

The Invisible Realities of Welfare Reform in Wisconsin: Perspectives of African American Women and Their Employers

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This study explored the experiences of African American women as they transitioned from welfare to work and develop economic self-sufficiency. The barriers to self-sufficiency included the "work-first" philosophy and case management practices, labor market conditions and employment practices, and personal history. HRD can help minimize these barriers through collaborations with welfare reform agencies, community organizations, and educational institutions to offer workplace education that would address the low literacy and work skills of former welfare recipients.

The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) brought a new culture to welfare in the United States. This legislation replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. PRWORA significantly changed the structure of income support for poor families by eliminating any entitlement to cash assistance, imposing a time limit for federal aid, and granting broad discretion to states in designing work-based programs to promote economic self-sufficiency among poor families with children. Even prior to the passage of PRWORA, Wisconsin was experimenting with the concept of welfare reform, and in 1995, the state legislature passed Wisconsin Act 289, paving the way for the Wisconsin Works program, more commonly known as W-2. A primary characteristic of W-2 is its concept of universal participation, meaning that everyone must participate in some approved work activity. This universal approach assumes that everyone has equal opportunities to become self-sufficient as a result of their labor force participation.

A Portrait of Lives Caught in a Culture of Welfare Reform

As a result of the changes in the welfare policy and the positive labor-market conditions during the latter part of the 1990s, welfare caseloads have substantially decreased (Brauner & Loprest, 1999; Holzer, 2000; Mead, 2002). According to Brauner and Loprest, from March 1994, which was the peak of welfare caseloads, to September 1998, the national caseload of welfare recipients decreased by 43 percent. Wisconsin's cash-assistance caseload during that period decreased by 89 percent, the highest decrease in the nation. From 1997 to 1999, for example, Wisconsin recorded the highest work levels among low-income parents of any of the 13 states in the Urban Institute's National Survey of American Families (Mead, 2002). To that end, Wisconsin has been hailed as the most successful reform state in the nation. However, critics question the extent to which the decline in caseload during the latter part of the 1990s was a result of the reform initiative or the positive labor market conditions of that period.

While the data suggest increased workplace participation, there is evidence to suggest that certain structural barriers keep participants from becoming self-sufficient. The findings on earnings and income, for example, consistently show that welfare leavers who join the workforce were typically entering jobs paying below-poverty-level wages (an average of roughly \$6 - \$8 per hour) and they were not receiving employer-provided benefits, such as health insurance or paid sick or vacation leave (United States House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 2000, p. 1409). Even though employment increased, the aggregate earnings increased very little, if at all. Another critically important consideration is the educational achievement of former welfare recipients. The evidence suggests that welfare recipients have fairly low levels of basic reading and mathematics skills, and they generally lack academic and occupational skills (Martin & Alfred, 2002; Scott, 2000). In her study of welfare-reliant women and their job aspirations, Scott (2000) found that in Cleveland, for example, approximately 36 percent had less than a high school diploma, 11 percent had a GED, and about 32 percent had completed some schooling beyond high school. Among the Philadelphia respondents, approximately 67 percent had less than a high school education, 17 percent had a high school diploma, 11 percent had a GED, and about 6 percent had completed some schooling beyond high school. In addition to the problems addressed thus far, data from the literature suggest that many women face additional personal and structural barriers to becoming self-sufficient. Among these include health crises, inadequate and unstable housing, mental health problems, alcohol and drug dependence, domestic violence, problems with access to daycare, and transportation problems (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2002; Mead, 2002).

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While women experience some similar barriers, they are not a homogeneous group, and that another critically important issue is the differential impact on members of racial/ethnic minorities (Holzer & Stoll, 2000; Savner, 2000). Indeed, race and gender intersect to create a different set of experiences for women of color.

