

Transitions

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'Transitions'* (a pseudonym) was established around twenty years ago to cater for the needs of students who required work before, during or after their studies have been completed. Their aims revolve around providing a service that not only benefits students but also offers the community a free, easily accessible business that can serve all their work needs. Transitions receives financial support from the government, from student associations and tertiary institutions who also govern its management. It therefore provides an interesting case study of the role of a 'mediator' within the community – a business that really caters to the 'young heart, easy living philosophy' (Palmerston North's newly developed promotional slogan).

Transitions can be defined within the community as an agency that acts as a mediator between the wider community (including businesses, household, government, farming, entertainment and community organizations) and the student community (universities, student associations, polytechnics, private training institutions). Internally its community links can be found between its core and periphery staff, and in its association to the summer satellite offices and other permanent offices based around New Zealand.

At a more universal level a community is characterized by the social cohesion that develops with close interpersonal ties. These ties are multifaceted and can include common history, or experiences to the point where emotional relationships can develop (Heller, 1989). One must also note that this is a relational definition and excludes any geographical element. This definition is consistent with my community as it draws upon the close interpersonal ties not only held within the team but also between the staff and employees and staff and students. Furthermore as students/employers continue to use the agency, their relationships with the team are enhanced, allowing the team to ascertain personal needs and cater for these in future meetings. Their belief is that happy employers equal more job offers and in return more job offers will equal happy students equalling less stress among all!

Mission statements are an important part of any community organization; they give the staff and any outsiders an idea of what the functions and goals are of those communities. Transitions has broken down needs into three categories, a business definition, mission and vision statement – these are all considered key performance indicators. In addition each office sets its own personal goals to enhance teamwork. Overall they define themselves as providers of a referral and placement service that enables students to gain financial and career satisfaction. Their mission and vision facilitate this by allowing students to earn as much money as possible during the summer vacation and during the semester. Furthermore they aim to provide a friendly, professional and effective service. These statements give rise to critical success factors, such as cost management, brand strength, screening and streaming processes and development programs (Strategic plan 2002-2005). These goals are also re-assessed on a regular basis by the team to ascertain that they are on the 'right track' to meet the goal.

Its contributions to the wider Palmerston North community on an economic level total \$4 million a year, not to mention supporting students financially as they continue their studies. On a social level the students themselves are able to provide their skills at a cheap rate and support all levels of the community – for example, cleaning out gutters for the elderly, baby-sitting for working parents, and other activities that result in a beneficial cycle for everyone.

Transitions is centrally located and staffed by three full-time permanent 'core' staff – Tom, Sarah and Lucy (pseudonyms). Their one story building is located in close proximity to two other Human Resource firms. Seen from the exterior (looking in) of the building are 'job boards' that display all the current jobs that have vacancies and give a brief description of the job and its requirements. Internally several desks are combined to form two 'L's' in each corner. On the opposite side of the room are desks facing the wall with enrolment sheets and code guides. An informal 'student' atmosphere is promoted

through the use of posters advertising future events, movie guides and health facilities. This enhances the “community” feel noted as an important factor for cohesion, participation and development by Thomas and Veno (1996).

Palmerston North’s Transitions is the regional headquarters for the Manawatu region; they manage a permanent office in another region and open one person (often student) operated offices during summer in additional areas. These summer offices (labelled satellites) are in constant contact with Palmerston North as all job offers are directed to P.N.’s call centre (and then sent to the appropriate office). These offices are also linked to a nationwide computer network where employment officers can view job and employer files.

Network analysis, such as that afforded by general systems theory, is important to a community like Transitions to illustrate its inputs, outputs and throughputs. As illustrated throughout this chapter, Transitions interacts with many different communities for its varied resources – jobs, money, student support, and so on. These are also considered inputs that help the agency to function efficiently, complementing its existing elements – that is the foundations of the system (the people and infrastructure). Specialisation within the system can be traced back to when students are registering, i.e., when they are filling out a form about what skills they already possess. This is a way of ascertaining who has the highest level of skill and allows them to apply for the job (also known as the output). Another output is a satisfied employer, on gaining this result it is expected the cycle will be continued.

