

An Employment and Vocational Guidance Program for New York City*

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INTRODUCTION

THE question of employment in a Metropolitan League program may seem strange to most of you, because, with two exceptions, none of the affiliated institutions have made any attempt to organize the work of securing employment in conjunction with their other activities. It is true that some member of your association who is out of work will occasionally inquire of your executive director if he knows of a vacancy. He in turn will get in touch with some of his directors or friends and try to find a place for the member. Likewise, a board member, in need of help, will from time to time telephone his executive with the thought of placing some member who may be unemployed at the time. This is the extent of the employment work done by the Metropolitan League organizations.

The two exceptions referred to are the Y. W. H. A., 31 West 110th Street, and the Y. M. H. A. of 92nd Street, both of New York City. While the problems connected with the placement of young women are different from those confronting us, who deal only with young men, there is no difference, for purposes of discussion, in the value and importance of the work.

In order to answer any questions which may be in your minds as to the need of employment work in connection

with our activities and in order to form a basis for any recommendations which may result from this conference, it is desirable that I place before you a picture of the work, together with some of the problems confronting us.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

Not so many years ago, a man or woman seeking employment would enter what was known as an intelligence office, to which would also come employers of labor. By means of their intelligence or lack of it, a bargain was struck between worker and agent, and the books of the office showed a transaction opened and closed. That is all there was to it. It is difficult to understand the reason for the use of the word "intelligence." It seems to have been a misnomer for advice. In other words, those seeking workers would call upon the office for advice in regard to obtaining help. There was no conscientious effort of any kind, no counsel, no acquaintance with business conditions, and the whole arrangement appeared to be a cut and dried process of getting men or women jobs as soon as possible and extracting the fee just as quickly.

Naturally, such a system invited fraudulent acts of one kind or another, with the result that labor laws were passed which sought to eliminate these possibilities. The passage of these laws opened a new field, guided by men with ability whose duty it was not only to remove the harmful features of the intelli-

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gence office, but also to educate as much as possible all those concerned. The result was that a number of public and quasi-public employment bureaus were established. The word "employment" was substituted for the word "intelligence," since it described more accurately the purpose of the enterprise. While the work in these offices was similar to that of the original intelligence bureau, many undesirable elements were eliminated. There are now thousands of highly efficient bureaus some of which are engaged not only in placement work but in vocational guidance as well.

PURPOSE OF THE EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

Every employment bureau has an opportunity for usefulness. An employer does not know who is out of work and an employee does not know which firm is in need of help. The purpose of the employment bureau is to bring these two together and in every case where that purpose is fulfilled a valuable service is rendered. This is true if the bureau be conducted by the public, by a philanthropic organization, or for private gain.

Those engaged in social work are expected to render every possible service to their members. Their service cannot be limited to advice only, but must include something of a more substantial nature.

Y. M. H. A. and Center activities are many, but if one of our young men is in financial difficulty, his interest in other things is diminished and our hold upon him is lessened. Every home has its economic problem which must be solved first. If we were to provide for cultural and recreational needs only, the young man would vanish from our midst at the first sign of a domestic trouble, and any hold which we thought we had upon him would be lost. Our desire should be to satisfy all his needs, social, physical, moral, and

economic. A man out of a job needs us as much as, if not more than, one who is working. One's outlook upon life is considerably affected by his income, and every one in need of work and in want is an embryo dissatisfied citizen.

At this point the community becomes interested. In New York City there are always thousands of men out of employment. We often hear it said that unemployment is a cause of crime. Be that as it may, it is essential that those out of work have some place to which they may apply in order to obtain work or to learn about conditions from which they can determine their future course. Merely answering advertisements and finding a large number of applicants before you is very discouraging.

THE NEED OF A JEWISH AGENCY

There are three large groups of employment agencies to which great numbers of applicants for work apply. They are the public bureaus, which include the city, state and federal offices, the non-commercial bureaus, such as ours, which charge a small fee or perform the service free for their members, and the private bureaus, which charge large fees on a profit-making basis.