Although the racial and ethnic impacts of welfare reform have received less attention from the research community than other factors, existing evidence indicates "somewhat differential impacts for minorities and whites, and in some studies, discriminatory treatment of minority groups" (Savner, 2000, p. 3). For example, Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O'Brien (2003) note that Black and Hispanic recipients tend to have longer stays on welfare and are, therefore, more likely to be affected by time limits. Similarly, according to Carroll (2001) and Gordon (2001), White recipients are more likely to find employment and/or receive more favorable treatments from welfare agency workers. In addition, Savner (2000) found Whites to be more likely to leave welfare because of employment, whereas, African Americans were more likely to be sanctioned off the welfare rolls. Not surprisingly, there is evidence to suggest that those states with the highest population of African Americans had the most severe sanction policies, (Soss et al., 2003). Other findings indicate that African Americans were less likely to be hired in majority white companies and were more likely to be hired in companies where there was a good representation of African Americans (Holzer & Stoll, 2000). As a result, some critics argue that racism is at the root of the philosophy on welfare reform (Soss et al.).

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American women who were transitioning from welfare and that of their employers to determine the extent to which working recipients were becoming self-sufficient from working. The research questions were as follows: (1) How do African American women describe their experiences with W-2, and how do they perceive their chances of becoming self-sufficient through their work? (2) What are employers' perceptions of the welfare reform initiative, and what are their experiences with former welfare recipients in the workplace? To address the research questions, this qualitative research study drew on an interpretive interactionist perspective to explore the complex phenomenon of welfare reform from the perspectives of those who were living the experience. The interactionist perspective is "a study of the subjective and everyday experiences of human beings from their own point of view" (Chovanec, 1996, p. 56).

The study participants included six employer representatives in the Milwaukee area who had hired and were supervising the work of African American female W-2 recipients and 15 employed recipients. The former recipients were employed women, who were receiving no cash assistance, but they were qualified for other services, for example, child care. The criteria for the employer sample were that they had to have hired and supervised W-2 participants. The six employers supervised the work activities of 12 of the 15 former welfare recipients who were involved in the study, and they represented the following employment sectors: the after-school program within an area public school; the food service department within another public school; retail sales with a nationally-known company; a nonprofit community service agency, one independently-owned child development center, and one nationally-known child development agency. Demographically, they were composed of one white male, two white females, and three black females.

Data collection was accomplished primarily through focus groups and open-ended, face-to-face interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice. All of the employed participants were interviewed once individually and some were interviewed as a member of a focus group. The employer interviews were all conducted individually in their respective workplaces. The interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for verification of accuracy. Data were coded and recorded using the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The employers' and employees' data were further analyzed for common themes in perceptions and experiences.

Findings

In this section, I give a brief profile of the former welfare recipients who participated in the study and present the structural and personal barriers that complicate their transition to self-sufficiency. The structural barriers had to do with the philosophy and the administrative practices of W-2 and workplace-related issues. The personal barriers were influenced by the characteristics of the individuals and the contexts of their living conditions.

Profile of W-2 Study Participants

Fifteen W-2 employed African American women, ranging from ages 21-43, participated in the study. Ten participants were in their 20's, three participants were in their 30's and two were in their 40's. The number of years on public assistance ranged from 2 - 20, with the oldest member (43 years old) having received public assistance for 20 years. One 28-year old had five children and another 35-year old (Jackie) had thirteen, with three sets of twins.

Jackie's children ranged in ages, from 4 - 16. The other participants had between 1 to 3 children. The only married participant was Vikki, who had three children and had been on public assistance for four years. She was attending college at the time of the interview and was near the completion of her undergraduate degree. She was working two part-time jobs, totaling 40 hours a week, and she was enrolled in four college courses. She credited her ability to pursue school and work to her husband who supported her by taking care of the household activities. All of the women received child care support and some received food stamps. None received cash assistance.

All the employee participants identified themselves as high school graduates, with nine having some post-secondary education. They all worked in service-related occupations, including clerical, retail, customer service, childcare, and food service. These jobs are classified as secondary jobs with low wages, few employer-sponsored benefits, and few opportunities for advancement. Ten of the women worked fewer than 40 hours a week, and overall, their wages ranged from \$6.50 to \$11.25 an hour. These findings support those of Jacobson and Green (2000), Martin and Alfred (2002) who reported wages among this group to be between \$6.25 and \$12.25 an hour.

