

**EMPLOYER MARKETING CONSORTIUM**

Spring 2002 focus group findings



28.June 2002

## Introduction

The Employer Marketing Consortium was formed to find effective ways to market government one-stop services to employers. To inform this effort, the Consortium conducted focus groups with employers in each of its seven states in late May and early June 2002. The goals of these focus groups were to:

1. Understand the biggest challenges employers face in finding, hiring, developing and retaining employees
2. Get insights into what recruiting, screening, assessment, and training resources employers use
3. Better understand how they think about government one-stop services, and whether such services meet their needs
4. Help the Consortium identify and refine promising marketing concepts

Two focus groups were conducted in each of the states: Alaska, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire and Washington. The Consortium representative from each state observed their two groups. The Consortium's consultant, Ken Mays of Outsource Marketing, observed all 14 groups. He prepared a summary of key findings and distributed it to the Consortium members and focus group moderators for comment. Then he prepared this report.

This report is organized into four parts:

- I. Methodology
- II. Key findings
- III. Detailed findings
- IV. Exhibits

These findings represent the views of 104 employers from a wide variety of locations, industries, and company sizes. Focus group research is qualitative, so we cannot be sure that these participants accurately represent the nation's employers. However, focus groups are generally better than quantitative surveys at discovering how people think. So we *can* develop strategies based on the powerful and consistent themes that characterized these discussions.

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# I. METHODOLOGY

The Consortium wanted to conduct focus groups in each of its seven states. Covering a variety of locations in each state would have required over 30 groups and taken too much time and money. We decided to conduct two groups in each state, but select locations and participants to represent a variety of employer types, sizes, and urban/rural locations across the 14 focus groups.

The Consortium solicited bids and chose three research companies to help execute the recruiting and moderation. The methodology detailed below was drafted by the consultant, discussed and fine-tuned with the research companies and Consortium members, then issued as a standard template for each research company to follow.

## Moderators

Patricia Glazer, a Vice President and Senior Moderator with Gilmore Research Group in Seattle, conducted the focus groups in Alaska, Montana and Washington. Jim Wilhelm, a Senior Vice President at Horizon Research International in Louisville, conducted the groups in Iowa, Kentucky and Missouri. R. Kelly Myers, Principal and Director of Research for RKM Research & Communications in Portsmouth, conducted the New Hampshire groups.

## Locations and dates

Two, two-hour groups were conducted in one evening (typically, at 6 and 8 pm) in each of the following cities:

Seattle, Washington	May 20
Anchorage, Alaska	May 23
Missoula, Montana	May 30
Portsmouth, New Hampshire	June 3
St Louis, Missouri	June 4
Des Moines, Iowa	June 5
Louisville, Kentucky	June 6

With the exception of Missoula, all groups were held at professional focus group facilities with observation rooms. In Missoula, the groups were in a hotel conference room, with observers connected via closed-circuit video in an adjacent room.

## Recruiting and group composition

We wanted the focus groups to be comprised of managers who were responsible for recruiting, hiring, and training at their companies. Consortium members developed lists of potential participants in each state, from employer databases or association lists. The research companies recruited from these lists. We developed a screener to help assure that participants had significant human resource responsibilities, represented a variety of industries, and had not participated in previous focus groups for the state. (The screener is provided in Exhibit 5).

Ten participants were recruited for each of the two groups, in order to yield at least six after no-shows. One group in each market was composed of companies with 10-75 employees; the other, of companies with over 75 employees. We sought a spread of industry types and workforce skill levels, and ended up with a good cross-section.

Manufacturing	19 participants
Retail	13
Healthcare	9
Hospitality & food service	8
Transportation	8
Financial services & insurance	7
Technology & telecommunications	7
Construction	6
Wholesale	5
Energy & utilities	4
Education & social services	3
Media	1
Agriculture	1
Miscellaneous services	13
Companies with 10-75 employees	49
Companies with over 75 employees	55

Most participants were either HR directors or senior executives in administration or operations. Each was given a \$100 honorarium in appreciation of their time.

## **Discussion outline**

States have already conducted many studies to understand employer needs. To acquire new insights, the Consortium decided to spend less time on general recruiting practices and challenges, and more time investigating four specific areas:

- Use of the Internet in recruiting
- Interest in Labor Market Information (LMI)
- Interest in the one-stop concept, especially in its website form
- Interest in online job listings and pre-screening of applicants by the state

These areas were associated with marketing opportunities, where we had evidence suggesting an overlap between employer needs and state services.

A sample discussion guide is provided as Exhibit 1. Each moderator used a slightly different version but all covered the same areas in the same order. Near the end of the discussion we exposed participants to two concept statements, corresponding to the last two bullet points above. After the first two groups in Seattle, we decided to replace the first concept statement with a printed sample of the state's employer services web page. This proved more useful in eliciting reactions to the one-stop concept. Concept statements and other materials used in the discussions are referenced in the discussion guide and provided in Exhibits 2-4.

