



## **Interview with a Minnesota public radio producer**

Intro: My guest today is Bill Martin, CEO of United Products and a board member of Lifetrack Resources in St Paul. Lifetrack is a service organization that provides transitional support for Minnesotans with employment barriers.

Host: Who are the people Lifetrack is serving, what type of problems do they face?

**Weak Start:** Lifetrack works with a wide variety of people. On example is Ruth Wilson, she's a 26 years old single parent with two school aged children. Ruth spent several years in an abusive relationship, had extremely low self esteem, no work history and little education.

Lifetrack worked with Ruth on such basic skills as applying for a job, and interviewing, and helped her plan a job search. Once she found an employer willing to give her a chance, Lifetrack worked closely with her to maintain job attendance and punctuality. Ruth works for a building maintenance company, her first job was simply laying out supplies for each work crew, replenishing cleaning fluids and cleaning mops, dust cloths, etc. That was more than a year ago, today Ruth has been promoted to a cleaning crew, working about 32 hours a week while her kids are in school. Ruth is just one of more then 350 people Lifetrack helped last year.

DON'T:

Use individual stories.

Characterize the situation as the struggle of an individual to overcome barriers. suggesting that problems were of her own making.

**Strong Start:** Lifetrack works with a wide variety of people who make up our community. We view each individual as a potentially productive and contributing member of the community. Then we ask what are the barriers that need to be overcome to get them working and contributing. The people we work with can best be characterized as people that have barriers, very often multiple barriers that prevent employment. It may be a physical, mental or learning disability. In others it maybe a language barrier, or they maybe victims of domestic violence, immigrants and refugees.

In every case, incorporating these people into the day to day life of our community is the goal. Helping them get and retain a job, pay their bills, and make a contribution to their families and their neighborhoods.

Lifetrack identifies and works on individual strengths, weaknesses and interests – and to figure out where people can fit into our community. You know, there are a great many jobs that need to be done in Minnesota, and it is remarkable to see the pride and determination people bring to the challenges of getting and keeping a job. Hundreds of people who were once dependent on the state for assistance are now leading far more self-sufficient lives, going to a regular job, meeting schedules and playing a useful role in the community.

DO:

Establish the goal of community incorporation before describing the problems people face.

Explain what barriers prohibit incorporation and focus attention on Lifetrack's work in removing the barriers.

Use "big picture" thinking to reinforce the benefits to Minnesota.

Host: Can you explain just what an employment barrier is?

**Weak answer:** Sure. As an employer we get all kinds of applicants. Some are obviously great job candidates and we can hire them and put them to work immediately. But many other people, who might end up good workers, aren't as good of a bet. We have applicants that speak very little English for example. We don't know if they will be able to fit into our company or not. Others have problems such as mental illness or disability combined with a long history of unemployment, or a spotty track record of work. As an employer, we wonder if they will be reliable. Or someone may have been recently released from prison, they are looking for a fresh start and we have to decide if we will take a chance on them. Each of these circumstances raises a red flag, makes a company wary of the risk associated with someone who is less likely to work out than the recent school graduate with all the basic skills in place.

For job applicants, these are barriers to success. Lifetracks knows such barriers can be overcome, but works to help employers with the understanding that some applicants are starting from an unequal footing.

DON'T:

Emphasize the individual and the risk they represent.

Describe barriers without demonstrating they are solvable problems.

Invite listeners to wonder about the moral worthiness of the individual.

**Strong answer:** Sure. As an employer we get all kinds of applicants. There are all kinds of people who could be great employees if we look past first impressions and understand how we can help them fit our needs. We have applicants that speak very little English for

example. Their drive alone makes them potentially great employees, but it takes a little time and work to get the mastery of English and get accustomed to how we do things here. We see people who have physical or mental disabilities, combined with no work experience, unstable housing and lack of access to transportation. Lifetrack has programs specifically designed to help people like this get the basic skills and personal organization that employers require. It helps overcome the barriers that stand between them and a good, stable job...and a productive role in our state's economy. Employers work with Lifetrack to specify what type of needs they have and Lifetrack sets about training individuals that can match those basic needs. It's a partnership between our company and the community -- represented by Lifetrack. When the pieces all come together everyone benefits.

DO:

Describe the benefits in terms of the community.

Use economic benefits to all as a supportive message.

Describe the problems in terms of the solutions.

Offer models ("the pieces all come together") that encourage big picture thinking.

Host: That seems like a lot of effort. There are other unemployed people in the community, why not just turn to them, rather than going through this process, why not just use the workforce that's available at the moment?.

**False Start:** We believe it is important to help those who are in need. People with employment barriers need an extra hand if they are going to make it. This process helps level the playing field and give opportunity to people who would otherwise fall through the cracks and continue to be dependent on society rather than self-sufficient. We consider all candidates for jobs. If a currently unemployed person applies and is the right fit, we will hire them. Sometimes we have little choice but to work with individuals to help them overcome barriers. In either case, our goal is to get a good employee.

DON'T:

Appeal to charity, which takes the listener away from thinking in terms of systems.

Describe the beneficiaries as a special interest, individuals who deserves help above others.

**Strong start:** It's in the company's interest, and in everyone's interest, that the people in our community have an opportunity to contribute and participate. People with employment barriers need an extra hand if they are going to have an opportunity. Making sure someone has basic skills, has some training in job interviewing, job search, and performance expectations, actually raises the quality of the workforce as a whole. When we can work with Lifetrack and potential employees to overcome barriers, to give them the chance to participate, to prove themselves, that is simply one more capable and productive person in the community. Everyone's quality of life improves when more people become capable and self-sufficient. As an employer, we invest in the community all the time, not just by supporting the local softball team, but by paying taxes, providing

jobs to residents, by contributing to the planning and vision for the community that we are a part of. Our work with Lifetrack is about building the community as we meet our workforce needs.

DO:

Describe work in terms of “contributing” and “participating”.

Emphasize the interest of the community rather than the economy.

Compare Lifetrack to other community-building endeavors.

Host: Well, since you put it that way, why should the state, through our tax dollars, be helping employers in job training? You are the one that ultimately benefits, why should we have to subsidize your training costs?

**Weak Start:** Keeping our economy strong is everyone’s responsibility – business and workers, of course, and government programs too. Getting a person who is presently dependent on government services more self-sufficient saves taxpayers money, and it often prevents more serious problems as well. Parents who are working and self-sufficient instill those values in their children. The more people we can have working and contributing, the stronger our economy will be and the smaller the state expenses for support and other services.

DON’T:

Lead with the context of the economy.

Describe the value of prevention in terms of the economy.

Cue government services. All three of these put listeners in a competitive mode: who’s getting something I’m not getting?

**Strong start:** It’s true, the company, and our customers in communities throughout the state also benefit from having a well trained employee who’s ready to work. So does the employee, that person’s family and neighbors, the church or other groups they are part of, the taxpayers... It’s kind of a ripple effect: every time another member of the community moves to a position where they can be actively involved and a contributing member of society, it makes the community stronger.

DO:

Describe work in terms of “contributing” and “participating”.

Emphasize the interest of the community rather than the economy.

Provide an image, such as ripple effect, that suggests interdependence.

Host: Thank you, Bill Martin is a board member of Lifetrack Resources.