Barriers and Challenges to Economic Self-Sufficiency

The participants were asked to describe their experiences with W-2 and to identify barriers to their transition and the opportunities available within the system for meeting cultural expectations. Based on their experiences with former welfare recipients in the workplace, employers were also asked to give their opinions of welfare and their perceptions of the barriers and challenges that African American women face in meeting the mandates of W-2. These barriers and challenges are identified as (1) W-2 philosophy of the work-first approach, (2) labor market conditions and employment practices, and (3) personal history and responsibility.

W-2 philosophy and the "Work-First" approach. The participants identified a number of issues that hinder the transition to self-sufficiency. The barriers in this category that were cited most frequently were the ideology of the work-first approach, the limited opportunities for human capital development through education and training, negative interactions with case managers, and W-2 agency and staff incentives for caseload reductions. This paper will address the first two themes within this category as they are most relevant to human resource development.

One of the fundamental barriers that both participants and employers identified was the philosophy of the work-first approach to welfare reform. The study found that, in some cases, participants were unprepared for the workplace, lacked the necessary education and training, and were unfamiliar with workplace cultures and expectations. As Vanessa noted, "They put you to work, but they don't understand that you don't know nothing about work. Then people get fired instead of making them aware. . . . Sometimes people are just not ready, and they set them up for failure." Employers also shared their perceptions and their experiences with workers who were oftentimes under-prepared and under-skilled for workplace activities, but who were forced to enter the workforce to meet the work-first expectations of the reform effort. For instance, one employer with the after school program of a local public school noted,

I don't think the whole idea of W-2 was well thought through as far as the implementation of it. They want people to be self-sufficient, and they think that a minimum wage job can accomplish that. For a single woman with three to four kids, how can she support them on a minimum wage job? W-2 should have provided opportunities for the women to build skills that would help them move from minimum wage jobs. These insights suggest that the "work-first" approach to welfare reform creates significant obstacles to fulfilling the expectations of the reform initiative. Some of the participants felt that they were unprepared to meet employer demands and that more training was needed to prepare them for the work place. While W-2 agencies provided some training, these were usually concentrated in the areas of basic skills and soft skills training. Moreover, such training was often interrupted when employment became available.

The study found that another significant problem with the work-first approach was the limited provisions for increasing human capital. Human capital theory suggests that increasing human capital is directly related to education and training (Cote & Levin, 2002). Therefore, in order for individuals to increase their worth in the workplace, they must engage in education and training activities that will increase their worth in the employment marketplace. However, participants noted that the new welfare culture discouraged the pursuit of post-secondary education. Those who were participating in higher education at the time W-2 was implemented had to drop out to participate in work activities. As Tasha noted, "When W-2 started, that was sad for a lot of women. It was like you had to drop out of school to go to work. I felt bad because a lot of us had to drop out of school, and that was totally unfair. That was not right; that was not right." Tasha was in a radiology program at the technical college and she, too, had to drop out to secure full-time work. Similarly, one employer noted:

One pitfall of W-2 is they want people to become self-sufficient, but they don't give them the proper tools to do that in a timely fashion. We have to take one step at a time. If one needs a GED or just adult basic skills because she cannot read, you have to take her from the step where she is, but do not take her livelihood away. Give her the education and the skills that would help her earn a decent living. This may

take a little time, but in the end, it will be worth it. The notion of self-sufficiency is not working. There are so many things programming them to fail because you have to have the right elements, the right resources to become self-sufficient.

Both participants and employers realized that the prospects for becoming self-sufficient rest with the acquisition of further education and training, and the former welfare participants indicated a willingness to do so if they had the financial and social capital resources.

