IMPAQ
INTERNATIONAL

MEMORANDUM

Date:	December 5, 2016
To:	Customer Experience Evaluation Partner AJCs
From:	Eileen Poe-Yamagata, Project Director
	Anne Chamberlain, Co-Principal Investigator
	Matt Darling, Co-Principal Investigator
Re:	Customer Experience Evaluation

Study Background

In September 2015, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) contracted with IMPAQ International and our partner ideas42 ("the research team") to conduct an exploratory study of the customer experience at American Job Centers (AJCs). The AJC customer experience involves all aspects of an individual's interactions with an AJC – as mediated by the individual's internal, subjective response to any form of contact with the AJC. Customer experience encompasses marketing, packaging, service offerings, utility, ease of access and use, and service reliability. Five factors that influence customer experience and that we explore are: customer perception, customer expectation, interpersonal interaction, customer trust, and customers' cognitive and emotional state.

Data Collection

Nine AJCs participated in this research. Exploratory information was gathered for this study using a variety of methods (we did not use all methods at all AJCs, in an effort to minimize burden on AJC staff):

• Mystery shopper/unannounced visits	(9 visits)
• Job/training seeker customer discussions	(56 individuals)
• Self-administered kiosk surveys	(297 individuals)
• Job/training-seeker focus groups	(8 focus groups with 6-9 participants each)
• Employer customer discussions	(11 employers)
• AJC staff interviews	(range of staff in 9 centers)

What We Learned

This is an exploratory study based on data from a limited number of centers, and the insights provided here do not represent of all AJCs. That said, a number of common themes emerged during the evaluation.

> ***Generally, customers appear to be happy with their customer experience.*** With rare exceptions, the customers we spoke to were satisfied with their overall experience and had very positive interactions with center staff and services. Job seekers explained that

being unemployed is emotionally taxing, and that stress and uncertainty persist during their job search. They said that the quality of their experience, especially staff interactions, can mitigate the stress and contribute to a positive experience. Employer customers were also pleased with their interactions with AJC staff. They frequently noted the importance of being able to develop a relationship with a single point-of-contact at the AJC.

New customers do not know what to expect from, or have misconceptions about, their AJCs. Most customers had misperceptions about AJC services prior to their first visit, often thinking the AJC was an unemployment office or "temp agency." They reported being pleasantly surprised not only at the variety and quality of services, but especially at the fact that these services were free. On the other hand, some customers were disappointed to learn that the AJC could not immediately provide them with a job.

For some customers, access to some services or benefits (e.g., Unemployment Insurance, or UI) is contingent on visiting an AJC. Customers in this "mandatory" category reported not knowing what to expect from the AJC based on the content of a letter[1] requiring them to report to the AJC. "Voluntary" customers –those who visit a site on their own, most often indicate some type of informal referral from, for example, a friend of family member. Only one customer reported having found an AJC through self-directed searching.

Reception staff's ability to correct misinformation while remaining positive and encouraging impacts customers' AJC experience. Individuals entering AJCs often reported experiencing acute or chronic stress, requiring assistance with housing, food, or other basic needs, as well as employment. This type of stress, described by behavioral scientists as "psychological scarcity," can result in a lack of available cognitive resources over a given time period, reducing an individual's capacity to engage optimally with the AJC services. The quality of interactions with AJC staff was cited as a major influence on customer experience overall, and as a primary reason why customers would, or would not, recommend the AJC to friends and family. In particular, warm and responsive reception staff helps to reduce first-time customers' feelings of ambiguity and the associated stress of not knowing where to go or what to do. This individuation and familiarity is particularly meaningful to customers who reported experiencing marginalization in their daily lives and having feared marginalization in the AJC.

Procedural requirements can frustrate customers. New customers often have to spend their first hour filling out paperwork and registering for services online --activities that may feel distant from their immediate needs. Customers and staff discussed the difficulty of sharing information such as criminal history, trauma, or abuse, without adequate privacy. Often privacy issues are an unfortunate consequence of an open floor plan intended to foster staff and customer communication.

Specific procedural requirements that customers faced include:

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[1] For example, a UI beneficiary may receive a letter requiring attendance for a Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA). The letters give contact information to schedule the REA, or a date when REAs are held. Letters also inform customers that they may lose access to UI if they fail to attend the session.

Initial Sign-In. Customers in some centers are required to show their right-to-work documents (i.e., a picture ID and either a social security card or U.S. Passport) to gain access to resources and programs. Because of concerns some customers have about providing their SSN, some AJCs provide an electronic means for recording SSNs, such as signing in using an electronic keyboard, i-pad, or kiosk station.

Orientation to the AJC. Many customers reported feeling overwhelmed and uncertain when entering the AJC. Reception staff ensure that all job/training seekers have a complete overview of the center's services and resources. Center resources are often communicated through posters, leaflets, calendars, group orientation, and one-on-one discussion. In some cases, a welcome packet is provided to new customers. One center uses a volunteer "concierge" to greet customers at the reception desk, walk them to the computer lab, and discusses each document in the welcome packet.

Job Bank Registration. All first-time job/training seekers are encouraged, but not required, to register in the state's job bank system. Customers who are computer literate reported that they enjoyed using the state job bank system and felt comfortable accessing it at the AJC or at home. Conversely, customers with limited computer skills told researchers that accessing the website is difficult, especially at home.

Programs are seamless, but often opaque to customers. While center staff work to alleviate procedural requirements by presenting customers with simplified service information, customers can interpret the seamlessness as opacity. When customers cannot 'see' the pieces, the result (what they are offered) can feel arbitrary. Explaining the funding processes and program requirements and allowing job/training seekers to come back another day to complete program enrollment requirements reportedly helped alleviate customer frustration.

