Talent Cards: Tools for Stepping out of Poverty

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Objectives:

- Study the way disadvantaged people interact with social services and organizations.
- Understand the needs of people in poverty and hypothesize what is required to help people climb out of poverty.

Regions of Study:

- Social Services agency in Atlanta, Georgia
- Technical job training center in eastern San Francisco Bay Area, California
- Homeless shelter in southern San Francisco Bay Area, California

Method:

- 2-hour, open-ended interviews at agencies (Bay Area) and participants' houses (Atlanta)
- 10 participants in Atlanta, 4 from job placement agency, 4 from homeless shelter
- Interview participants included homeless, jobless, and others in poverty; single, married, parents; ages 20 to 60+
- One researcher asked questions, and one to two took notes and operated a video camera
- Questions focused on personal history, interaction with government services, and experiences with social services.
- Themes were extrapolated from interview notes and video using the grounded theory approach

Themes Discovered:

- Giving Back

  "Even this interview is making me feel good – giving back. Maybe I can help someone else out. Even that keeps me from drinking and using."

  "I am those people I am helping."

- Sense of Progress: tangible steps and results

  "After hitting rock bottom, the first step I took had to be a big one… so I knew I wouldn't go back."

  "AA encourages people to take one step at a time to avoid 'future tripping.'"

- Interpersonal Interaction
  - Mentor: communicate success stories
  - Long-term community of peers: demonstrate self-worth to others

  "I applied and a week later I had a job, so that was good. But I couldn't even compare the two. [The job training agency] had their heart in it. At the [other] job placement center, I went three times, but I couldn't even go again, I was so depressed."

  "You see someone's who clean and sober, and you need to see how they do it."

- Foster a Productive Balance Between Past and Future

  "The past needs to be remembered. However, one can not dwell on it. It is to easy to get angry and depressed."

  "Every ten feet I see an empty pint. The crow says 'You're hurt, the [liquor] store is there.' They tell you to the play the tape – what got you here… I see my dog getting killed, my truck leaving, my wives, businesses, clothing… all the things I've lost. I saw all the bottles and walked to the opposite side of the street."

- Individually Tailored to each Client
  - Active participant in the process
  - Reframe negative experiences (empowering)

  "Before I wouldn't even do this interview. I would think I have nothing to tell you, but I have a lot to tell you… I always knew there was a purpose for me to be here… maybe I'm supposed to be a counselor and help out someone else who is homeless. Maybe I'm supposed to explain ways of not going to the penitentiary."

- Ready for change at "epiphany" moment (see next section)

Case studies and the spiral-down theme

Many participants described or exhibited a cyclic pattern in their lives which we've termed the "spiral-down model."

Downward Spiral

Spend from days to years "spiraling down," losing control of their lives and not looking beyond the moment

"Chaos", "Maintaining", "I just have to keep doing what I'm doing and then I'll be OK", "Things keep going wrong but it's not my fault."

Paige, mother of Ashley, age 12

She lives in a constant denial of the downward spiral her life has taken. She has no community to support her but still has an unusually high sense of self-worth.

Pre-spiral Bad Decision

Problems start with a "bad" decision which doesn't help people work toward their goals

"Living life in a community of bad decision makers", "Unstable but fun", "Live without thinking about anything but myself."

Kelsey, mother of David, age 3

"I'm a lost cause, but I know I need to save him." She has a fear of examining past mistakes. She never hit rock bottom, so she never had to examine her expectations and bad decisions.

Relapse

Prone to another bad decision

"Doing better, but…", "Just can't say no to my friends", "Everything is lined up against me", "I'm a lot smarter than last time"

Jenna, mother of 2 girls, ages 12 & 14

A friend helped her see that she lived the last chapter of her life so she can get on with the next chapter. Pieces are still missing in her puzzle. She could not understand any need for a back-up plan.

Good Decisions

Have the means and support to continue to work towards goals in unfamiliar territory

"Finding stability", "Knowing who you are and what's really important", "Understanding how to spot and avoid stupid men"

Nancy, mother of 2 boys, ages 8 and 9.

Her biggest asset was her "village", a group of single mothers who share the same visions and goals. She said she is the first to admit she needs help (check her pride), and her village responds.

Way up

Changing habits and outlooks to climb out of "low point" and support goals

"Self-respect", "New Community", "Giving back"

Tim, father of grown children.