Labor market conditions and employment practices. The paths to self-sufficiency rest with the women's ability to maintain long-term employment with wages that would push them above the poverty level. Indeed, this study found that labor market conditions and workplace practices significantly impact the movement to self-sufficiency. The barriers within this category that were identified as most critical were the low-wage labor market where the majority of these workers are concentrated, lack of employer support and understanding of the characteristics and needs of low-income working women, inadequate training, mentoring, and coaching, and workplace discrimination.

As most studies of welfare reform have pointed out, simply having a job is not enough to move recipients to self-sufficiency. Results from these studies clearly indicate that the effectiveness of the "work-first approach" to self-sufficiency was more of a myth than a reality when dealing with low-income workers with family responsibilities. The study participants shared a similar view. They shared their frustrations with the low-wage labor market and their reality that their participation in such a market would not move them to a position of self-sufficiency. Kayla, who worked in food service at one of the area child development centers, noted,

I work for \$7.85 an hour, but I only work about 35-38 hours a week. The company offers medical, but it is so expensive that I could not afford to get it for me and my son. We get Badger care [medical insurance] from the state and that helps. . . . I have been on this job for two and a half years. I have gone from \$7 to \$7.85 an hour and I don't think that I can go much further unless I go back to school.

Kayla's experience is representative of those of the other participants and supports the findings of prior studies that suggest post-welfare recipients are concentrated in the secondary labor market, work part time, have access to only minimal fringe benefits, and have few opportunities for promotion and advancement.

Similarly, both the participants and employers strongly agreed that employer understanding of the issues that low-income women face and providing their support are crucial in keeping post-welfare recipients attached to the workplace. The women expressed the desire to be treated as an equal employee and not as a W-2 recipient, to have an employer understand their situation as single parents with dependent children, and to be flexible with their scheduling when family emergencies occur. For example, Sharon noted,

The employers must give the women a chance even though they are on W-2. Being on W-2, you should not be treated any differently. A lot of people think that they are lazy or don't want to work. I know there are some people who hit that stereotype button, but everyone is not like that. There are some of us out there who have always worked and want to work. Give us a chance and treat us just like everyone else is treated, being an equal employer.

Not surprisingly, the findings indicate that the women tend to thrive best in a work environment that promotes a sense of family and community. Vanessa, for example, works for a child development center, and she expressed her gratitude for her family-friendly work environment her employer has created. She noted,

I have had jobs where the employer did not care about you as a person. Now I work for a daycare center, and I have a good supervisor. She owns the daycare, and she treats us like family. She is very understanding and tries to work with us when the kids are sick or we have a problem. She is very easy to talk to. . . . This job does not pay much, but I really like it because of the family atmosphere.

The employers also agreed that creating a supportive environment helps former welfare recipients attach themselves more permanently to the workplace because they develop a more positive attitude about work. As one noted,

Employers must show that they care. The participants must know that you care. If I don't think that you care about me, then I am not going to open up to you. I am not going to show you any vulnerability. I am going to come in hard. They are like a wall when they first come in. You are going to have to break through that wall, and the only way you get through that wall is to show them you care. You must create a supportive work environment. (Employer/Owner, Child Development Center)

Creating supportive and caring work environments was found to be an important strategy in employee retention. Participants agree that working for a caring employer motivates them to go to work, to perform to the best of their abilities, and to not let their employers down.

Moreover, it has been established that women transitioning from welfare end up in jobs that require minimal skills and education. Therefore, workplace training is usually limited to learning specific skills necessary for job performance (Jacobson & Green, 2000). The training and coaching necessary for helping these new workers meet

other cultural expectations are often lacking in workplace orientation and socialization programs. Ann, one of the more accomplished of the former welfare recipients, noted,

They should have orientation and let W-2 workers know what it means to be professional. What is professional to me may not be professional to you. Some women have people who will tell them how to be professional, but many of them don't know anyone in the business. It's just that some women don't know because their mother didn't know, their mother's mother didn't know, and it just goes back. People need to know what it means to be professional and the employers should provide the training and provide them with something like a mentor or someone to help you out.

