; the physical redesign and a functional redesign. And for us, the functional redesign is moving away from programs into function-based teams.

And I'm going to turn it over to Kevin to tell you the rest of the story.

KEVIN WILLIAMS: Thank you, Dawn. So as Dawn was mentioning, we have two main parts that we wanted to mention together, and that was our physical redesign and actually our functional redesign, and ensure that they went hand-in-hand while we're going through this process.

So I'm going to be talking a little bit about how we did the ideation and also the prototyping for each of these.

The physical redesign started with coming up with ideas, as we did the observing and engaging and immersing ourselves with our customers and with our staff, and talking to them and asking kind of how might we create and provide world-class customer service here at our One-Stop center.

So through that, and taking the observations that we had, and then engaging that customer and actually sitting down with them and asking them through interviews and truly trying to find out how we might physically redesign it and talk about our functional redesign – how they go hand-in-hand, as I said – we came up with describing it through concepts ideas.

And so we created a concept matrix of how we might do that. And then from there, the staff went on and created, in smaller teams, concept posters, which of course created tons of stickies all over. So if you're planning on doing anything like this, I highly recommend you invest in lots and lots of sticky pads. And putting them all over and coming up with the ideas that we did.

And we shared those ideas from our concept posters of what we might look like, from updating our lobby and our resource room and more of an open concept design, and the hiring events; what that might look like, through the concept posters? And those are actually the things that became the first ideation of what we went on to come up, with a mock plan to give to our designer.

And so with taking that portion of it and handing it off to our customers and to our staff to take a look at it, by sharing it we got great feedback and we could go on to the next phase.

With the functional redesign, it went hand-in-hand as well. We took a look at how we flowed. And as Dawn was mentioning, right now everything is centered around programs instead of function. So we put the staff together initially and we talked about how could we do it so that we could think about functions and not talk about the programs, the specific ones that we were developing here – or had developed here.

And so by doing that, the staff was able to sit down and break it up and say, yeah, look, we're actually doing like functions. For instance, we have four or five teams who are doing the exact same function, but they just called it something different in each of the programs, and realizing that they were actually providing the customer the exact same service.

And so once they got to thinking about that, they realized that we could condense this down and make it so it's better for the customer, so the customer doesn't think of themselves as being a program participant, but actually just a participant in the WorkSource system in general. And so by meshing that with how our physical redesign was going, we could put it all together and reduce the duplicated activities that we had going on.

One of the big things that we also looked at when we did the functional and physical redesign is working with a disability advisory committee, and bringing them on with our workforce – the local workforce development council and services oversight committee. And bringing them into the conversation, they provided great insight and how – for the physical redesign and for the functional redesign, of how we could improve it to be better for them.

And then what we did was we just took that and we started prototyping. I'm going to show you a couple pictures here of before and after. As you can see, with the physical redesign, the before kind of has that look – I liken it to having those ropes that you see there, like you're going through the airport and TSA and you're going to be screened here at WorkSource before you ever through. And that's just not warm and welcoming.

So resoundingly from customers and staff, they said that they needed – or they really wanted to have something more warm and welcoming. So you can see on the right kind of the design feature that we have there. And so having a less large presence with just this massive desk that we have there – we put the desk a little smaller and actually created a welcome and a greeter function, as you see, with the white podium that's there.

So everyone who walks in our center now, as they could have circumvented the front desk if there was a line, and went to our resource room and possibly never spoke to a workforce professional, now they'll be addressed by our welcoming team and ask them what they're in our center for. If they're repeat customers, they'll follow up on how they're doing with progress – the plan that has been built with them.

So having this design so that we have that warm welcome and talk to them right off the bat when they walk in, has made a huge – and as we prototyped it, we – it was amazing to hear the customers say, wow, we can't believe that someone is just right here, right now, in our face and talking to us about what they can provide us here at the center.

Because part of it was also getting them a package to say, these are the different services; where can we get you started? While they were at this warm and welcoming greeting that they had. So they were blown away by it and there was zero negative feedback from that.

We did also learn through ideations of it is that we did need to think about when we had high times and low times of customers coming in, and working it out with our staff so that we could ensure that we greeted and talked to each customer that came in.

The second picture is for our resource centers. And most centers, just like ours, 75 percent of the total customer engagement happens in the resource room. And what was happening with ours is they would come to the front desk and then kind of be told to go to our resource room and register in our WorkSource website. And then they would be helped out by someone; if they raised their hand, someone would come over and ask them what they could do. But it was more of a self-service.

The after look, as you can see, is we've created more of a space that's a little bit more private by putting the dividers up. And also, with the functional redesign working with the physical redesign, the functional redesign is our staff actually comes out there and walks around and engages them and talks to them and sees how they can help them. So it's constantly engagement with the customers. So the customer's raising their hand when they might think that they have something that they want to talk to one of our specialists with.

