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Lessons from Project NetWork Recruiting for the DRI “Early Intervention” Project

Overview of Project NetWork and the Participation Process

The SSA Project NetWork Demonstration was undertaken in the mid-1990s as a randomized field experiment of four different return-to-work treatment modalities, with each model implemented in two states. Case-managed services were provided to a “treatment” cohort consisting of DI beneficiaries, SSI recipients, as well as applicants for SSI. The sampling design called for random assignment of eligible volunteers into equal-sized treatment and control groups of 540 persons, for a total of 8,640 participants across the eight sites nationwide. Eligibility criteria for volunteers were quite broad: the participant had to be unemployed, reside in the catchment area of the demonstration, and not receiving employment services from state VR agencies. The demonstration lasted two years and each participant was to be guaranteed a nine-month minimum time frame of potential service receipt. These stipulations mandated that the “recruitment” phase lasted a maximum of 15 months.

Various field staff at each of the eight sites had to use a massive outreach effort in order to achieve their participation quotas of some 1,080 individuals. The recruitment methods consisted primarily of a postcard mailing to DI beneficiaries and SSI recipients informing them about Project NetWork and requesting them to attend an information session to learn more about the demonstration. Mailings were sent to random groups of 3,000 persons at three-month intervals during the 15-month recruitment period. A follow-up mailing was conducted for a subset of these initial mailings thought to have return-to-work potential -- DI beneficiaries on the rolls for 2-5 years, and younger (aged 16-24) SSI recipients. New SSI applicants were solicited to participate via a face-to-face interview. These methods accounted for about 80 percent of the project participants. The remainder came from interviewing newly-entitled DI beneficiaries, DI beneficiaries having continuing disability reviews, referrals from other agencies, and self-referrals.

Participants in the Project NetWork demonstration completed a three-step process. First, they had to respond affirmatively to the initial solicitation to volunteer for the project. Second, they attended an information session with demonstration staff (referred to as “pre-applying” by the Abt project evaluators). Third, they volunteered for the demonstration, at which time they were randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups.

Different amounts of data were collected depending on how the person responded at these

various decision points. This allowed for analysis of three different rates of participation:

- 1) a “pre-applicant” rate which distinguishes between eligibles who become either non-respondents or pre-applicants, where the pre-applicant rate is the number of pre-applicants divided by the eligible population;
- 2) a “continuation” rate which distinguishes between those pre-applicants who subsequently become either non-participants or participants, where the continuation rate is the number of participants divided by the number of pre-applicants; and
- 3) an overall “participation” rate, which is the number of participants (including both treatment and controls) divided by the eligible population.

These rates can be examined according to various sub-groups.ⁱ In addition to SSA status and demographic attributes, other variables examined with respect to the participation decision are self-reported health status, functional limitations, work limitations, employment experience, and personal attitudes towards work. Participation rates for the overall demonstration, as well as for each site, are provided in a summary report by Abt Associates.ⁱⁱ Some additional information is available on pre-program earnings from one of the sites (The Virginia VR Outstation Model), where the author was the research coordinator.ⁱⁱⁱ

Participation Rates for Similar Return-to-Work Programs Involving Persons with Disabilities

The Abt study noted two training programs/evaluations for which various participation rates could be determined. The first is the SSA/VR Reimbursement Program. DI beneficiaries and SSI recipients are referred for VR services and the VR agencies are reimbursed for service provision should the person return-to-work sufficiently long and at a high-enough earnings level that they are terminated from the SSA rolls. A 1987 GAO study^{iv} found that roughly 15 percent of newly-awarded DI beneficiaries in 1983 were referred by SSA to VR agencies. Half of these referrals were deemed by the VR agency to not warrant further examination for eligibility. Most of the other referrals chose not to enroll in VR. Ultimately, only one of every eight SSA referrals applied and was accepted for VR service provision. This implies an overall participation rate of two percent for all recently-enrolled DI beneficiaries.

The second employment training program was the Transitional Employment Training Demonstration (TETD). This demonstration provided employment services to SSI recipients aged 18-40 with mental retardation in the late 1980s. The recruitment strategy involved

ⁱ Abt conducted two in-person surveys of demonstration treatment and controls, a baseline survey of a sample of non-participants, and used SSA administrative records to analyze the participation decision.