The bureaus in which we are interested are the non-commercial bureaus. The only two Jewish bureaus in New York City are those I mentioned, that of the Y. W. H. A., which handles girls only and which charges no fee, and the Y. M. H. A., where a fee is charged.

The community, therefore, has a right to ask, why the especial need of a Jewish bureau? Why not use the existing agencies, such as the Y. M. C. A.'s? First, because of the discrimination against the Jew, to which we should be accustomed by this time. What is surprising, perhaps, is the fact that in New York City, where

there are nearly one million Jews, discrimination should exist to so large an extent. A large proportion of the young men who come to us for work tell us of their experiences with employers who regret they cannot employ Jews. We have had the experience in placing ex-service men, notwithstanding the preference which service to one's country is assumed to give, irrespective of national origin or religion. One of the largest agencies in New York City discriminated against Jews even though some of our prominent Jewish leaders were on the board of directors. After a thorough ventilation of the situation, the discrimination was discontinued.

Second, when we realize that the Jew has his own likes and dislikes, his own peculiarities and characteristics, his own unusual troubles, a special sympathy and understanding are essential, and a separate treatment is required. There is no agency better able to handle this problem than a Jewish organization. The placement of Jewish boys and girls should, at least to an extent, be a part of the work of every organization such as ours.

Jewish Community
I am not proposing that each organization in the Metropolitan League open an employment bureau. There are steps, however, which each may take, that will be helpful to their members. We must concern ourselves with several phases of the subject in order to arrive at a solution of the problem.

THE EMPLOYER AND THE EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

There are several distinct advantages of an employment bureau to the employer, the most important of which is the elimination of selection. When an advertisement is placed in the papers a large number of workers invariably apply and in his haste to rid himself of them, the employer

often takes the least desirable. It is said, of course, that applicants may be asked to write instead of calling, but the time lost is too great. In addition, the personality of the writer cannot be recognized, and the one sending the most matter of fact reply may have potentialities which can be appreciated only upon interviewing the applicant. It is unfair to determine the selection of a worker solely on the basis of the letter he writes, except, perhaps, in cases where correspondence and advertising ability are essential.

An employment bureau is in a better position than the employer to select from the mass. It has had an opportunity to compare one with the other and to select desirable persons, though the final selection is left to the employer. In other words, while we often pick out the very man who eventually fills the job, we prefer to send two or three applicants to the employer so that he may choose for himself. He will not hesitate to interview a small number but would object to meeting a large number.

Incidentally, the employment bureau investigates its applicants and saves the employer this necessity. In very many cases we are called upon to furnish the references which we have in our possession in order to satisfy the employer. It is a relief to most employers to know that the applicants who apply have a clear record for honesty.

The bureau also saves the cost of advertising in addition to the time taken up with interviewing a large number of applicants.

The disadvantages of the employment agency to the employer are not really important but worthy of consideration. To some extent it is true that many good workers do not patronize employment bureaus. It is said that a good worker is always in

demand. Still, it would require mental telepathy to ascertain which employer is in need of one's services. In times like the present when even many good men are out of jobs, they are becoming more and more accustomed to apply to employment agencies of the better type. They will not apply to public bureaus. The employer who uses the agencies will in many cases be prejudiced against them because of his experience with numerous inefficient ones. The misplaced applicant may cause inestimable loss to his employer, either through dishonesty or inefficiency. Being in need of help at once the person hiring the worker has no choice but to accept the applicant sent to him by the bureau and perhaps suffers because of such choice. But this is unlikely when dealing with the proper type of agency.

