

Mentors can help new employees to settle in

Starting a new job can be traumatic. Wendy Taylor looks at a way to overcome it.

DRIAN JENKINS has been helping unemployed people find work for the past 22 years. He started on the front desk at a CES office, later moved to Employment National, the agency formed to manage the first contracts with private and not-for-profit employment agencies, and today is the Victorian manager of Sarina Russo Job Access, a private Job Network provider with eight offices in Melbourne.

According to Mr Jenkins, the caseloads of employment consultants have become increasingly challenging over the past decade as they face a higher proportion of clients for whom a lack of work is only one of their problems.

More clients, he says, now struggle with substance abuse or undiagnosed mental health problems, are in transitional housing or are dealing with other complex problems.

The implication for employment agencies is that even though a buoyant economy means employers are more willing to take on job seekers they would have overlooked a decade ago, the traditional case-management model of placing job seekers and maintaining phone contact is often inadequate to stop a placement failing. "We found we were placing people, but they weren't staying," he says.

So to more effectively help clients needing more intense and individualised support and monitoring, the company introduced mentors. "If we can get a job seeker past that first dangerous three-month period, then we have far greater chance of them staying in employment," says Mr Jenkins.

Jo Langhorne has been contracted to act as a mentor since November last year and supports 20 to 30 Sarina Russo Job Access clients.

Ms Langhorne had worked for eight years at Flight Centre. She started as a consultant, moved into training and finished as an area manager.

"In my Flight Centre background I was used to working with young, motivated, pumped-up salespeople who really wanted to achieve something," she says. "So this is very different for me. But what I have learnt is that it is not that people don't want to achieve, it's that they don't know what's possible."

She cites many examples of job seekers she's successfully worked with, including a

young woman who, although new in a job, was taking regular sick days. "Once a week she would be phoning in sick and she was really jeopardising her job," Ms Langhorne says.

"Meeting with her, however, I realised that she had nothing really to look forward to. She didn't have any goals and she had no incentive to work because she lived at home, so if she didn't work it didn't really matter because her parents would help her out.

"But then we worked out that she did really want to buy her own home. I was then able to link this to why she should go to work. So how much deposit she would need, how much she needed to earn each week, and how much she needed to put aside. She was someone who hadn't held a job for more than eight to 10 weeks, but she is still in her job now."

How Ms Langhorne supports other clients depends on what they need to stick at a job. "Most of my work is in the middle of the afternoon to early evening. I usually speak to employers in the afternoon and then call people after they have returned home from work."

For others it involves more hands-on assistance, coaching on handling interviews or sitting down with a client and his or her employer to clarify expectations.

Ms Langhorne says her main focus is on helping people readjust to work and teaching them workplace etiquette.

"I work with people who have been unemployed from six weeks to three, four or six years. If someone has been unemployed for three or four years-plus, their routine may be that they can sleep in and they don't have to be anywhere on time.

"So I make sure they turn up on time and that their life supports them going to work. That is, that they're not out 'til four in the morning if they have to go to work at 7am."

"Sometimes it is just educating the job seekers about the workforce. That you don't make a doctor's appointment during the day, that you make it before work or after work. Or if it is one that you absolutely have to have during the day, then you ask your employer first, you don't say to them, 'I'm not coming it tomorrow because I have an appointment,'" she says. Ms Langhorne says the approach hasn't worked for everyone but it has helped dozens of job seekers to hold down jobs and has given them hope for the future.

LINK:

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After being unemployed for some time, people can benefit from mentors advising them about returning to work. Picture: AFR