Ann saw mentoring and coaching as significant to the socialization process and one of the employers agreed with her and further noted the challenges of developing workers with little work history. As the employer noted,

It takes a whole bunch of coaching to get them to a point where they are comfortable in the workplace. They don't know; they don't have information. For a lot of them, it is their first job that they ever had. It takes patience, tolerance, and long suffering to try to work with them. You have to help them from the transition of no job to the job market.

Similarly, another employer of a nonprofit agency noted,

I pray for guidance in working with the ones who have never worked before. I see myself as a trainer. I have taken that on as a calling. I make it a point not to fire people because you have not accomplished anything if you fire, but if you work through the bugs, more than likely you can get a good employee. They find some value in you and you in them.

These experiences speak to the complexities and challenges of developing welfare-reliant workers, particularly the ones who are new to the workplace. As these data indicate, it takes a special employer, one who is dedicated to the development of human potential, to help the new entrants in attaching themselves to the workplace. Together with that dedication, it takes continuous coaching, some degree of flexibility, and a communal work environment. However, Jacobson and Green (2000) found that the employers of Wisconsin who participated in their survey, those primarily from the manufacturing sector, believe that their responsibility to their employees involves providing them with job-specific training and a paycheck. They did not see their role as coach and mentor. Therefore, we need to further explore the extent to which the characteristics or the culture of the work organization facilitate or hinder employment retention.

Another barrier of significance is that of discrimination. Participants noted that discrimination against post-welfare recipients was widely practiced in the hiring process. In addition, they noted that there was a common perception among some area employers that W-2 workers are lazy, do not value work, have poor human relations skills, and have high employment turnover. Because of such stigma, some employers are reluctant to hire participants of W-2, particularly if they had had one or two negative experiences. Marcia explained,

Employers of W-2 participants need to know that everyone is not lazy. Some of them might need to be patient with them a little bit more. Employers need to understand them a lot more; but they will also get the ones who really, really want to work. . . . Just because someone else did not work out, that does not mean that I will not do a good job; but that is how they feel.

Overall, the women perceive the stigma of welfare to be a serious barrier to their employment access. Moreover, the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and gender form a nexus from which stereotypical images of poor Black women are drawn. These images and perceptions are then used to restrict access to employment in white dominated organizations. While only about one-third of the women named race as a barrier, the majority identified their low economic status as a serious barrier. For example, Sharon noted,

Sometimes, I think the biggest barrier to getting out of welfare is what got us there in the first place—we don't have the means. When you are on welfare and you don't have education, everybody stereotypes you. Sometimes when things come up and you don't have the money to take care of it, it sends the message that you are lazy and you do not want to work. Most times that is not the case. We are doing the best we can.

While Sharon perceived her poor economic conditions to be a primary barrier, the employers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly cited racial discrimination as a major barrier to Black women's employment access and advancement in the workplace. As an HR manager of a Community Service Agency said,

There is certainly discrimination that happens in the employment sector. There is racial profiling when they go out to Wauwatosa and out to Waukesha to get jobs. There is racial profiling when you drive to Grafton. So those are certainly special barriers. There is discrimination in the bordering counties. If you are a White person going out to apply and a Black person going out there applying, the cards are stacked in favor of the White person. (HR Manager, Community Service Agency)

The observations noted above highlight the intersection of race and class in understanding Black women's lives, particularly as they respond to welfare reform demands and expectations. They also support the findings by Holzer

and Stoll (2000) and Jacobson and Green (2000) whose studies revealed that Black recipients in Wisconsin were less likely to be hired in suburban organizations and in small white firms. This employment barrier, together with the low-wage labor market, unsupportive workplace environments, and the lack of opportunities available for cultural socialization compound the difficulties of former welfare recipients in becoming economically self-sufficient.