ⁱⁱ Abt Associates, “Recruiting SSA’s Disability Beneficiaries for Return-to-Work: Results of the Project NetWork Demonstration,” March, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean, David and Judith Smith, “Project NetWork Final Report,” Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, June, 1995.

^{iv} General Accounting Office. *Social Security: Little Success Achieved in Rehabilitating Disabled Beneficiaries*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987.

solicitation letters very similar to those used in Project NetWork. A total of 13,800 invitation letters (along with follow-up mailings, telephone calls, and outreach to local service providers) were sent out. There were some 2,400 responses indicating some interest in the project, for a “pre-application” rate of 17 percent. A total of 745 of these ultimately became volunteers in the demonstration, for a “continuation” rate of 31 percent. The overall “participation” rate is roughly five percent (745/13,800) of all project eligibles.

Overall Participation Rates for Project NetWork and by Site

A total of some 145,000 program-eligible individuals were solicited to participate in Project NetWork across the eight sites to obtain the requisite number of participants. It should be noted that while the number of participants is roughly uniform across sites (as dictated by the sample design) there was dramatic variation across sites in the number of eligibles invited to participate to achieve the quota (ranging from under 10,000 to almost 25,000). Roughly 12,000 of these eligibles attended the information session, yielding a pre-application rate of 8.1 percent. Of course getting the individual to respond that they were interested in attending the information session was only part of the intake process. “According to local demonstration staff, most individuals invited to participate in the demonstration never took the next step of setting up an interview. Only about one half of the people who did set up an interview actually showed up, either the first time they were scheduled or at a later time. The other half decided not to participate before hearing more about the program. Prospective clients who did not show up for an interview and did not respond to follow-up calls were eliminated from the pool of prospective clients... Although nonparticipants still had the option of changing their minds and volunteering later during the recruitment/intake phase of the project, case/referral managers reported that very few did so.”^v

Some 6,500 of the pre-applicants ultimately became participants, for a continuation rate of 55 percent. The overall participation rate for Project NetWork was then 4.5 percent.

There was significant variation in the pre-application and participation rates across the eight sites. Pre-application rates, which indicate the relative desirability of the demonstration for program eligibles, ranged from 5.2 - 11.1 percent. Overall participation rates ranged from 3.4 to 5.4 percent. Obviously, the higher the pre-application rate and continuation rate the lower the number of eligibles, which have to be recruited. States with high pre-application rates tended to have low continuation rates, indicating that a fairly high degree of “screening” was being conducted by project field staff. Conversely, states with low pre-application rates have higher continuation rates. This is indicative of a “hard-sell” approach by project staff.

The Virginia Outstation Model demonstration was quite unusual in having had one of the highest pre-application rates (10.8%) as well as the highest participation rate (5.4%). This resulted in a continuation rate of exactly 50 percent. And yet Virginia struggled mightily to reach their quota. After the last mass mailing of solicitation letters, the demonstration was still short, so project staff had to re-interview individuals previously categorized as non-productive – those persons who were not heard from after listening to the information session.

^vOp cit., Abt Associates, page 2-4.

Participation Rates by Solicitation Method

Some 60% of all participants in the overall Project NetWork demonstration were solicited via the postcard mailings. The follow-up mailings to persons with perceived greater work potential (DI beneficiaries with relatively stable health conditions and young SSI recipients) resulted in attracting only an additional two percent of all participants. The SSI applicant pool comprised 21 percent of all participants. Self-referrals accounted for seven percent of participants and other-agency referrals another six percent. Newly-enrolled SSDI beneficiaries made up only one percent of all participants in the Project NetWork demonstration. Several case managers observed that recently-awarded DI beneficiaries were still experiencing acute health-related problems and were not viable candidates for return-to-work programs.