## II. KEY FINDINGS

1. **While the soft economy has increased the supply of job seekers, employers still have trouble finding qualified workers.** Their challenges fall into two categories:
  - Limited supplies of workers with specific skills or experience, in certain occupations or regions of the country.
  - A shortage of workers with basic skills and reliability. This second problem is broadly perceived as a cultural decline in education, loyalty and work ethic.
2. **Employers rely on a variety of resources to find people. They choose a resource based on cost, past experience, speed and perceived characteristics of job seekers who use that resource.** Managers see resources in terms of the trade-off between quantity and quality of applications.

*Fewer applications  
but less need for  
screening*



*More applications  
but more need for  
screening*

- Agencies and recruitment firms
- Employee referral programs
- Word-of-mouth and in-person recruiting
- Company website
- Organizations such as industry associations and schools
- Walk-ins
- Job fairs
- State employment services
- Newspapers
- Internet job sites

3. **Most employers are familiar with Internet job sites and many have tried them; however, they fall far short of ideal.** Since it is easy for job seekers to submit electronic applications on these sites, listings attract large numbers of frivolous responses. Many will come from out of state or abroad. For most positions, HR managers prefer applicants who are familiar with local lifestyle and pay norms, and do not have to relocate.

4. **Labor market information is not very familiar to most HR managers. When it is explained to them, few are interested, because it is seen as a strategic planning tool that has little relevance in their day-to-day work.** The exception is data that helps employers determine compensation. Pay norms would be appealing if they were up to date and specific enough to reflect an employer's industry, region, and job classifications. Cost of living trends are also relevant as a context for compensation policy.
5. **Awareness of the state one-stop brand varies, but if participants do not recognize the current entity, they at least claim familiarity with a previous name** (e.g., "Job Centers"). However, most have only superficial knowledge of the system, and it amounts to "help for the unemployed." Uninformed perceptions are driven by two widespread beliefs:
- *Government is bureaucratic and inefficient by nature; they don't think like business so I wouldn't expect their people to understand our business.*
  - *Their mission is to help unemployed workers. Our experience complying with UI reporting requirements is a regular reminder that government is more interested in process and assistance for the unemployed, than in finding us the right workers.*

These are powerful perceptions that color most participants' reactions to all of our ideas. The exceptions are a few individuals who have had personal contact from employer service representatives, typically on a recruitment project. These experiences – invariably with one-stop offices not in large metro areas – cause HR managers to rethink their assumptions. They turn into advocates of state services, defending them to the rest of the group with words like "they've improved lately."

6. **Interest in state services for employers focus on four areas:**
- **Screening and verification.** *Save us time weeding out applicants who fail to meet basic criteria.*
  - **Basic skills training.** *Instruct applicants in the missing skills and work ethic that their parents and teachers should have instilled in them.*
  - **Rules and regulations.** *Help us understand the complicated and constantly changing laws and guidelines that affect us.*
  - **Market development.** *Promote my region as a place to live and work; promote occupations where there are labor shortages.*

7. **It is difficult to know, understand and navigate government services. Therefore, most participants are very interested in a state employer services website, both in concept and actual form.** Such a site would be an important (though not sole) resource for many HR managers, provided it does not suffer from usability problems that plague many sites. Smaller companies appear more interested than larger companies, where many HR directors have already found similar resources (e.g., a HR association website). HR managers in larger companies are also more likely to feel the state offers limited expertise compared to their own professional education and experience.
8. **There is keen interest in the concept of online posting coupled with pre-screening – but also broad skepticism that the state can deliver.** The desired benefit is “waste less of my time with unqualified applicants,” more than “hire better people.” Plus, lower cost than newspapers, other job websites and agencies. Reasons for skepticism are also the keys to acceptance and success. Namely:
- *Can the state attract a broad applicant pool, not just the unemployed?*
  - *Will they listen to our needs and be on my side, even if that means rejecting applications from some of the workers they are trying to help find jobs?*
  - *Can their screening be timely and efficient, involving basic criteria rather than subjective judgments we want to make ourselves?*

### III. DETAILED FINDINGS

#### 1. Challenges finding good employees

The economy's downturn has produced more job seekers, but most employers still reported problems finding and keeping good employees. Almost all the managers we talked to agreed on the reason: a deteriorating work ethic, particularly among younger people entering the workforce. Focus group participants complained that many workers lack basic traits of honesty, punctuality, courtesy, communication and reliability. Many are deficient in elementary math, reading and writing skills. They seem to lack interest or commitment to work – as evidenced by failure to show up for a job interview, quitting after only a few days on the job or suddenly taking time off for frivolous reasons.