His pride got him into trouble, and it was not until he put his pride aside that he was able to help himself and change his life. "My past is a huge stop sign. Goodwill helped me spray paint over the stop signs."

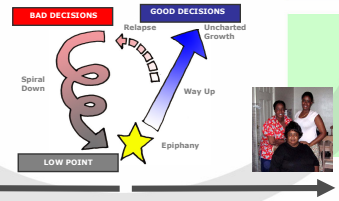
Low Point

Feel they have no hope and nowhere to turn – may stay for days or years

"Maze, I Don't Understand", "Not much between me and dying", "No community", "I've hit rock bottom."

Jake, a single man living alone in a small house

Jake has both physical and emotional problems. He has no plans and struggles to "maintain". He cannot work and is only helped by Sister Sullivan and his Auntie. "Without Auntie I would be dead."



Epiphany

Able to step back, see situation clearly, and develop a strong resolve to change for themselves

"Found God", "See Clearly", "My kids made me realize I have to change"

Wilma, mother of 2 girls, ages 12 and 16

There was an epiphany moment during her 7th arrest when her life flashed before her eyes. Her kids were the ones who questioned her actions and prompted her to get out of the spiral.

Pre-Epiphany Mindset: Short-term education possible, but social services offered are not being internalized.

Learning Ready Moment: Processes and values taught after the epiphany are "learned" and internalized.

Preliminary Prototype:

• Talent agency framework

Clients are "talent", case workers "talent agents" in a "talent agency." Reframes the notion of clients as *assets* rather than *costs*, and gives talent agents a vested interest in talent's long-term success.

Benefits for clients:

- Getting jobs:
  - Identify skills and needs (housing, jobs, education), emphasizing past experiences as assets
  - Map out steps of progress for complete solution
  - Supply job training and leads
- Interacting with outside world:
  - Enable easy application for government services
  - Provide references and a positive reputation for those entering job market
- Finding a community:
  - Supply a mentor and the support of a long-term, constructive community
  - Provide opportunities to "give back" to others
- Developing economic and social skills:
  - Align incentives for talent and talent agents: caring, not combative
  - Create a semi-sustainable enterprise (make $$)
  - Connect skill-providers to those in need within the community
  - Provide a safe environment to learn economic and social skills (budget, plan, earn, work, give)
  - Reduce fear through access to information and community

Benefits for social service agencies:

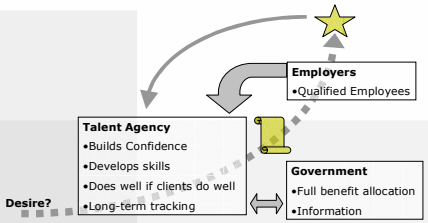
- Client success is tracked longitudinally
- Client information is kept centrally

Benefits for government:

- Improve efficiency with (limited) access to talent agencies' databases
- Better allocation of benefits to those in need

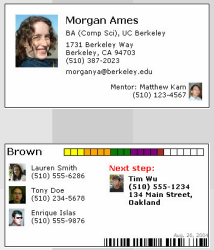
Benefits for employers:

- Talent agency is a source for well-trained, positive employees



• Business card implementation

- Business cards are a powerful symbol of professionalism
- Gives a reminder of progress
- Provides a tangible and attainable next step
- Supports the role of a mentor
- Promotes the development of a community
- Affords the demonstration of self-worth to others



Front:

- Front looks like a business card
- Mentor (or "talent agent") – personal reminder, professional reference
- Talent agency can provide address, phone, email

Back:

- Levels (colors) from martial arts
- Progress bar
- Helpful past contacts/clients
- Next step
- Barcode for synchronization

Scenarios of use:

- **Scenario 1:** Jorge is an international student at a local community college who has limited job opportunities because of his student visa. He is a computer engineering major and loves working with computers.

Before - Actual story from participants	Problems	After - How the Talent Cards would help
• Went to a campus job-placement center • Felt very stressed filling out the form ("like a test"); took it home so he could find all the information and so his cousin could help • Returns w/ form, told to come back in a week • A week later, given a job that's unrelated to his skills; he has no say in the placement process • The job placement center was "successful," yet it left Jorge frustrated and depressed	• No say in job placement process • No help filling out the form • Skills not utilized • Job placement center treated Jorge as a liability, not an asset	•Immediately given an initial interview with a "talent agent" who assesses Jorge's skills and goals •Gets a set of cards with contact information for three job leads and one other computer engineer in the community who could give Jorge advice on the process •Also gets descriptions of job leads •Gets help on his resume from other computer engineer •Contacts on card act as references when Jorge follows up on leads •Talent agent has a vested interest in Jorge's success

- **Scenario 2:** Wendy is a single mother of four with two part-time jobs, but is having a really hard time making ends meet – she and her children often have to skip meals because there's just not enough food in the house. She decides to apply for food stamps.