This overall decomposition of the participants by method of solicitation does not indicate the participation rates for each of the methods. For instance it would be useful to know what percent of the overall mail solicitations ended up as demonstration participants versus those recruited in face-to-face interviews. Unfortunately, the Abt report does not contain such a break-out. However, the Virginia VR Outstation data contains such a categorization. In Virginia, while persons recruited via the initial mail solicitations comprise 62.3 percent of all participants, the participation rate -- as defined above --for initial mail solicitations is quite low. Specifically, only 761 individuals from the 12,789 persons receiving initial mail solicitations became Project NetWork demonstration treatment or control members, for a participation rate of 6.0 percent. The rate is even lower – 2.9 percent (41/1397) – for those persons who received a follow-up solicitation letter in the mails. The face-to-face interviews of SSI applicants yielded a much-higher participation rate of 21.9 percent (262/1197). However, the highest rates, perhaps not surprisingly, were recorded for the relatively low frequency instances of self-referrals, at 45.6 percent (21/46), other, at 43 percent (83/193), and other agency referral, at a 42.3 percent participation rate. Even the recent DI allowances, although few in number, had a relatively high participation rate of 21.4 percent (6/28) when compared to the mail solicitation approach..

According to the Abt report, the favorable Virginia experience with SSI applicants may have been highly unusual. The overall participation rate for SSI applicants for the entire demonstration was only 4.2%. One explanation may be that once the mailings in Virginia were exhausted the case managers were forced to recruit more heavily from the ranks of SSI applicants. There is anecdotal evidence that applicants were being badgered to participate despite not being interested. Indeed, this lack of interest is consistent with what Abt found in discussions with case managers. At several sites recruiting SSI applicants was suspended because it was deemed unproductive.

“In general, applicants were said by case managers to be less likely than existing beneficiaries to volunteer for Project NetWork, because their health and personal situations were in greater flux than current beneficiaries. Applicants were believed to apply for benefits because they felt that they were too disabled to work, so they did not understand why they were being solicited to participate in a back-to-work program. Some applicants felt that they had to volunteer for Project NetWork or their chance of getting benefits would get hurt, even after being told that participation was strictly voluntary. These applicants sometimes agreed to participate but dropped out of the program once they realized that Project NetWork was truly voluntary. One case manager in Fort Worth said, “If applicants hear that they are getting approved for benefits,

you never hear from them again.” (Abt Associates, page 2-5).

Factors Affecting Project NetWork Participation

Recall the overall participation rate for the entire Project NetWork Demonstration is 4.5 percent. With a wealth of variables collected from the baseline survey of a sample of program eligibles, it is possible to model this participation decision in a multivariate framework, wherein the marginal impacts of a given factor on the participation rate could be examined, while controlling for the separate influence of the other variables. Unfortunately, the Abt study includes only a univariate analysis of the participation decision by reporting participation rates stratified by different groups of categorical variables, (e.g., age, years of schooling, race, sex, primary impairment, and time intervals for receipt of SSI/SSDI payments). A test of statistically significant differences in participation rates for the classifications of each variable is also reported. Results are presented separately by SSA payment status as well as by site.

Summarizing those factors for which there were statistically significant differences within the various categories of the given factor posited to affect participation yields the following.

- Men had slightly higher (4.7 percent) participation rates than women (4.2%) in the overall demonstration.
- Persons age 31-40 had the highest participation rate (5.6 percent) and were almost twice as likely to participate as those over 50, who had the lowest rate (3.0 percent).
- Blacks (5.0 percent) were 16 percent more likely to participate than whites (4.4%).
- Higher levels of education led to greater participation rates. Persons who had graduated from college (or higher) were almost twice as likely as those who did not finish high school to participate (6.7 versus 3.4 percent).
- Those persons self-reporting good to excellent health were more than twice as likely to participate, as those perceived to be in poor health (6.1 versus 2.5 percent).
- All four of the measures of functional limitations (communication, mobility, and two different activities of daily living scales) impacted on the decision to participate. Persons without limitations in one of these measures were twice as likely to participate as those with severe limitations.
- Persons who worked in the past 12 months had a participation rate of 6.8%, more than twice the rate for persons who had never worked (2.6%). Moreover, for the persons who worked in the past year, the participation rate was dramatically higher for persons working 30 or more hours versus those working less than 30 hours (11.0 versus 4.8%).
- There were several measures of attitude toward work, as well as lifestyle, transportation, and functional limitation variables collected by Abt during the baseline survey that led to differential participation rates.