Center use of customer feedback. All sites have both formal and informal methods for collecting customer feedback, including evaluations handed out after orientation meetings, customer feedback cards in the reception area, and self-directed feedback through phone calls or e-mails sent by customers. At no center was there a systematic process for analyzing or using customer feedback. Customer feedback was mostly dealt with by reaching out to the individual to address his or her specific complaint. One center told researchers that customer feedback is sometimes shared at staff meetings, both to raise staff awareness of issues or perceived issues, as well as to brainstorm solutions. Another center described having used customer focus groups to collect information and opinions from customers before designing or implementing new workshops. The reason that customer feedback is infrequently used appeared to be due largely to lack of resources, especially time.

Potential Tools to Enhance the Customer Experience

Based on the themes identified above, as well as exploratory data from other components of this study, there are a number of potential tools that could be explored and may enhance the AJC customer experience:

Revised or augmented invitation letter for job/training seekers. Revising REA letters, or sending a supplemental e-mail message, could help to set clear expectations and improve customers' emotional response to receiving these letters.

Social referral program. Because so much knowledge of AJCs is spread via word-of-mouth, a social referral program could capitalize on these interpersonal connections to clarify expectations and encourage uptake of center resources. If current customers (both job seekers and employers) had referral cards with information about the center, they could share them with friends or colleagues. This social referral process could invite new customers to the center using an incentive structure.

Simplified registration and check-in process. The registration process should be streamlined and automated as much as possible. For example, if registration could have a digital option and customers could fill in necessary information online at home prior to their visit, there may be less uncertainty about, for example, required documents. Also, completing this task online prior to a first visit could increase a job seeker's commitment to visit the center.

Streamlined registration, and more personalized, digital access for employers. Employers reported wanting more control over the website listings and screening process for job candidates. In particular, they wanted to be able to access the applications directly themselves. Creating a web-based portal for employers to list jobs and screen candidates may encourage better participation among employers.

Short, targeted orientation sessions. Shorter orientation sessions that provide an overview of services to all job/training seekers could increase accurate knowledge about all the resources available at the center and reduce ambiguity around eligibility requirements.

One-page overview. A one-page document with a list of all services, a short one sentence description of the service, and a link or direction for learning more about each service, could reduce confusion, increase knowledge of services, and motivate job seekers to act to access those services.

Personalized job/training seeker calendars. Breaking up big goals (e.g., find employment) into smaller, concrete sub-steps increases the likelihood of achieving them. Having job seekers use a personal calendar to plan for these sub-steps on the way to their bigger goal can help maximize their use of center resources.

Open services and remove eligibility barriers. Many job seekers were confused not only about what services were available, but also about which services they were eligible for. Although funding and policy parameters might limit the ability to expand services, allowing any interested job/training seeker access to all intensive services could reduce customer uncertainty, increase a welcoming atmosphere, and improve motivation to participate fully at the center.

Dedicated time for AJC staffs' administrative tasks. At some centers, case managers reported having specific blocks of time institutionally set aside for completing

paperwork and filing tasks. This helped to alleviate some of the stress on their schedules.

A Word on "Virtual Centers"

Researchers and DOL anticipated that some brick-and-mortar AJCs would exist virtually (online), particularly in areas that serve remote, hard-to-reach customers. Most AJCs' online presence is, or is linked to, the state workforce system website. For this reason, to explore the "virtual" customer experience, researchers talked with state and local level staff in two states that serve a large proportion of remote customers. We determined that neither state offered online resources that were markedly different than offerings in other states. Specifically, the two state systems that were examined are no more comprehensive or readily accessible than most other systems.

Online Customer Experience Barriers

In short, the two online systems that we explored cater to self-service AJC job/training seekers. The online systems do not provide resources for more intensive services or training. Neither site has a mechanism to interact with a "live" AJC staff for guidance. Both sites present a great deal of information and are difficult to navigate. As one staff member described it, "There are too many clicks. Too many layers." Both state systems are mostly used to register in the state labor exchange, and as a secondary job search engine (Indeed.com and Monster.com are the primary job search engines).

According to state and local-level workforce staff, employer customers have fewer complaints about the online system. This is likely due in part to the fact that most of these customers have a point-of-contact at the AJC and can choose the extent to which they interact with the online system. State workforce and AJC staff members anticipate that employers would appreciate an online system that is usable with tablets or mobile phones —neither system is currently designed for such use.

Online Customer Experience Levers and Recommendations

Staff members at the state and local level said that being able to work with customers virtually would be an asset. One consideration is that the job/training seeker customers who are the most remote —who cannot access a physical AJC, may not have (or be able to get) internet access. In response to this, one state works closely with UI to ensure that REA customers live within a certain perimeter of an AJC. UI customers who are very remote may satisfy the UI requirement by online registering alone. For extremely remote customers, this state also offers some interaction with AJC staff members by telephone. Communicating regularly in this way requires an online case management system.

State-level staff need to know how customers use their online systems. Some staff members admitted to having "no idea what the user experience is like. Can [customers] find [our website]? We don't know." Staff members learn about customer experiences anecdotally. Neither state is currently using web analytics, which would provide basic data on customer navigation in the state system. Both states have made efforts to learn about the customer experience, despite scarce resources.

Staff at all levels need regular training on their online systems. While there may be upfront group training or generic online 'help,' staff members in both states said that ongoing

training on how to use the website and its resources was needed for staff at state and the
local levels.