THE WORKER AND THE EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

So long as an agency exists solely for the purpose of placing workers, its particular value lies in relieving shy and backward applicants from facing competitors. With the development of the better type of employment department, placement is only one of the many attributes it possesses. Today, every efficient bureau is prepared to give information about the different industries with their attendant advantages and opportunities. Advice concerning business conditions is constantly sought and given. Vocational and educational guidance are distinct features of employment service. In other words one does not visit an agency today merely to get a job. In our own office we are constantly besieged for advice with regard to employment and vocational matters. Not so long ago I received a letter from a young man asking my advice concerning the advisability of calling upon a certain

school in this city, where he would be required to pay \$15 to be told what vocation he is best fitted for. I had him call upon me and helped him find satisfactory employment, incidentally saving him the \$15.

The disadvantages of the employment bureau exist for some applicants only. In our own department we see some young men day after day, spending all their time here without making any effort whatsoever in their own behalf. They seek no interviews, they answer no advertisements, but sit and wait for something to happen. For this type of applicant, the employment bureau is of no value. It discourages not only the so-called applicant but also many who possess the aggressiveness which we all admire. For that reason we discourage lounging. Our department opens particularly early in the morning so that we can tell the young men as quickly as possible whether there is work for them or not. Those for whom there are jobs are despatched quickly and the others are requested either to visit our library and write letters or call upon employers of their own choice. We discourage their dependence upon us and impress them with the fact that we are merely one means of obtaining work.

OCCUPATIONS

We learn in connection with employment work that there are all sorts of occupations to which workers may be sent. Most firms engage people from year to year, discharging only for inefficiency or poor business. In such cases, the only question from the viewpoint of the employee is the opportunity for advancement which the position offers. There is some advantage in knowing that the job is permanent, because the possibilities may be practically unlimited. If the work itself or the line of business appeals to the worker, he may see sufficiently far ahead

to warrant his remaining on the job even though his duties at first seem unimportant.

This is not true in cases of seasonal occupations, where the period of time in which the work is to be done is limited. The clothing industry is an example. The operators, cutters, etc., work for a number of months and then are let off to find any other employment which will provide for them until their season begins. It is true that the wages are higher for the busy months than they are in occupations which keep one busy all year, but it is difficult to persuade the workers to live much below their incomes to overcome the slack season.

In our bureau we are often called upon to place skilled operators during the period when their own lines are inactive. A cutter becomes a porter. A presser becomes a watchman.

There is also a group of workers who are not earning enough in their regular vocations to cover the needs of themselves and their dependents. They seek additional work in other fields in order to increase their incomes. Teachers also act as social workers. Lawyers also act as teachers. Workers of all kinds may also be musicians. Bookkeepers may also become salesmen. Miscellaneous jobs are open at odd times of the day or night for a great mass of such wage earners. This group presents an additional problem for the employment agency to solve. It often means finding two jobs for one man in order to insure a sufficient income for him.

So much for the practical side of the employment question. There are many more phases of great importance to the placement secretary, such as "types of applicants," "types of employers," "methods for finding positions," "the relationship to other bureaus," and "miscellaneous prob-

lems." It is not necessary, however, to delve into these matters at this time.

While this placement work is, as a matter of fact, of immediate importance to the job-seeker, as a matter of theory it is of little importance compared with the uncertainty and dissatisfaction which may result from just giving some one a job. The theory referred to is described as "vocational guidance" which is defined as "organized common sense used to help each individual make the most of his abilities and opportunities." It means that an inventory is taken of one's knowledge, ability and experience, on the basis of which one is guided in the direction which will help him most in his future development.

VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE

Vocational guidance seeks to help persons to choose, prepare for, enter into, and make progress in occupations. It means giving information about commerce and industry to help in the choice of an occupation. It gives opportunity to discover talent. It advises boys and girls to enter this or that school for the purpose of discovering their talents and preparing for an occupation. It advises in regard to promotion, change of jobs, and after-education. It supervises the progress in particular positions and chosen occupations.