And as you can see from the pictures, just a more inviting environment. And the fact that we have chairs of different heights and different ways that it looks. And that was also brought by the disability advisory committee of talking to us about that.

Also, with the noise-canceling, with the yellow partitions that you see there. We realized that for some folks, if they were doing certain work that they had a little bit of trouble concentrating, so those are actually noise-canceling partitions that were there. And we tried some of that out and the customers liked it, so we were able to move on.

So functional redesign part of it, moving on from the physical redesign. The big things with the functional redesign – and although, I will say this. This slide that you see right now, this is how we are in the current state. This one kind of looks like it's a good picture of how we are, but really it's a mirage because it's completely set up by programs and not by functions.

So when you look at this, you can see that – you can almost point out the agency or who was working these programs, and that's kind of how we siloed ourselves. So we said, we don't want to fit our customers actually into the programs that we have now; we want to take the time and listen to what their needs are. It'll help them to be part of their own employment solutions by telling them about the functions that we provide.

And so we'd like – we're moving towards this future state, as you see right here. Simplified a little bit. The funding, as you see on the bottom right, they're taking the funding sources and putting them out to all of these different functions and coming up with these key functions.

And once again, as we went through the prototyping, this is – the staff were the ones who came up with the fact that we had these seven functions sitting here. And these are the ones that we're prototyping currently and working on so that we can move towards it. So when a customer comes in, they aren't identified by the program that they are; they're simply identified as a WorkSource customer who needs a service in one of these functional redesigned areas.

And so the tools that we used, we had a lot of questions from the staff with saying, hey, so we use Lean and we also use customer-centered design, and then there's integrated service delivery. How do we put it all together? So I think this slide is one that really sums it up very well. You can take the Lean tools that you have and do the mapping and the root cause analysis; you can do customer-centered design with the observations, the prototyping; and then also integrated service with the functional team ideas and doing the expanded service menu that we have, and put all that together.

As you can see by the dark blue, that's really the customer-centered focus. Using each three of those integrated, we can come up with a better system for human-centered design using all three of the ideas that are there.

And that's all I have for right now. And we will pass off to Stacey in Massachusetts.

STACEY THOMPSON: Well, hello, everyone. I hope you're having a great afternoon. My name is Stacey Thompson and I am a workshop facilitator at the career center of Lowell, which is an American Job Center.

I was part of the Greater Lowell Workforce Development Board team, which was a 14-member team. And I will talk about that in a moment.

Just a little bit about Lowell. So we are on the northeast side of Massachusetts, currently under 16 inches of snow. But we're also, as a fun fact, the first place where the phone numbers in the country were used. So I guess innovation is in the water here.

So as I said, we're a 14-member team. And for most people that in itself would prove very difficult, and there were challenges that did come with that.

However, the challenge that we partook in was, how do we collaborate effectively to make things easier or better for our shared customers? And I really enjoyed this challenge for a couple of reasons. And this actual image is really important to us as we moved forward.

Now, the reason for that is a couple of things. I think it's really important to think of beyond the numbers and the statistics that we're used to dealing with, we have to always remember that is a customer. It is a person. And so if you look at this image, the customer is the biggest image. Why? Because it is the fundamental, the most important image throughout the presentation. And throughout customer-centered design you have to keep that as the focus.

And the other thing that I really enjoy about this particular image is that one of our clients, when we told them what we were trying to do, actually spoke to us about the fact that they really enjoyed the process of what we're going through and they wanted to participate. And so that's why we were able to get this wonderful image.

So we had our challenge in mind. So in order to really tackle it, we had to dig to the root of what were the issues, what were the challenges that were impacting our shared customers? And so we did it in steps.

And the first step for us was to identify who the customers were. So we had to figure out not only who are they, but what are the things that are important to them? Because once again, it's very important to take a step back. Often we get caught in the business of doing business and we forget that each person has their own story and has the things that are quite important to them. So we had to first identify who the customers were.

And then after that, step two was to talk to the customers in their environment, which for us was actually really powerful. So we visited – similar to what Tennessee had done, as Virginia had mentioned, we went to our locations of our different people in the community, our community partners. And it was really powerful because not only were we able to see how they functioned, but we were able to see how our customers transitioned from one to another. So that was a really great experience.

So the thing that we also enjoyed – and we found this by going out to our customers in their environment – is that there was a familiarity that they had. And so in that freedom, they were actually more honest. And sometimes, the dialogue that you would hear, I will say, it hurt a little bit. But quite honestly, that's what we needed. If the honesty is going to get us to move forward, it's going to be the catalyst for change, then it was a necessary ouch.