Personal history and individual characteristics. Some former welfare recipients have histories, characteristics, and demonstrate behaviors that create obstacles to their employment retention efforts. These barriers can result from individual personality, past familial experiences, as well as the social and economic context of people's lives. While the study participants identified a number of personal barriers to their economic sufficiency, the ones cited most frequently were fear of failure and a lack of social capital and financial capital resources. The fears included the of not meeting W-2 expectations and time limits, the fear of not meeting workplace expectations, and the fear of losing a predictable life as it existed before welfare reform. However, what these women feared most was leaving children in unfamiliar daycare centers to be cared for by strangers. The women discussed these and other fears in their lives. Here is one example from Rebecca:

One of my greatest challenges was fear. Yes, fear was number one. Because you were on the system so long, now you have to go to work, and that was new to many women. The biggest fear, I can speak for 80 percent of us making the transition, is failure. What happens if we fail? If this does not work out, they will say, you don't want to do nothing anyway. . . . We were paralyzed with fear.

The employers also provided some critical insights into the meaning of fear in these women's lives. For example, the HR director of a nonprofit agency stated:

Can you imagine a Black woman from Milwaukee out there in Waukesha, Oconomowoc, or someplace working in a predominantly white environment, maybe predominantly white male environment, and having to deal with some of the comments, sexual harassment, racial harassment. And plus you probably have been bused out there and the babies are back there somewhere in a childcare center, and you are wondering how they are going to get a hold of me if there is an asthma attack or something like that, and they don't have a cell phone. They are wondering, will they come and tell me on the floor if my child is sick. That is a scary thing; that is scary for any parent. That is a huge issue that tends to paralyze the women. Several other issues compounded the fear that dominated the women's lives. There was the fear of being an alien or an imposter in the workplace as well as the fear of not retaining a job or running out of time limits mandated by the reform provisions. Providing for their families depends upon their W-2 benefits and the income from their jobs, and there was a continuous fear of being sanctioned off the system prematurely.

Other issues for the women were the poor economic and social conditions within which they lived their lives. An analysis of the demographic data reveals that the ones who have advanced in their jobs, make over \$10 an hour, and are pursuing post-secondary education have families that support them in their efforts. Tasha, who had such a supportive family, noted, "I have a mother and father, and fortunately, I have a good mother and father. My brother is there for me. I really have a great family and they are very understanding, especially my mother when I was trying to go to school." Ann, on the other hand, lacks the support of family and community, and she finds making the transition a more arduous journey than the one Tasha experiences. As she explained,

I don't have a support system, and that is my biggest problem. Before, it was easier for me to stay home and raise my kids. Now I have no support, no one to help me. If I run into a problem with W-2, I don't know what to do or where to turn. This whole support thing is tough.

Employers also expressed concern for the impact that the lack of financial and social capital resources has on the women's ability to maintain long-term employment. One retail sales supervisor explained,

Sometimes it's not that the women don't want to do better, it's just that they don't have the money. If the car breaks down, many a times they do not have the savings to take care of it right away. It means that they have to find another way to take their kids to day care and get to work. If she does not have someone to call on, most likely she is going to be late for work or worse yet, stop coming.

Because of the various and often conflicting demands these women face, behaviors that are often interpreted as poor problem solving skills could be the result of a lack of financial and social resources, thus making better solutions difficult, if not impossible.

Overall, this study supported the evidence that speaks to the complexities of the challenges African American women face in their struggles to meet the expectations of welfare reform. These personal and structural barriers form an interconnecting system, with each element greatly exacerbating the other. These systems of barriers keep families in a position of dependency, despite the good intentions of welfare reform efforts.

Discussion of Findings and Recommendations for HRD Practice

The question of work versus welfare has been the subject of welfare reform actions for over 40 years (Hansan & Morris, 1999). Many of the approaches to welfare reform have often focused on one strategy over another and have given little consideration to a holistic approach that would view the personal and structural barriers from a more systems perspective. Moreover, a review of the literature indicates that welfare reform has focused primarily on changing behavior among participants and has given little attention to the structural barriers inherent in the welfare reform agencies and in the workplace. Collectively, from the findings of this study and from those of large-scale studies on welfare reform, it appears that a more integrated approach must be taken, one that will address both the personal and structural barriers to economic self-sufficiency among women transitioning from welfare. Human resource development can play a significant role in that endeavor. While many personal and structural issues were revealed in this study, this discussion will address the major critical issue of the work-first approach as influenced by labor market conditions and education and training of post-welfare recipients.