It is natural that if a boy takes up a line of work for which he is adapted, he will achieve a greater success than if he drifts into an industry for which he is not fitted. An occupation out of harmony with a worker's aptitudes and capacities means a measure of inefficiency and perhaps distasteful labor. An occupation in harmony with the nature of the worker means enthusiasm, love for his work, and efficient service. Vocational guidance seeks to work with each person as a separate problem, and to invite the confidence

of parents so as to assure assistance in guiding their children.

Men and women everywhere are wearing out their lives by working in the wrong fields, because of a wrong start in life. We must attempt a conservation of human energies to eliminate the great waste in men's lives, just as we do in the case of the conservation of natural resources. By providing for our children today, we will prevent future wasting of lives.

When, as vocational guides, we meet our applicants, our first effort is to keep them in school. It does not matter that they may already have left, because we feel it is never too late to return. We keep on hand a list of schools with the subjects taught and if it is at all possible, we try to get them back. Occasionally, the parents are consulted with a view to ascertaining the necessity of a boy's going to work. If they are not in need of his earnings, we sometimes convince them of the advantages to the boy of continuing his studies. If, however, his few dollars are needed, we must use different methods. First we try to return him to school and find after-school or part-time work for him. In many cases this is satisfactory to both the boy and the parents. Second, if the part-time position does not pay enough to overcome the financial handicap in the home, we give the boy full-time employment, insisting, however, upon his entering school at night. In dealing with those who have definitely given up their studies, we must be careful in our guidance. Any jobs given them may become either their work or the stepping-stone to failure. The vocational guidance worker seeks to encourage self-analysis in the selection of employment. By constant questioning and reference to the boy's application, we are able, by a process of elimination to determine several

kinds of work for which he may be fitted and in which he may succeed. We do not accept the theory that a man is fitted for only one vocation in life. We feel that he may be equally successful in a number of occupations, and we are satisfied if we have found one of them. In assisting the applicant to select a vocation, we go over with him the opportunities in the various industries and occupations so as to help him determine, if possible, the work in which he wishes to engage.

Vocational guidance does not necessarily cease with the placement of the applicant, or with returning him to school. Even though he believes he is in the right industry, he may find conditions of such a nature as to warrant a change. He may be dissatisfied because of lack of advancement. His prospects may appear so poor that he feels he is wasting his time. The same may be true of a school where the system of instruction or the teachers are not sufficiently inspiring. A young man who works all day may fall asleep in school at night unless his instructors are interesting. The vocational guide must follow up his first effort by making such corrections as the boy's new situation requires.

There are among us many sceptics as to the value of this work. At best, they say it is guesswork. Were it not for the fact that many self-styled experts are engaged in doubtful practices which they call vocational guidance, the work itself would progress more rapidly. It is hard to dispel scepticism when a pretense for vocational analysis is made by means of mind-reading, handwriting, muscle-reading, and the shape of the nose. There was one private bureau in New York City which advertised a complete vocational analysis for \$15 based upon a photograph of the applicant. But we must not let such instances overshadow the possibilities which

vocational guidance offers. We all agree that there are certain elements manifesting themselves in ordinary cases which guide the careful observer to give sound advice. We are all vocational guides in a sense. We all meet young people to whom we give suggestions regarding their vocations, which we think are based upon common sense. If a young man stutters and is sluggish in his answers, it is unlikely that his ambition to be a lawyer will ever be fulfilled. We all can see that a boy who loves music and appears to have talent should be encouraged to follow it seriously. It is just common sense, and the vocational guide who makes a study of applying common sense to situations which include a knowledge of one's education, inclinations, experience, and training, is aiding the development of a necessary work, the result of which will greatly benefit the great mass of young people who come to you saying, "I can do anything," when they really mean they can do nothing.

Since the war, the Y. M. H. A. bureau has not been doing intensive work along these lines. We no longer have the necessary staff or equipment for it; we have practically abandoned it. But the great need remains.

I have told you all the things I did merely to give you an idea of the real importance of this work. No other work done by our associations compares with it in value, because until our members are happily employed, they are not adequately receptive to the physical, social, and religious program.

