

## WORK

## 'We're used to seeing people on their worst day': Career centers help with more than jobs during pandemic

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For Bridget Altenburg, a work trip to Washington, D.C. in late February was business as usual. Meetings between the president and CEO of Chicago's [National Able Network](#), a career services nonprofit, and congressional staffers included the usual banter about the weather and how the Chicago Cubs would do this season.

But something else was on Altenburg's mind. Just a few days prior, one of her directors alerted her that Covid-19 was making its way through the U.S., and it was only a matter of time before it would affect National Able Network's operations providing job training and placement to roughly 75,000 job seekers across the Midwest.

By February 28, around the time President Donald Trump referred to the virus as a "hoax," Altenburg emailed her team with plans to implement social distancing at the network's offices, ramp up deep cleaning in their training centers and move all of their documents online. By March 16, National Able Network became a fully virtual career center.

"I'm continuously blown away at how great my team is adapting to this, and how passionate they are to help their job seekers in any way they possibly can," Altenburg tells [CNBC Make It](#) of the 120 staff members who transitioned to working from home.

The work of career services has never been so crucial as it is today, now that the pandemic has caused more than [30 million Americans](#) to lose jobs with no clear end in sight. But as career-center workers have changed how and where they do their jobs, the nature of their jobs has shifted, too. Many find they're helping people adjust to an entirely new way of living, in addition to finding work, and the stress that comes with it.

While many parts of National Able Network's coaching program can be done online, Altenburg says a digital divide persists. Those without internet access at home are most likely to face major threats to their finances, shelter, food security, health and overall wellbeing if they lose crucial work and wages. Within one program dedicated to senior workers, for example, Altenburg estimates 80% of the 1,000 participants don't have internet access at home.

To make up for it, staff members correspond with job seekers by physical mail and phone calls to send and update resumes, fill out online forms and work on job applications. Altenburg says call activity is up by 30% now that the network's physical locations are closed.

Despite digital solutions and analog workarounds, moving career services online means losing a critical component of helping people through the job search.

“One thing we’re trying to figure out is how coaches can address that emotional aspect of [job searching] when they’re not seeing people in person,” Altenburg says. While coaches work hard to help job seekers through the stressful process of job hunting, “it’s hard to build the same level of trust over the phone or online when you’re used to doing it in person.”

“We’re used to seeing people on their worst day,” she continues. “Now, there’s an added element of fearing for your safety.”

The loss of in-person human connection has also [impacted networking](#), arguably the most effective way to land a new job.

“My wings have been clipped,” says Jane Oates. Part of her job as president of [WorkingNation](#), a nonprofit campaign about employment, includes organizing conferences and panel events about the job market. With travel at a standstill and continued limitations on in-person gatherings, many of her spring and summer hiring events have been canceled.

“A lot of our usual spring activities, which bring talent and great employers together, were all sidelined,” Oates says. WorkingNation has participated in some virtual networking events, but they reach far fewer people than they would offline.

No longer able to connect job seekers with employers in person, Oates worries for the individuals left to navigate the hiring landscape on their own.

“The anonymous nature of applying for jobs online and having to sell yourself is discouraging,” she explains. Sending in dozens of applications and not hearing back can lead people to question what they’re personally doing wrong to end up with so little feedback.

“People need to go into this being resilient,” Oates says, particularly given the tough job market of today. “Don’t be disappointed if you don’t hear back from someone right away or at all.”

That sentiment is behind a new “[resilience coaching](#)” program offered by the [New York Public Library’s Career Services](#) department. In addition to traditional career coaching sessions, which help job seekers improve their resumes, interviewing skills and

networking, resilience coaching offers tips for safeguarding mental health and handling the stress of life during a pandemic.

“Everybody has bad days but how do we make sure we don’t stay stuck in those bad days, and how can we build a tangible plan for moving forward?” says Marzena Ermler, manager of the library network’s career services.

Ermler says the library asked patrons whether they’d be interested in such a resource, as well as if people would be interested in volunteering their time to be resilience coaches. The library received overwhelming response from people across the U.S. — and as far as Belgium — about wanting to help others in need. As of late April, four library staffers and 16 volunteers offered resilience coaching. Anyone, regardless of whether they’re a library patron or in the New York area, can receive coaching or volunteer to be a part of the program.

Unlike turning to a friend or housemate who may also be under a lot of personal stress, “a resilience coach is an outside empathetic person who concentrates only on you and can help you,” Ermler says. “I think that’s incredibly invaluable.”

Beyond emotional support, career centers are also expanding the breadth of resources they offer to those coming to them for guidance.

That’s the case at the [University of Florida Career Connections Center](#), which serves over 56,000 students.

“It’s changed the day-to-day types of conversations we’re having with students,” says senior director Ja’Net Glover. Many students have come to the career center, by phone or through video, to navigate the logistics of having an internship or entry-level job [postponed or canceled altogether](#). Students planning to go into industries being completely waylaid by the pandemic may have an especially tough time coming up with a plan B (or C, or D).

In addition to making sure students feel heard and validated when future prospects are nothing but uncertain, Glover says her team has been directing students to organizations that can help with concerns related to food insecurity, housing and mental health support.

“It’s so important for us to help students adapt to what’s going on around us,” she says,  
“and remind them of their ability to be resilient when we’re going through such a crisis.”