Extending this theory, Transitions can also be indirectly compared to world systems core – periphery theory. This can be defined as “an elite controlling a weaker periphery”. This core has several strategic advantages such as power, mass media and market mechanisms. One could extend this to the hierarchy of knowledge at Transitions, the staff is often aware of market forces through their experience in the industry whereas students are not privy to this knowledge. However deviation from the theory stems from how the knowledge is used, in corporations it is used to make one group of people more powerful than the rest whereas in communities the knowledge is a ‘silent helper’ that can be used to benefit the users.

Hierarchies are minimal during the year with Tom taking the role of central regional manager, undertaking the administration role for these offices. Sarah and Lucy are “out the front” with Sarah assuming Tom’s role when he is absent. However during the summer season each of these staff members assume a different role. Tom manages the satellite offices; Sarah takes responsibility for the call centre staff and Lucy heads ‘the front’. Technical support for the networks comes in the form of Ed, a helper for services, and advice for technical problems is primarily given over the phone. The orderliness of this system has similar traits to the general systems theory, which promotes order, quantification and rules.

There are two foci – the employers and the students. This is also reflected in the usage of two slogans, one to appeal to the employers “For a job well done” and the other (more light-hearted) to students “Challenging employers since we began”. Even language is modified, employers are spoken to in a formal, polite tone as a mark of respect whereas the approach towards students is more informal and light-hearted – mainly in order to identify with them so in turn the students can identify with the agency as a friendly stress free environment. Applied to Caplan’s model for workers in human services (cited in Orford, 1992) this approach could be seen as a client-centred case consultation, where expert recommendations and opinions are provided. This is also evident when the employment officer is receiving a vacancy - they will try to gain as much information about the employer and job as possible, this is to make sure that, a) the job details are correct, b) the right student can then be referred to the job, and c) that the employer is easily contactable to arrange interviews and so on.

Treating the employers with respect, speed and helpfulness is Transitions first priority, this includes suggesting tips for attracting the right type of student and offering deals for short term jobs (e.g., three hours equals \$30). Although the advantages of this deal are directed towards students to make some quick money, past policy has been three hours for \$27 and for special cases (big deals, or long relationship with job search) this is still sometimes the case. Priority treatment is considered the most imperative of these measures, as without the employers providing the jobs the agency would be non-existent. The

standard of job searches service is echoed by a survey completed by 1,032 employers. 96.8 percent of employers who used the service would use it again and 98.9 percent rated the service as helpful and friendly (employer handout).

The youth of Palmerston North are an important demographic group, they are “the future of our city” (PNCC, 1993) and over 44 percent of the total population is under 25 (Census, 1991). Therefore the City Council created a youth policy for two purposes, a) to act as an information source about Palmerston North’s young people, and b) suggest policies that could be beneficial to this group. The council identified five areas of concern to it and the wider community; these are unemployment, motor vehicle accidents, suicide, crime and psychiatric admissions.

Under the category of employment the council promotes three goals for youth development, these are encouraging people to achieve their community aspirations, providing a stimulating and healthy environment and encouraging a vibrant economy (Nisbet, 1993). Lewin (2000) suggests remedying this situation involves taking collective responsibility for employment, including contracting work out to community operations, researching industry trends and incentives for business development. The Palmerston North City Council actively engages in most of these initiatives. They support Transitions by contracting out many of their research, promotional and financial jobs. Their most recent policy change is to include the issue of employment in its city vision (Community Development Plan, 2000) that illustrates what the council’s view of what the city will be like in 15 – 20 years. They state “growth in employment and range of work available here. Palmerston North will have high employment. The city will encourage skilful and ethical business practices. Palmerston North will take advantage of employment creation and business schemes”. Although there is no direct mention of where youth fit into this template, the original aspirations still stand, however they are refined so youth policy’s also fit into this overall ‘city vision’.

Students are provided with three types of potential jobs when they view the website or job-boards. These are jobs that aim to provide short-term (minimum 13 weeks) work experience for under-graduates and graduates. These jobs dictate that special skills and knowledge are

needed, most often in a research capacity studying the strengths and weaknesses of a particular business as an unbiased participant.