This work serves the additional purpose of bringing non-members to our ranks. The largest number of applicants are not members, but every one of them is a prospective member. If their first experience with a Y. M. H. A. is a happy one—get-

ting a job—they readily become interested in the other activities. Some of you may have questioned the desirability of charging a fee. Do you know what we do with the fee? Every fee is credited to membership for the young man up to the amount paid. If the fee is not equal to membership, he pays the balance. Of course a large number of young men do not accept this privilege, because they live so far from the building that it would not help them to enroll. But hundreds join every year who take advantage of our other facilities and who renew at the expiration of their term for the full amount.

With this understanding of the problem, I submit the following proposals for consideration by the Metropolitan League.

First, there should be an employment bureau established in the business section of the city. This bureau should be open to members of all the organizations in the League and to others if there are more jobs than can be filled by members. As the machinery for such a bureau now exists in the Y. M. H. A., it is for the League to convince the trustees of this Y. M. H. A. to turn over this department with its staff, its equipment, and its experience. As there are on our list more than 3000 employers who patronize us, with whom we place approximately 2000 young men every year, an excellent nucleus for service already exists. Of course, the sentiment for retaining it at the Y. M. H. A. would be very great and from that standpoint I should hesitate to favor my own suggestion, but at this moment I stand here as an advocate of the expansion of the Metropolitan League and not as the executive director of the Y. M. H. A.

When our employment department was first organized, most of our applicants came from this neighborhood and it made little difference that they stopped here be-

fore going to the business district. But the following happens almost every month. From September 1st to October 15th, 1926, we placed 250 applicants. 68, or 27%, came from the district in which the Y. M. H. A. is situated; 74, or 29% from the Bronx; 57, or 22%, from the lower East Side; 26, or 11%, from Harlem, and 25, or 11%, from Washington Heights. Only 27% came from the immediate vicinity of this building. 182, or 73%, had to ride to get to the Y. M. H. A. In every case the applicant first comes to us before going downtown. If he does not get a position, he returns to us and is often sent to another place, which involves another fare. If we do not send him to another position, he hesitates to return to seek work for himself, because he considers it too late to do so. This riding back and forth is a great waste in time, energy and money.

As for employers, 95% are in the heart of the business district downtown. 40% of those who called upon us, recently were below 14th street, 15% were between 14th and 23rd street, 20% between 23rd and 33rd streets, and 20% above 33rd street.

The employer, too, is handicapped by having the office too far from his business. After telephoning for an applicant and waiting from half an hour to an hour, he may not employ him and telephone again, wasting more time.

By establishing the employment bureau in the business section, most of these objections are eliminated. The boy must go downtown anyhow, and he can remain there if the bureau is also there. He can return to the office as often as he wishes and

can see many more employers, all without extra fare. The employer will be able to interview a great number of applicants by this arrangement.

If this suggestion is adopted and a real bureau is established, then my second proposal is in order. To be of greater service to our members, a vocational bureau should be organized to carry on the work along the lines mentioned. I have long advocated the establishment of a vocational bureau with permanent offices, and properly equipped with trained workers who could advise, suggest, and seek information regarding the actual conditions and possibilities in the various trades and professions and become gradually a storehouse of information for vocational guidance.

Such a bureau is just being organized for Jewish young men by independent persons who realize the value of the work, but who would like to tie it up with some recognized organization. The League may be able to take this project over with its staff and equipment.

My third proposal depends upon the success of the first two, and that is the registration and interviewing of applicants in their respective associations instead of in the employment bureau. I will not go into the details of this plan because there are many phases to it. I have presented this subject at many conferences and conventions and although it apparently met with approval in every case, I am still here advocating the same program. However, if the League will see its way clear to undertaking this important piece of work, I will be happy to assist in preparing a complete program which will incorporate the suggestions here outlined.