So our step three was to ensure that any action that we're taking was actually – is actually being done to meet the customers' needs. So after we had gone through the point of finding out what the issues were, we had to kind of think about how we did business at the career center. And the first thing that we had to do is think of how we have our streams of customers.

So we have two different streams of customers here, one that is an unemployment insurance customer who is seeking either employment and/or training assistance; and then we have our non-UI customers who are seeking basically the same thing.

Now, our UI customers – our clientele – is a very steady stream of people that come into the career center. We have exemplary work with them and we have good rapport and it was about an 80 percent return rate for those customers, which was a really good, high rate.

However, with our non-UI customer group, when we actually looked at them, when we did our own self-examination, we realized the standards that we had for ourselves, that it just didn't meet up and it didn't match up. And so that's when we realized we really needed to invest some work, because at the beginning of this challenge it was about around a 39 percent return rate. So for us, that was just not good enough. It did greatly improve throughout the process.

So we did a lot of interviews. And I think it's really important to do these interviews because you really get to talk to the customers. Virginia had mentioned the fact that it's very easy to kind of just do business and then forget that you kind of need to take a step back. And so for us, we took a step back by interviewing both the customers and then we spoke to people in the industry who have done a lot of work. It was definitely fun and it was interesting; it was a very telling experience.

So this image is a memorable quote. So one of the things that I was able to do was talk to some of the people that had come in through our seminar and to gain – kind of gain perspective of their experience. So one question that I asked was, if you were to describe your experience coming into the career center by using colors, what would you describe it as?

And so initially I heard, it was a positive feeling, so I would say purple. To be quite honest, I was excited by that. However, the person was not done and then concluded by saying, however, I would choose blue because that's how I left feeling. So that was a stinging moment, but it was very important for us to hear that that was how customers were feeling. So we knew that we needed to make some changes.

We also spoke to experts. And for us, our experts were people who really interact with our customers, as well as some people on the more policy side. So our internal customers – I'm sorry, internal experts, overall I would say said, you really have to make sure that you have a friendly face and you're accommodating and cheerful. Because people are coming into the career center because they need help, so you always want to make sure that they feel as if you are engaged with them and that they matter to you.

And then on the external side, the external experts, I think this was a really important turning point for us because what we were told was, don't think about the performance measures. Don't be tied down to the regs. Take a step back, assess the situation, find out where the issues are, and then we'll integrate that later. So to know that they were kind of tied into what was going on was really, really exciting. We knew that we had partnership in that as well.

So initial conclusions – and we did have a lot of great things happen on both ends of the spectrum, some things that we tried and it didn't work out very well. But our initial conclusions were this. We knew that we needed to make the customers feel more welcomed in our state. We had to make sure that the seminar made them feel welcome and really addressed the areas that they needed to have addressed. So we knew that we needed to redesign, and that in itself was a task; it was definitely a job.

And then on top of that, we needed to make sure that each customer knew what their clear next step was, because that was one of the things that people felt – especially for our non-UI. As I said, we focused on them. What was the next step? How could they go through this process? What was their triage? And so we made sure that they understood that they had one offered to them.

So as you see in these images, our first image was very much of a clinical feel, not very warm, definitely not inviting; it's sterile, if you will. And then our next picture, we went through the process of painting; it made it so much more friendly. We decluttered, if you notice. We actually just recently got new signage, which is bright and inviting. And so all those things add, all those little updates. And it doesn't have to cost a lot of money. It does have to have you really think about your customers first.

As far as our seminar, we had – before our prototype, it was very long. Extraordinarily long. Unnecessarily long. And it covered areas that really weren't important to this particular group of customers. So we made sure to eliminate unnecessary information, make it more concise. And then, once again, make sure at the end of that they did know what the next stage or steps would be for them and how they would get to that.

So what were the lessons that we learned? And I have to say, there were a great many lessons throughout this process. I think the first thing is to know your customers. So you can't start prototyping, you can't start doing any of these processes without taking a step back, understanding what their needs are, their goals, their barriers. Make sure any of the changes that you make are not just to make you feel good or make it appear good, but to actually really meet the need of the customer.

The second thing is, don't be afraid to fail. You have to realize – when we first started to do our seminar over again, we used a process that just didn't work for us. So we did initially fail by what all appearances would say. But at the end of the day, all that does is eliminate something that just doesn't work. And if you look at it that way and change your mind, which is number three, then it actually makes the process a little bit easier. So if you have to change your mindset first in order for other people to buy in – to buy into the process.

The next thing, number four, is to be patient with yourself, the process. Nothing happens overnight. So you're going to have to have time, put effort into it. And then after all those things kind of come together, things will start to work out for themselves.