Normal jobs can range from short to permanent/full-time, however students must have the skills noted on the job card, or experience in a similar field. When these jobs are nearing their proposed start date, they are placed on the urgent board and matching of students with the skills noted occurs. When a job interests a student they can then discuss it with the employment officer, i.e., whether they are suitable for the position and if so, given the contact details. These types of interactions (especially in short term jobs) promote community development and increases when various types of people in the locality are being served and at the same time gaining valuable skills and qualifications along the way (O’Connor and O’Regan, 1992). These skills include tips for preparing for an interview, frequently asked information and Internal Revenue Department information which is all posted on their website.

One technicality that can lead to exclusion is the definition of student – which is defined as “tertiary or intending tertiary students”. This comprises universities; polytechnics, a college of education or a New Zealand Qualification Authority approved private institution. This strict definition occurs primarily because the institutions provide most of the funding. International students are also catered for but they must have a work permit that states they are a student and they are allowed to work 15 hours a week.

Stress from unemployment can cause financial and psychological problems for students. The Dohrenwend model identifies unemployment as one of several ‘life events’ at a ‘macro-level’ (Bronfenbrenner, cited in Gregory and Dresler-Hawke, 2002) that can lead to psychopathology. In such a model anxiety and depression are noted as indicators that a persons current situation/environment is being challenged to the limit (Levine and Perkins, 1997). Mediators help reduce student’s problems to the ‘micro-level’ where getting a job and retaining it becomes the responsibility of the individual. If their preferred job (i.e., working in a particular environment) isn’t available, then students can undertake short-term jobs to reduce financial pressure. As a result the students “may grow and change positively as a results of mastering the experience” (Levine and Perkins, 1997) or return to their

normal state. In extreme cases the student may develop maladaptive behaviours that constrain them from developing. Troubles with loans often make students believe that Transitions is their last hope and they may take their frustrations out on the staff. *"Empowerment is a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs"* (Rappaport, 1987, 122). For students, empowerment is firstly gaining a job then organizing new skills such as improving communication, while undertaking these jobs. Warr (1987) has identified nine psychological functions of employment stressing opportunity for control, skill use, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity, money, security, interpersonal contact and valued social position, all of which can be related back to the empowerment process which Transitions provide.

Size in this framework does matter – as the level of empowerment will increase or decrease depending on membership and resources available. Rappaport (1987) notes that to achieve empowerment the organization must be small enough to provide meaningful relationships yet large enough to obtain the resources required to continue. Transitions adheres to the framework with minimal differences – the team is small and localized yet on a larger scale their reputation is well established not only in the community but on a national level where they gain their financial resources.

A typical client follows a simple registration process, the student is asked to fill out a registration form that asks personal details, job history and skills acquired. These are entered in the computer while the student is present, and specific questions are asked as to ascertain the level of each skill recorded (this also is valuable when the employment officer is matching students to a job that has specific skills). The student is then given a card, which records their name, number and pamphlet "Welcome" (student handout) which sets out rules and regulations that students must obey to access the services.

A new innovation is to provide a web based registration service for both employers and students. Employers simply fill out an on-line form, which is sent to the appropriate office, with the employment officers ringing to confirm the details provided before placing the job on the job board. Students fill out a normal registration

form but are also told to visit the nearest office so they can pick up their card, discuss job possibilities and rate their skills with the EO.

Hence technology plays the role of the silent powerful team member. All records are computerized so the team can call up and see past employers and student's records. It is also a vital tool for linking offices nationwide so staff can 'compare notes' when similar jobs are being advertised on a national level. A recent addition is the use of e-mail to send thank you e-letters to employers for using their service – this is a quick method that illustrates the value of all users – as without them the service would be non-existent.

"Change in society is pervasive" (Moore cited in Thomas and Veno, 1996) and as the program subscribes to a continuous improvement policy it frequently makes changes to build its operations to be more efficient and valuable and allow its members to maximize their potential. Recently it has undergone two changes to, a) its image, and b) developing its business. The image has recently been 'rebranded' while still retaining its name and traditional colours. This was a national decision based on time, i.e., it had been 10 years since the last change and an up-to-date image needed to be promoted. Emphasis is now placed on the job part of the sign, advocating that they are comparable to any other human resources organization. This small change has snowballed to extensive changes in each office, including changes in stationery, business cards, posters and signage on the exterior of the building.