Conclusions Drawn by the Abt Researchers in the Project NetWork Participation Report

The Abt study determined that the three strongest indicators of a person choosing not to

participate were: 1) severe limitations as reported in either of the activities of daily living scales; 2) a self-reported inability to work; and 3) never having worked. (Of course the latter indicator is not relevant for DI beneficiaries, who must have a significant work history in order to qualify for the program.) Conversely, the most important factor associated with participating in the Project NetWork Demonstration is being employed for more than 30 hours per week in the past year.

The Abt researchers then segmented the eligible population for the Project NetWork Demonstration into three groups according to the likelihood of their participating: 1) highly unlikely; 2) moderately likely; and 3) quite likely.

- The “very unlikely” cohort made up 73 percent of all project eligibles (the 145,000 persons solicited) but had a participation rate of only 2.6%. Such individuals invariably have never worked, perceive themselves as unable to work, and have a serious functional limitation.
- The “moderately likely” cohort comprised 24 percent of Project NetWork eligibles and had participation rates of 9.1 percent. This cohort was characterized as not having serious ADL disabilities, being able to work, but not working more than 30 hours per week in the past year.
- The “quite likely” to participate group was only three percent of the eligible population, but had participation rates of 12.2%. Such individuals do not have severe ADL limitations, self-report that they are able to work and have been employed more than 30 hours per week within the past year.

Examining Participation Rates According to Annual Earnings

The Abt report makes abundantly clear the importance of employment in the participation decision. Since ever working, and, in particular, working more than 30 hours per week in the past 12 months are strongly associated with participation it would seem that measures of annual earnings levels and employment rates merit some closer examination. The earnings variable examined in the Abt study is the level of annual earnings for participants and non-participants in years prior to the date of random assignment to the demonstration. The SSA Master Earnings File maintains records of calendar year earnings but these data were only available at the group (10 to 19 persons), not individual level. As such, the Abt study could not examine participation rates by subgroups of the eligible population. However, they were able to examine the mean earnings for participants versus non-participants. They found that participants had lower annual earnings than non-participants in both years (\$4,035 vs. \$4,608 in 1990 and \$3,077 vs. \$3,693 in 1991). The Abt researchers cautioned that these intervals may combine pre-disability onset and post-disability onset periods of earnings. Moreover, they could not tell whether these earnings corresponded to periods prior to or after the person was on the SSA disability rolls.

A more general problem with the SSA Earnings File is that they are only available on a calendar year basis. Calendar year earnings are not “aligned” around the month in which the solicitation occurred. This means that one cannot infer too much about earnings in the period immediately preceding solicitation or random assignment. For instance, a person assigned to the demonstration on July 1 could potentially have six months of pre-random assignment and six months of post-random assignment earnings. Since the SSA only reports earnings during this calendar year it is impossible to accurately assign them to the relevant interval. This makes examining the influence of earnings levels on participation rates problematic.

Fortunately, quarterly earnings collected by the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) were

obtained on an individual basis for the eligible population in the Virginia VR Outstation Model. With individual earnings records the pre-demonstration earnings can be stratified according to participant status as well as SSA beneficiary status. Recall, there were approximately 15,000 persons solicited at the Virginia site. This eligible population resulted in roughly 12,500 persons who did not respond (subsequently referred to as “non-respondents”) to the mailing solicitation. VEC earnings were collected on a ten percent sample of these non-respondents (roughly 1,200 persons). The balance of 2,500 individuals “pre-applied” in that they attended, or at least expressed interest in attending, the information session detailing the opportunities offered by the Project NetWork demonstration. Roughly half of this group chose not to participate in the demonstration (called hereafter “non-participants”). The remaining 1,200 “participants” were assigned to either the treatment or control group.