And then number five, laugh often; laugh at yourself, laugh at the things that you didn't know. But you have to kind of make sure that this process is not like pulling teeth. A lot of people don't like change. They're afraid of change. So if you don't make it fun, if you're not willing to laugh at yourself, then it's going to be a painful process.

So what are we up to now in Lowell, because there's a lot going on? We did actually change the seminar so much that it was looked at by the state as a model. And so they're still tweaking things, but that was a very exciting thing for us.

We're also in the midst of doing a mobile seminar, which is actually bringing the seminar to the community instead of just having them come here. Which builds a rapport with the customers and with the community so people know who the career center is, where we are, and all of those pieces.

And then the aesthetic things, changing different things about the career center. As I said, we just got new signs, which is really exciting. And then we were looking into our budget for other things that we really want to do. Because for us, this isn't a one-time thing; this is now a process in how we function as a career center.

I have to say that it's really important for anybody who's thinking about doing this process to have it come from the leadership down. We're fortunate at the career center of Lowell to have Shannon Norton Calles, who is the director, really believe in it, and really is the one who brought it to us. And then from that, people were buying into it because they see it's not just something we're trying to push, but it's actually supported on all levels.

So at this point I'm going to turn it over to Virginia for questions.

MS. HAMILTON: Thanks so much, all of you. You've done amazing work. We have – we're running a little bit behind. We've got some – a bunch of questions here. I'm going to dispense with a couple of them quickly and we may have to get back to you on others.

The first question was about sharing the customer letter. I'd have to check into that. It was written by a real person for a purpose and it's – I don't own it, so we'll have to see.

"How do you incorporate communication access, which are spoken languages and sign language, in the One-Stop?" Do either of the One-Stops on the phone right now have the capacity to work with hearing impaired as they come through the door? And/or Dave, do you have an answer to that?

MS. THOMPSON: So this is Stacey from Lowell. We actually do have people that speak multiple languages here at the career center. So as far as that, I think part of our hiring mentality has been to make sure to incorporate people who speak – in our particular area it's Kumai as well as Spanish. So we do have multiple people who speak those languages.

But as far as having someone who speaks sign language, we actually work well with one of our community organizations who has people who are hearing impaired. And so we actually have someone currently working here on a part-time basis that does speak sign language. And so that's helpful. But we also, like I said, have the relationship with community partners. So if we did need that, we could get that from them.

MS. HAMILTON: Great. Thanks.

MS. KARBER: And this is Dawn in Spokane. And we also have staff that speak multiple languages. And we also have a contract with an interpreter services. And right now we have – someone joined us for interpreter service – sign language interpreter services – about once a week. So we really have no problem pulling in someone if we need them. And we also have a disability access advisory committee who's working with us on this issue.

MS. HAMILTON: Thank you, Dawn. This is for you, I think, Spokane. Were there any privacy concerns with the open plan that you have in your resource room?

MR. WILLIAMS: Yes. So actually, with the prototyping that we did, and talking to staff and customers, what we didn't see in the picture is the next generation of that. We went on and we realized that with the open floor plan there were some considerations for that with privacy. So we're building three glassed rooms off to the side there, so that if a conversation goes where they feel that it's uncomfortable to have that conversation out in the open floor plan, that they have that more private conversation with them. So I would recommend anyone who goes to an open floor plan to consider that.

MS. HAMILTON: Great. "I like hearing the difference in physical redesign and functional redesign. Were there any changes to the titles of the staff to help make the centers more inviting, like employment counselors, job coaches, et cetera?"

MR. WILLIAMS: So actually, yes. Once again, the staff being involved and are helping us name actually what those functions are and then what the people are within the functions. And so really, we kind of blew it up and we don't want to continue to use the same names as job coach or career counselor or anything like that. So we're letting them pick those actual names from it and they're coming up with some pretty unique things that truly speak to what they're doing within those functions.

MS. HAMILTON: Great. And this is for either center. "Have either of the centers made a combination to address the needs of youth customers?"

MS. KARBER: So this is Spokane. And no. What we did is we actually built a youth One-Stop center on the same campus as our One-Stop center. So they're side-by-side buildings and we have a One-Stop campus now.

MS. HAMILTON: Wow. And I know that there's some One-Stops that are actually – I know we had another presentation by some folks from – I never pronounce this right – Waukesha County in Wisconsin. And they actually are really refocusing their One-Stop system to look at – to work with people who are under 30. So if you want to get more information about how to do that, you can talk to the folks up in Wisconsin.

I'm afraid – there's some more questions here. I'm afraid we're out of time. I need to turn this back over to John to do a close. But thank you for all your questions. If you want more information or you didn't get your question answered, I don't know what to do. Email me. My email is Hamilton.Virginia@dol.gov. And I'll try to get it to the right person.

(END)