***“In the current economy, there’s gotta be people out there with a work ethic...I just don’t know where they’re hiding.” (NH)***

***“[Many applicants are] naï ve young workers who don’t understand what a job requires” (MT)***

This cultural commentary permeated the early part of our discussions. It overshadowed several other challenges mentioned by many participants:

- Finding people with certain specialized skills that are in short supply – nurses, for example
- Finding or training employees with computer skills
- Convincing applicants to move to, or stay in, an area (especially in Alaska and Iowa)
- Overcoming language barriers
- Understanding and complying with equal opportunity requirements
- Finding workers who have both technical and personal skills
- Dealing with seasonal labor shortages
- Finding effective, affordable media to advertise positions in

Most managers agreed that the combination of a soft economy, deteriorating work ethic, and lack of skills resulted in larger *quantities*, but lower *quality* of applicants. This placed a bigger burden on them as HR managers to sort through applicants and find qualified employees.

## 2. Resources employers use to find employees

Employers rely on a variety of resources to find people. Typically, each HR manager had a few favorite resources, based on four main criteria:

1. The cost of the resource
2. How well the resource has worked for their company in the past
3. The perceived characteristics of job seekers who use that resource, matched against the characteristics of the position
4. How quickly the company needs workers and how fast the particular resource works

Common resources were described as follows:

- **Agencies and recruitment firms** help employers find people who are not actively looking for jobs – especially senior positions. They relieve HR managers of much of the screening burden. But they cost more than most resources.
- **Employee referral programs** are a low quantity but high quality source for applicants at a variety of skill levels.
- **Word of mouth** is a less formal version of employee referral programs. It lacks the incentives but is still an important source of applicants, especially for small industries or isolated locations where the relevant people tend to know each other.
- **In-person recruiting** refers to HR managers (or senior company executives) actively searching for and contacting candidates directly. An important subset of this was bluntly referred to as “stealing from the competition.” This is not limited to high-skilled, senior positions. For example, it was a common tactic for restaurants or retailers to visit competitors and offer jobs to front-line employees who impressed them.
- **Walk-ins** are a common source of applications for retailers.
- **Job listings on the employer’s website** were mentioned by many participants. Managers like applicants who come via this channel because they are interested enough in their company to visit its website.
- **Internet job sites** (e.g., monster.com) can deliver large quantities of applicants quickly – particularly younger, computer-savvy workers. However, many applications will be unsuitable, so this resource puts a heavy screening burden on HR managers. (The next section discusses the Internet as a recruiting tool in more detail).

- **Organizations** such as industry associations and schools are good sources for professionals and workers with specific skill sets. Employers use both personal contacts with these organizations (e.g., a professor), and job postings in association newsletters or websites.
- **Job fairs** attract people who are looking for work and have the added benefit of getting the employer's name out in the community.
- **State employment services** are a cheap supply of unemployed, less-skilled workers. (This resource is discussed in more detail in a subsequent section).
- **Newspapers** are an expensive resource, especially in large metro areas. But classified ads are quick and generally good at attracting local applicants for low to medium-skilled positions. A frequently voiced limitation of classified ads was that their cost inhibited complete job descriptions; the abbreviated listings encouraged many applicants who didn't meet job criteria.
- **Other media** mentioned by a few participants included trade publications, TV and radio. A few companies benefited from national media advertising done by their parent corporation.

The chart on the following page summarizes the three main characteristics of major recruiting channels, based on participants' comments. Note that *low* selectivity tends to mean *high* numbers of applications, and vice versa.

*Characteristics of major recruiting channels*

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Selectivity</b>	<b>Perceived skill level of applicants*</b>
Agencies/recruitment firms	High	High	Any level specified, but tend to use for high-skilled
Employee referrals	Medium	High	Medium to high
Word-of-mouth	Low	High	All levels
In-person recruiting	Low out-of-pocket; high time cost	High	All levels
Organizations	Low	High	Medium to high
Company website	Low	Medium to high	Medium to high
Walk-ins	Low	Medium	Low
Job fairs	Medium	Medium	Medium
State employment services	Low	Medium to low	Low
Newspapers	Medium to high	Medium to low	All levels
Internet job sites	Medium to high	Low	Medium to high

\*This is probably oversimplified. When we discussed skill levels, participants reminded us that there are actually two dimensions with four different combinations:

- Lower-skilled generalists – e.g., retail help
- Lower-skilled but specialized – e.g., truck driver
- Higher-skilled generalists – e.g., manager
- Higher-skilled but specialized – e.g., surgeon

### 3. Awareness, usage and perceived value of Internet job sites

Almost all participants were aware of Internet job sites. The most commonly mentioned national sites were monster and hotjobs; many also mentioned America's Job Bank. In each focus group location, most participants were also aware of the local newspaper's online job listings, which were often promoted under their own brand name. Many participants were also aware of the state's online job listings.

A slight majority – perhaps 6 of 10 participants – had tried job websites as a recruiting tool. They agreed the major Internet job sites such as monster could deliver many applications in a hurry; their convenience and speed were appealing. But they found that using these sites was not cheap, and had some significant, practical disadvantages:

- The Internet does not impose geographic limitations, so applications come from all over the world. Most employers prefer to hire people within the region, who are familiar with their location's climate, standard of living and lifestyle.