Before - Actual story from participants	Problems	After - How the Talent Cards would help
• Learns from a neighbor where to go to apply for food stamps: an office across the city • Takes a day off from work to go to the office and takes three different buses to get to the office; the trip lasts two and a half hours • Completes a form, is told that her appointment to see a case worker is in one month • Caseworker takes out her form and types in everything on it while Wendy waits • Qualifies for food stamps a month after applying	• Food stamp office doesn't respect Wendy's time or her situation: makes her wait a month for an appointment, then enters her form into the computer while she waits • Difficult for Wendy to get across town to office	• Already involved in Talent community • Talent agent recommends a particular person at food stamp office, appears on back of Wendy's cards • Talent agent helps Wendy fill out form ahead of time, sends them her information, and calls over to make an appointment for her • Has to go to the food stamp office just once, if at all • Gets food stamps within a week

- **Scenario 3:** Wendy now has $200/month of food stamps, but has trouble making them last more than a week. Also, she often works 12-hour days and can't afford childcare. She would really like to get a daytime job like a secretarial job so she can be at home with her kids more often.

Before - actual story	Problems	After - How the Talent Cards would help
• Doesn't know what to do to make her food stamps last longer • Leaves her three younger children under the watch of the oldest (who is nine), but worries about all the bad influences in their neighborhood – doesn't feel like she has any other choice, though • None of the jobs for which she has applied have called her back. She doesn't know that her resume doesn't look professional, and that her police record and neighborhood send up red flags for employers who have had or heard of bad experiences with similar applicants.	• Food stamp office didn't give Wendy any information about how to make her food stamps last for a whole month, and Wendy doesn't know how to do it herself • Doesn't have anywhere to turn for cheap childcare • Lacks the skills and the situation to find a better job • Potential employers don't have a clear picture of Wendy from her resume, and she has no references, so they give undue attention to her police record and her neighborhood	• Given the contact information for people who can help her on the back on her cards: a community member skilled at making food stamps last and another who does childcare for exchange • Gets help from the food stamp expert, whose community "karma" improves for helping Wendy. (Wendy gives her a card with the service written in, so the food stamp expert or her "talent agent" can update her karma – here, the cards are acting as cheques.) • Knows how to type, and teaches another community member how to type in exchange for a after-school childcare for her kids. Wendy feels like she's important in the community – she's giving something back, and she's valued. They exchange cards, and both of their community karmas go up for their service, a physical representation of their involvement with the community. • Talent agent helps Wendy build a resume and gives her all of the job opportunities • Business card is professional tool for job hunt, and talent agent is a reference • Talent agency has a good reputation for backing good employees. Employers see that Wendy is coming from the talent agency and decides not to put as much weight on her past or location. • Lands a good-paying secretarial job that enables her to be home with her kids in the evenings

- **Scenario 4:** James has a good job doing carpentry, and has been "clean" for a month because of a rehabilitation program mandated by police and wants to stay that way.

Before - actual story	Problems	After - How the Talent Cards would help
• Wife and friends all drinkers or drug addicts - finds situation tempting • Old dealer greets him as a friend • Starts lying compulsively and pawning off tools from his job to pay for the drugs • Loses his job	• Didn't have anyone to turn to • Surrounded by influences that didn't help him rebuild his life • Felt like the road to success was impossible: much easier to fall back to old habits	• Community "karma" up to a "green" level – has been in community for a long time • Role model for people trying to get out of similar situations he was in – has to set a good example • Can call his talent agent to talk him through it when he feels like he's slipping • Cards remind him that he's vested in a "good" community and has come a long way – would have a lot to lose • Knows what he has to do next to keep moving upward – doesn't "future trip"

Future Work:

- Conduct further ethnographic work on poverty in the US and abroad
  - Next site: Bangladesh
- Iterate on prototype (talent agency, business cards) in the US
- Extend prototype to developing countries, starting in Bangladesh
- Evaluate portability of design from low-income communities in US to low-income communities abroad

Project Team:

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