Developing the business through the addition of two new jobs has modified the focus. The first position is that of screening officer – this person will re-screen students once they have registered as skilled or un-skilled and identify their strengths and weaknesses. This will tie into the new manager who will take a list of skilled students, sort them and approach businesses that would be interested in the students skills, e. g., approaching a information technology business with a list of info-tech graduates, allowing the business to choose the best candidate. However one must note that these positions are currently being advertised so the real effect of the development will not be evident on the system for another two to five years. Overall these changes will result in Palmerston North becoming a knowledge base, students will then choose the university because

of the knowledge that the quality of degree is high and work will be available when they graduate.

Risks are an inherent part of any community. Internal and external threats can significantly affect an organizations development; to minimize this event the program has compiled a list of threats that could hinder its development and strategies to overcome them. Assessing and planning for such events are steps within a conceptual community framework (Gregory and Dresler-Hawke, 2002) and usually undertaken when researching a community. The fact that such an assessment has already been completed demonstrates that it is an up-to-date and innovative organization aware of its needs and demands.

Transitions also have a number of strategic links. An example is the newly formed link with the technology department at the university titled Tech Link. This link enables staff to pass on jobs it cannot fill (and still get the credit) and vice-versa. Furthermore this relationship will be enhanced when the manager is operating.

On the financial support side Transitions is closely aligned with Study link (formerly student services), students must sign up over the summer (as an attempt to search for work) before they can receive a Student Hardship benefit. The students must also report every two weeks and get their card signed by an officer to receive a benefit.

Through the number of jobs placed by each office, effectiveness and achievement can be measured. These figures are considered an indication of success and subsequent funding is dictated by these figures. In addition telemarketers (who have had no previous association) are employed to carry out surveys of satisfaction. Student satisfaction is measured by anonymous surveys, which question what is important to the student, quality of the services provided, what services they use the most and future improvements they would like to see. They are taken throughout the year and are also completed in the satellite offices. Thomas and Veno (1996) also stress that evaluations such as those mentioned, allow organisations to be accountable for positive and negative strategies on the people it serves.

Transitions consider other human resource agencies to be competitors, and often list jobs that cannot be filled by these agencies. One

main competitive advantage is the fact that it is free to users. Many human resource agencies are fee based to both employers and employees to give a perception of value, quality and even a performance guarantee. However these agencies are also vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations, businesses developing their own human resource staff and the fast developing web-based organizations. Transitions is aware of these forces so tends to stress its advantages, i.e., its flexibility to handle anything, satisfaction rate and low frills efficiency.

In conclusion I chose to study Transitions as a community because of personal involvement. Every day I interacted with various types of students and employers who themselves had different needs. It was a great experience to be able to see the workings of a human resources agency that was fulfilling a real need of the student community. I found strengths in its flexibility and willingness to achieve the best deal possible on behalf of both students and employers. Daily, monthly and seasonal goals are always being set and revised, challenging staff to challenge themselves and provide the best service possible.

The Palmerston North City Council fits into this picture through its community development plan, which takes note of the large population of students and caters towards growth of the \$4 million job search already provides to the local economy. Furthermore variables that can hinder the community's development such as stress, unemployment, competition and empowerment are accounted for and contained enhancing the quality of service provided. Lastly I believe this program is a vital 'linking' service. It is vital to the various types of employers (those easy livers!) who have multiple needs, it is vital to the students (the young hearts) as a means of helping to provide financial support and it is vital to the community that these two interest groups are linked.

NOTES

- * The real identity of my community has been concealed to protect their policies, strategies and members' own personal opinions. The identity of individuals has similarly been protected and names are pseudonyms.

KEY WORDS Community Psychology. Empowerment. Human Resources. Interactions

ABSTRACT While education is never complete, the change from school to work depends on transitional vocational services, a specialised sector within the community that bridges education and business and enables young people to gain jobs while also providing employers with new recruits. As such, the organisation that serves must straddle two parts of the community, and yet retain its own identity and purpose. Transitions (pseudonym) is an organisation that links people and business, and facilitates the easy entry of young people into the work life of the larger Palmerston North community.

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LOCAL RESOURCES

Personal interviews with the three core members in Palmerston North:
Tom, Sarah and Lucy (pseudonyms).

PHOTOS

Student Handout explaining rules
Employer Handout explaining rules

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