Working for wages is the principal means for obtaining income and getting ahead in the American society (Hansan & Morris, 1999). Work is the key to personal independence and an effective way to achieve a meaningful role in society. However, the findings of this study and those of other studies reveal that most of the jobs available to former welfare recipients do not pay wages sufficient to support a family, particularly a single-parent family. For example, in the year 2000, 97.8 percent of Wisconsin's welfare to work program consisted of single-headed families. Those who filed a state income tax return the following year reported an average annual income of \$10,499. (*An Evaluation: Wisconsin Works W-2 Program*, April 2001, p. 45). Similarly, researchers affiliated with the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) have studied the earnings of women leaving Welfare in Wisconsin. Among those who left welfare the fourth quarter of 1995, average earnings for the year was \$9,108. Average earnings rose to \$10,294 the second year after exiting welfare and to \$11,450 in 1997, the third year after exit. According to the IRP data, three years after leaving welfare, most families still had average earnings below the poverty line, which was set at \$16,825 in the year 2000. What is most disconcerting is the current decline in earnings as evidenced by the W-2 evaluation of April 2001. It appears that the downward spiraling of the economy may have a direct effect on the employment and earnings potential of post-welfare recipients as well as their movement back to the welfare rolls, as evidenced during this economic downturn. Milwaukee County, for example, with its large concentration of people of color, particularly African Americans, accounted for an 85.2 percent return rate statewide. As Hotz, Mullin, and Scholz (2002) note, the least educated tend to have higher rates of unemployment and tend to be more susceptible to the volatility of the economic market. It is not surprising, then, that both the employers and the participants suggest that one way of improving economic self-sufficiency is with better education and training.

While W-2 offers education and training programs, the data suggest that more effective employer intervention programming is warranted to assist this group of workers become more economically self-sufficient. Employers can address the low-literacy and employment skills of this population through workplace education. HRD could approach this opportunity through collaborative partnerships with W-2 agencies, community based organizations, and other workforce development boards. Through these collaborative efforts, the organization could address the low literacy skills of former welfare recipients through a variety of integrated, context-based workplace literacy programs (Fisher & Martin, 2000). According to Fisher and Martin (2000), an integrated learning program seeks to assist learners to develop a narrow base of skills that are generalizable to a broad base of contextual situations or to develop a broad base of skills (such as traditional academic skills) that are applicable to a specific contextual situation (such as a particular job). The goal of integrated learning programs is to develop literacy skills as well as work-related skills. The idea is to situate the learning within particular contexts; that is, make it meaningful to the learner's work and personal lives. While the women were able to obtain entry-level jobs that required minimal skills, they believed more education and training would improve their employment opportunities.

In addition, the study also found that women in transition are often ignored and are denied opportunities for workplace socialization. Noting that many lack work experience and have an initial fear of the workplace culture, mentoring and other socialization programs could assist the new entrants in attaching themselves to the workplace with greater ease. Ragins (1995) notes that mentoring relationships can help meet both career development and psychosocial needs. From a career development perspective, mentoring can involve coaching, sponsoring advancement, protecting protégés from adverse forces, providing challenging assignments, and fostering visibility. From a psychosocial perspective, mentoring can provide personal support, friendship, acceptance, counseling, and role modeling (Ragins, 1995, p. 108). HRD can intervene and provide learning activities and mentoring programs that would help the women overcome their fear of the workplace, provide coaching in their new work roles, help them learn the expectations of the workplace, and provide some of the psychosocial support that many of them lack.

As the employers of this study recommended, HRD could also provide training to supervisors and managers on the characteristics of low-income workers with family responsibilities and help them develop ways for creating a more supportive workplace environment to facilitate their retention and advancement.

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