***"It's risky to bring someone up from outside...not everyone likes Alaska." (AK)***

- It is free and easy to broadcast digital copies of one's resume to answer dozens of Internet job listings. Employers who listed on the Internet received many applications that were not customized to the job and often did not meet the job criteria. They have concluded that most Internet applications are not carefully considered.

***"The problem with monster is you get inundated with resumes...about 80% of what I get is garbage" (WA)***

- The Internet tends to be used by younger, more computer-savvy people. This can be a positive if the company is looking for these types of employees. But it tends to exclude many older and less-educated workers. (Or specific occupations: one participant said "nurses don't apply that way.")

***"The entry-level person I'm looking for is not going to have access or know how to use it." (MO)***

Because of these drawbacks, many managers who had tried Internet job sites no longer used them.

***"We used monster...ended up with so many applications, we stopped using it." (MT)***

Those who continue to use them tended to be in industries where the Internet is a preferred channel for both employers and job seekers (e.g., technology companies).

***“If you have a very focused job and want to get as many applications as possible, they work well...especially if it is a technical position.” (WA)***

Still, some HR managers hoped the potential benefits of online recruiting could be realized.

***“It’s going to be more used...it doesn’t work well yet, but it will.” (KY)***

The online version of newspaper help wanted advertising was a somewhat different animal. It still suffered from many of the same limitations, but at least it appealed to a more regional audience. The popularity of online newspaper job listings also depended on how well the newspaper promoted them. In some markets they were well promoted, even with their own brand name; in others, they were seen as little more than bonus coverage companies received when they advertised in the classifieds.

In sum, managers were somewhat ambivalent about the Internet as a recruiting tool. On the one hand, it was convenient, fast, and seemed to attract more educated, computer-savvy candidates. But on the other hand, it overwhelmed managers with hundreds of applications, most from people who had considered the position and its requirements only superficially.

#### 4. Awareness and interest in Labor Market Information (LMI)

We asked if participants were aware of economic information tracked and published by their state. Some participants weren't aware of anything. Many were vaguely aware of some government-issued economic information quoted by some source. A small minority was familiar with LMI data, mentioned several examples, and referred to LMI publications or online sources.

When we showed a sample list of LMI categories (see Exhibit 2), many participants were surprised and intrigued that so much information was publicly available. If it were available on a website – a possibility we brought up – they thought it would be convenient.

Then we discussed whether they could *use* such information – whether it would be not just a curiosity, but valuable in their work. And here, the participants split into three distinct camps:

- Most of them said this data would be of little use in their jobs, either because they couldn't see its relevance or they didn't have time for it. These appear to be busy managers who couldn't see themselves neglecting daily HR demands to do esoteric, analytical work.

***“I found it interesting, but I don't know how it affects the day-to-day.” (MT)***

***“DOL has wonderful statistics, but you almost have to be a statistician to use them because it is so complex.” (WA)***

- Some thought the data would be valuable, but they were answering on behalf of their companies, not themselves. They felt the information would be useful for competitive analysis, marketing, or long-term planning.

***“Sounds like really good info if you were going to move your plant.” (WA)***

- A small minority said they would be interested in the data themselves, for HR planning. They appeared to be managers with more time to do such work, and types whom enjoy working with data on their computers.

There was one item on the LMI list that *was* interesting and relevant to almost all participants: “average wages by industry and job type.” However, there was widespread skepticism that this data would be up-to-date and easy to use. Participants also agreed it would have to be specific to their industry and area to be useful. It would have to be based on well-done wage surveys, and show norms for specific titles or skill levels within each industry. The more they considered these “if's” (and listened to the experience of their fellow participants who were fa-

miliar with LMI data), the more they convinced themselves it might be unrealistic to expect the government to provide such data.

***“I couldn’t fine-tune it to match my company...do their definitions match ours?” (NH)***

Many respondents noted that their industry had its own data sources, for example, associations, websites, or trade publications. They often felt they were more valuable and realistic sources for HR-related statistics.

Several respondents noted that the Internet was the best source of such information, since it could be kept up-to-date more easily.

## 5. Awareness and perceptions of state one-stop brands

By this point in the discussion, the name of the state one-stop brand had often been brought up in the context of another question – for example, resources they used to find employees, or online job postings. Now, the moderator explicitly mentioned the name and asked if participants were familiar with it, and if so, what they knew about it.

The response predictably varied by state, depending on how recently the new one-stop brand had been introduced, how intensively it had been promoted, and whether or not it was easily confused with other organizations or service brands.

The following list is intended to convey the range of brand awareness we encountered in the focus groups, not imply marketing effectiveness for some states over others:

### **Brands most focus group participants (in their state) were aware of**

WorkSource (WA)

NH WORKS

Iowa Workforce Development Centers

### **Brands some participants were aware of**

Alaska Job Center Network

Missouri WORKS!

Career Resources One-stop Centers (KY)

### **Brands few participants were aware of**

JobLINC (MT)

Regardless how familiar they were with the state's one-stop brand name, almost all participants were aware of employment services (often under a previous name like 'Job Centers'). Managers associated this entity with help for unemployed workers, or more specifically, "The Unemployment Office." The entity's customers are the unemployed.