VEC earnings from 1990-2000 are available for these three roughly equal-sized groups with an assigned Project NetWork status of non-respondent, non-participant, or participant. Three yearly periods of earnings prior to the quarter in which the solicitation (or random assignment) took place are available for these cohorts. Table 1 presents these earnings sorted by gender and SSA status. The top two panels report earnings information for DI for female and male DI beneficiaries. There is remarkable similarity for men and women in both the earnings levels and employment rates. A close inspection reveals a steady decline in both average annual earnings and the percent of beneficiaries with VEC-reported earnings as they get closer to the date of random assignment. Indeed, earnings in the period three years prior to assignment are more than twice the amount reported in the year immediately preceding notification of the demonstration. These declines occur irrespective of gender and Project NetWork participant status. This is noteworthy in that most of the DI beneficiaries have been on the rolls for several years. The lower earnings and employment rates for the non-respondents are consistent with the Abt findings about persons most unlikely to participate. The higher earnings for non-participants versus participants indicates that many of the non-participants had an earnings profile that made them appear to be viable candidates for return-to-work services, but chose not to partake of them.

The female and male SSI recipient cohorts, listed in the middle two panels, had much lower earnings levels and employment rates than the DI beneficiary cohorts. Another distinction is that while non-respondent earnings are similar across gender, the earnings levels for male participants and non-participants on SSI are more than double their female counterparts in five of the six sample comparisons. At the same time, those SSI recipients who ended up as non-participants and participants experience the same deterioration in earnings levels and employment rates over time as exhibited by the DI cohort. Once again, the earnings of non-participants are comparable to, if not higher than, those of the participants for the given pre-demonstration annual intervals. As with the DI beneficiaries, the SSI recipients have been on the rolls for a substantial period of time; these three years of earnings are all most likely occurring while the person is already disabled and on the rolls. There must be factors other than earnings that dictate why non-participants don't take the next step and become NetWork volunteers.

The earnings and employment rates for female and male SSI applicants, provided in the bottom two panels, are the highest of the three SSA disability payment groupings. This is perhaps not surprising given that these people are not receiving any disability-related transfer payments at the time of being solicited to participate in the demonstration. The earnings for men are a bit higher

for each time period and participant status. While there is a drop-off in earnings and employment rates it does not seem to be as pronounced as for the other cohorts already on the SSA rolls. Of course for SSI applicants this drop-off could be indicative of the onset of disability, although unlikely given the presence of congenital developmental disability for many SSI applicants.

Table 1: Pre-Solicitation Average Yearly Earnings and Employment Rates							
		Pre-Solicitation Annual Earnings Period					
		Year 3		Year 2		Year 1	
Sample:	# obs.	Earnings	% w/earn	Earnings	% w/earn	Earnings	% w/earn
DI Beneficiaries - Female							
Participant	281	\$3,906	43.8%	\$2,518	35.6%	\$903	26.7%
Non-part.	172	\$3,900	39.5%	\$2,675	32.6%	\$1,655	26.7%
Non- resp.	293	\$2,862	26.6%	\$1,641	20.8%	\$589	13.3%
DI Beneficiaries - Male							
Participant	326	\$3,829	47.9%	\$2,310	36.5%	\$769	26.7%
Non-part.	230	\$3,387	39.1%	\$3,129	34.3%	\$1,669	31.3%
Non- resp.	420	\$3,916	28.3%	\$2,044	19.8%	\$852	12.9%
SSI Recipients - Female							
Participant	158	\$806	23.4%	\$360	17.7%	\$265	17.1%
Non-part.	121	\$1,025	26.4%	\$337	19.8%	\$212	12.4%
Non- resp.	233	\$212	10.7%	\$271	12.9%	\$276	10.3%
SSI Recipients - Male							
Participant	124	\$1,615	30.6%	\$1,233	25.0%	\$642	18.5%
Non-part.	114	\$1,676	31.6%	\$1,258	28.1%	\$1,056	22.8%
Non- resp.	191	\$325	18.3%	\$359	15.7%	\$243	11.0%
SSI Applicants - Female							
Participant	120	\$4,182	59.2%	\$4,106	55.8%	\$3,427	50.0%
Non-part.	284	\$3,410	40.8%	\$2,821	36.3%	\$2,165	36.6%
Non- resp.	42	\$818	31.0%	\$837	19.0%	\$869	14.3%
SSI Applicants - Male							
Participant	146	\$5,627	65.1%	\$4,646	57.5%	\$3,681	57.5%
Non-part.	282	\$4,934	47.5%	\$3,610	41.5%	\$2,910	39.4%
Non- resp.	44	\$1,387	34.1%	\$1,067	29.5%	\$492	29.5%