*"[NH Works?] It's **Employment Security**. I've hired a few of their people." (NH)*

*"[Career Resources One-stop Centers?] It's **similar to the unemployment office**." (KY)*

Most participants had interviewed applicants or hired workers from this channel. They viewed it as a potential source for certain types of workers. Their perceptions were shaped by their experience trying it as a source for applicants and by contacts to confirm job-seeking activity by people drawing unemployment. Common perceptions were:

- *Employment services are important and valuable. We need to help unemployed workers, and someone needs to help train workers in basic skills.*
- *They can be a useful source of less-skilled, entry-level, and administrative workers. If you need a lot of these workers quickly, they can help you find them.*
- *They're on the side of the unemployed worker. They're more interested in finding this person a job than meeting employers' needs.*

***"They don't screen very well for me...they don't listen; they just want to place unemployed workers."*** (IA)

***"They don't review qualifications."*** (AK)

***"They send people who are not qualified."*** (KY)

***"You can get flooded with people who chew up your time."*** (NH)

- *Many of the people they deal with are problem workers. Or they're just going through the motions to get unemployment.*

***"They're there because of drugs...alcohol...reasons I wouldn't want them."*** (NH)

***"They have job jumpers."*** (AK)

***"They apply because they have to, not because they want the job."*** (NH)

- *Like much of government, they are about process and social service. They're not in tune with the needs or mind-set of business.*

***"The state is more of a shotgun approach, not specific to my needs."*** (MO)

***"You have to fill out a paper form, fax it in. It's a government thing – gotta be this way."*** (IA)

***"Confusing"*** (NH)

***"No one would respond back to you – neither applicants nor NH Works."*** (NH)

- *The quality of service varies by location. You can find good service in rural offices, but the big metro offices just process bodies.*

***“The smaller the office, the better the service.”*** (WA)

Given these perceptions, it’s not surprising that some participants who were aware of a new one-stop brand felt it represented expanded services for *workers*.

***“Missouri WORKS! is a new name that signifies they’re trying to do more to help job seekers.”*** (MO)

But a few participants *did* note that the new name went with some new attention to employers. Invariably these managers had had a positive experience with an employer services representative in a smaller one-stop office. Sometimes the rep had called and/or met with the employer to introduce themselves and explain how they could help. Often they had worked with the rep on a recruiting project. This experience – and the fact that the services were often inexpensive or free – had the power to change entrenched perceptions.

***“They’ve really changed lately. It used to be a cattle call.”*** (MT)

***“Joy (rep’s name) in Pella is wonderful.”*** (IA)

***“A positive thing for me, since they’ve changed their focus, is that you can find some professional candidates from their system.”*** (KY)

One of the most fascinating parts of these focus groups was watching the dynamic between one or two participants who had had this experience, and the rest of the group who hadn’t. Where there was no group member with a positive experience, the discussion often digressed into a litany of complaints about employment services. But where there was a positive participant, the other group members were curious. *What about these new services? Where do you get them? Do they come to you, or do you have to find them somewhere in the complicated bureaucracy? Can the state really do that for us?*

***“If you develop a relationship with one of their counselors, they’ll screen for you.”***  
(AK)

## 6. Interest in state services for employers

We next asked participants if they would be interested in services offered by the state to help employers. After discussing whether they were interested and why or why not, we asked for participants to suggest important services they would like to see their state provide – realistic services that they would use if the state offered them.

Despite earlier consensus about the state being more on the side of workers than employers, most participants felt the state could help them in some way. The most often-suggested services were:

- Screening of applicants so that employers didn't have to waste time with unqualified job seekers.
- Verification of applicants' backgrounds. This included a range of checks, many problematic, including drug testing, school transcripts, driving records, criminal records, and credit checks.
- Help understanding business rules and regulations – particularly new or changed laws. This could be in the form of online guides, handbooks, or personal assistance via telephone and email. (A few participants referred to this as a “help desk” for employers). It was also suggested that each company be assigned a personal contact.
- Promotion of the state or locale as a place to live and work, to attract and retain workers with needed skills.

It is significant to note that the marketing concepts developed by the Consortium and presented later in the focus groups came up in some form, unprompted, during this “you tell us” section. Managers asked for a more organized and accessible source for all employer services. Many mentioned online job listings. And most participants in every group proposed screening of applicants.

Other requested services included:

- Applicant profiling/testing
- Basic skills training for workers
- Comparative wage and benefit data
- Computer training
- Customer service and phone skills training
- Downloadable boilerplate information for prospective employees, e.g., about health-care or housing options

- Health plan comparisons and buying advice for employers
- Help understanding cultural differences of immigrant workers
- Help writing more effective employment ads
- Matching and liaison between companies hiring and companies laying off
- More diverse applicant pool, to help employers comply with affirmative action
- Online lists of recent college and high school graduates
- Transportation/daycare assistance for interviewees
- Vo-tech/apprenticeship certification
- Workshops or conferences on HR-related topics

Two themes ran through the suggestions.

The first recalled participants' earlier comments about the deficiencies of incoming generations of workers. Could the government do something about this? Could it train workers in the basic virtues they had somehow missed from their parents and teachers?

***“Teach work ethic. Assist in educating high school, college students what work life could be. Teach the value of being a good worker. Teach professionalism.” (NH)***

***“School-to-work program that teaches soft skills and work ethic.” (MT)***

This theme also showed up in the requests for screening. Employers wondered if the state could somehow evaluate applicants and screen out those who weren't serious about working.

The second theme had to do with communication. Managers were frustrated that applicants often ignored the criteria they stated in their job postings. *Must work nights. Oh I can't work nights. Must type 50 wpm. I can't type that fast. Requires heavy lifting. I have a bad back.* And so forth. Many of the requests for screening amounted to the HR manager wanting the state to clearly communicate (again) what the employer had written, and verify that the applicant indeed met the criteria.

***“Screen what comes back to me...even the basics: the three things in the ad we're looking for.” (AK)***

***“These people have to have all five of these criteria, if they don't, I don't even want to see them.” (MO)***

## 7. Interest in one-stop state employer services website

The Consortium suspected that few employers were yet familiar with the one-stop concept. To evaluate its appeal, we first asked the focus groups whether it was difficult to know what services the state offered to employers. Almost everyone agreed it was. Was it hard to find out about these services? Most said yes. Some said they would call the employment office. More than a few suggested a website might be helpful.

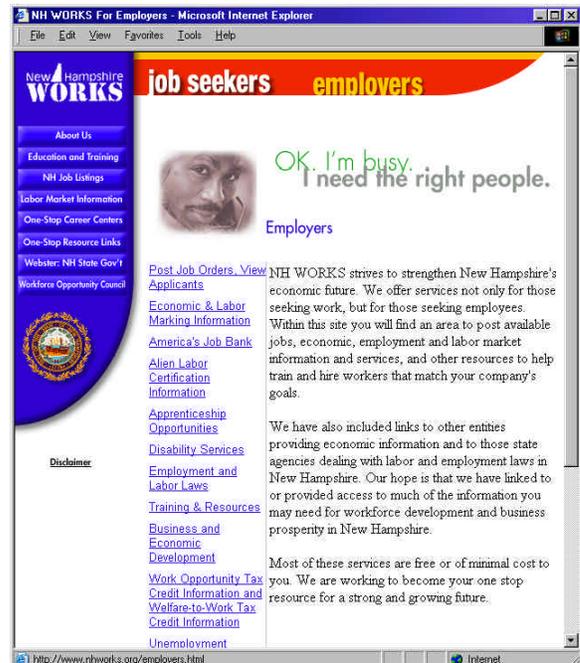
***“It’s a hodgepodge. Not worth it...too confused.” (NH)***

We then distributed copies of the top level “for employers” page of the state one-stop website.<sup>1</sup> We asked participants to review it and give us their reactions. Invariably they asked if it was a real website. We told them it was. Very few recognized the web page or had visited it.

The majority of managers were very positive about the concept. Many wanted to take the sample page with them or get its web address. When asked what they liked about the idea, most mentioned the convenience of having all this free information in one place. Others referred to specific features on individual state sites. Those most commonly mentioned included:

- Attractive design; looks ‘user-friendly’
- Online job postings
- Business regulations
- Labor market information
- Downsizing assistance
- Tax credits
- Locations of one-stop offices
- Offer of in-person consultation

Managers felt the site would be particularly valuable to small businesses and new companies. The focus groups comprised of smaller companies were generally more positive about the site than the large company groups.



*New Hampshire’s employer page*

<sup>1</sup> In the Seattle groups we used a concept statement rather than the site. See ‘Methodology’ for an explanation.

**“Oh, yeah!”** (KY)

**“Surprised we haven’t heard about it.”** (MT)

**“Needs to be promoted.”** (KY)

**“Every small business should know about this.”** (IA)

**“Can we keep this [copy of the web page]?”** (many)

Few participants were openly negative, but a significant minority was lukewarm (e.g., rating their interest at 3 on a scale of 5). Their reasons fell into three categories:

- *Not much new or valuable here. Already have this type of information on Chamber of Commerce, HR association, or industry-specific websites.*
- *This might be useful for inexperienced people, but I’m a seasoned HR professional. The state employment services people don’t know as much as I do.*
- *It’s too general, not specific to the needs of our industry.*

**“One size fits all doesn’t work.”** (AK)

There were also a few groups where no participant had had any positive experience with the state, and the group dynamic was to treat new ideas with skepticism. In these groups, the one-stop idea was theoretically interesting but practically unconvincing because managers didn’t respect the source of information and services.

Both positive and lukewarm reactors shared some skepticism about usability. Most managers had been disappointed too often by websites that appeared promising, but turned out to be difficult to use. The information one was looking for was often missing or out of date. In Alaska and Montana, we discovered real (and fortunately fixable) usability problems with the state one-stop site.

**“[I would be concerned if] the site is not updated regularly or if typical problems that affect a number of websites are not addressed. It has to have substance.”** (NH)

**“I don’t have time to do a lot of searching...it has to be easy to find.”** (MT)

Even managers who were extremely positive said such a site would become just one of the resources they used. Neither the online job postings nor the other information and services would replace their current resources.

Also, since the one-stop site is necessarily general, managers still saw a need for personal assistance tailored to a company's specific circumstances.

***"Can I get follow up?" (NH)***

***"I would like it if you could ask a question and get an answer back within a day." (MT)***

## 8. Interest in web-based job posting and screening

Since many participants mentioned screening when we asked them to suggest state services, it is not surprising that our pre-screening concept met with positive reactions. As with the one-stop concept, the groups divided into positive and lukewarm responders. The following factors distinguished the two factions:

**Positive responders** dwelled on the promising *potential* of the idea. They expected that the state would screen on very basic, objective criteria, and weed out applicants that would waste the company's time. They were interested in this free, efficient source of lower-skilled, young, and entry-level workers.

***"You could save money by not running ads."*** (MT)

***"I like it all...I think they should do it."*** (AK)

***"Because it's the state, it would be less intimidating than, say, hot-jobs."*** (MO)

***"Concept is beautiful. Sold."*** (WA)

Find job seekers who meet your needs.

Missouri WORKS! not only helps you find potential employees—they'll pre-screen them to meet your needs.

The state's job match system offers you direct access to thousands of workers. You can conveniently post job openings for free.

But there's more to Missouri WORKS! than just Internet job listings. Their staff can discuss your needs, then pre-screen applications according to your criteria. You'll save time by reviewing only those applicants who meet your needs.

It's the least expensive and most productive way to find the right people.

*Concept statement (Missouri example)*

**Lukewarm responders** liked the concept in theory, but were skeptical that the state could deliver. They doubted the pool of applicants would be large and diverse enough to meet their needs. They doubted the state would have the resources to adequately screen. And they worried that the screening might be subjective, performed by bureaucrats who did not understand their needs.

***"Too good to be true."*** (KY)

***"I seriously don't think they would be able to do it."*** (NH)

***"As a concept in a perfect world, I want it...but I'm a doubting Thomas."*** (IA)

***"Before I respond, I want to know whether the end of the sentence is '...applicants who are unemployed.' "*** (KY)

***“[DO they mean to say that] the unemployed are the most qualified? They aren’t going out and recruiting.” (MO)***

***“Where are they going to get these people?” (NH)***

***“Would depend on how well it’s marketed to the people looking for jobs.” (MT)***

***“I don’t trust them to pre-screen.” (IA)***

***“[Employment services is] not an efficient organization.” (IA)***

***“Where’s the money coming from to do this?” (AK)***

In sum, the concept addressed a widespread need, but appeal and adoption would ultimately depend on three ingredients:

- The state’s ability to attract a broader applicant pool, not just “the unemployed.”
- Pre-screening that eliminated only clearly unqualified applicants, based on basic, objective criteria.
- Trust in the state workers behind the system to have sufficient resources, listen to employers, and deliver timely, reliable service.

## 9. Understanding, expectations of 'pre-screening'

Before leaving the second concept, we briefly probed what the participants would expect 'pre-screening' to entail.

From this and earlier parts of the discussions (where they suggested screening before we prompted them), we heard participants use 'screening' and 'pre-screening' interchangeably. There is probably some useful nuance between the two, but it appeared that those managers who were alarmed at the idea of the state conducting this activity were alarmed in either case; those who gave the state the benefit of the doubt also did so in either case.

Whether 'screening' or 'pre-screening,' some managers think of this as the early interviewing process, where a company's HR people evaluate which candidates are worth interviewing for the line managers they would report to. Not surprisingly, these participants did not want state workers assisting with such subjective evaluations.

***"I want to do the nitty-gritty myself." (NH)***

***"Hiring is not a faceless thing...it's a human being. Enthusiasm, face-to-face interaction is important." (MT)***

However, the majority of our focus group participants saw screening as an initial qualification for non-professional applicants, to make sure their background fits the job criteria. Employment agencies routinely provide this service, and employers routinely buy it because it saves them time.

***"Three basic things in the ad: if they don't have them, then don't come." (AK)***

The value of the screening service depends on three main factors:

- How good are the people doing the screening?
- How well has the criteria been established, discussed, and understood by the screeners? (Note that part of a good screening service is to help the employer more clearly define their criteria).
- Will it be easy or difficult to attract applicants? (To the degree there are few applications, screening is less important).

Managers are accustomed to paying employment agencies for this service. In a few groups where we asked, they said they might be willing to pay the state for different levels of screening. “Free” is a double-edged sword. It is an important competitive benefit, but it also raises the concern that the service might not be very good (you get what you pay for).

Finally, there is a form of screening that is essentially self-service. Many participants suggested that if the state could:

- require job seekers to fill in certain information corresponding to objective criteria; and
- present applications in digital form (probably online), in an interactive format that allowed employers to sort on the objective criteria...

...then the HR managers could very efficiently screen or prioritize applicants themselves.

## 10. Preferred communication channels

In several groups where time permitted, we concluded by asking participants how they themselves preferred to hear about services such as the ones we had discussed.

Managers listed a range of communication channels, including:

- Mail
  - Official letters from the state
  - Other types of mail such as bulletin, postcard or pamphlet
- Email
  - Simple email letters
  - Email-delivered newsletters
- Associations or professional organizations
- Trade journals
- Job fairs
- Workshops or seminars
- Newspaper advertising
- Advertising or public service announcements on TV, radio
- Personal contact

A simple letter was probably the favorite choice. Email came in second, although here the participants were polarized: many said they specifically did *not* prefer email because they feared it would get lost among the spam.

These groups are not designed to provide quantitative feedback, so we should use preferences here as guidelines, not rankings. In any case, what participants say they prefer may not be the same as what in practice gets their attention.

## IV. EXHIBITS

1. Sample discussion guide
2. LMI examples
3. Sample websites
4. Job posting/pre-screening concept
5. Focus group recruiting screener

## Exhibit 1. Sample Discussion Guide

Gilmore Research Group

# C02057 (rev. 1)

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### EMPLOYER/HR RESOURCE STUDY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Missoula: May 30, 2002 at 5:30 and 7:30 pm

#### **Introduction**

(Moderator introduces self, unbiased third party, and then explains:)

#### ***Purpose of the Focus Group:***

We're conducting groups among employers in this state as well as several others to understand your needs and the resources available to you with respect to recruiting, screening/assessment, and training of new employees. Some of the topics that we may be discussing have to do with hiring and recruiting, that may not relate to your current needs in this economic environment, but please think of the last time your company was in that situation.

This evening, we will also look at some concepts for services that may be provided to support those functions and would like to get your feedback about them and how interested you would be in any of these products or services. We'd like to know how you think the provider of these services might best assist you in your HR role and which services would be of most value. So first we'll introduce ourselves, and then we'll go through these different topics one at a time.

#### ***Ground Rules/Disclosures:***

Some viewers/listeners

Taping, audio for my purposes

Use first names only for anonymity

Can only hear one at a time; speak up at same level as I am

No right or wrong answers, want your candid ideas, perceptions, and suggestions

We don't identify individuals when we quote ideas, but present the information in a combined form.

#### ***Respondent Introductions:***

First name?

What your role is?

What type of company?

## **Background/Warm-up**

What challenges does your organization face finding the right people for its jobs?

- How have you approached the issue?
- What solutions have you found?
- To what extent does it differ by type of employee?

What resources have you used? (Look for spontaneous mention of Internet and focus in)

(If Internet not mentioned, probe for use of that resource:)

**Do you find Internet-based job listings a useful way to find qualified employees? Why or why not?**

- Which sites do you use? Monster.com? Local Newspaper's Online Classifieds?
- What do you like about it/them?
- What are they missing?
- Are they good for all types of employees or only certain types or certain jobs? Why?

**Are you aware of economic information that's tracked and published by your state?**

(ASSESS UNAIDED AWARENESS, THEN PROMPT WITH EXAMPLES OF INFORMATION AVAILABLE FROM THE STATE – *see Exhibit 2.*)

- How useful do you think this sort of information is or could it be, if it were available on the Internet?
- Why/why not?
- Which information would be most useful? Why?
- Which format? Why?

## **Perceptions of State Services for Employers**

Are you aware of [WorkSource (WA)/Alaska Job Center Network (AK)/JobLINC (MT)]?

(IF SO, ASK:) What do you know about it?

Would your company be interested in services provided by the state to help employers? Why or why not?

Now, please think about the human resources challenges your company faces this year. If there is one service the state could provide that would help you address these challenges, what would that service be?

I'd like you to imagine a service the state might realistically provide—and, if it were offered, you would use it. Take a moment to think about it and write it down, then we'll go around the table and find out what everyone said.

### **Concepts and Reactions**

Is it difficult to know or find out what services the state provides to employers?

What if all of these services were listed and explained on a single website, especially for employers?  
[discuss, before handing out example]

PASS OUT PRINTOUT OF EMPLOYER WEBSITE. [see Exhibit 3] EXPLAIN THAT THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT AN EMPLOYER WEBSITE MIGHT LOOK LIKE. ASK REpondENTS TO WRITE DOWN ON PAPER, WHAT IS MOST/LEAST IMPORTANT AND WHAT IS POSITIVE/NEGATIVE ABOUT THE IDEA.

- First of all, what was the most important piece of information about this concept?
- What was least important?
- What was the best part of this concept? What benefit does it have for you?
- What is the least attractive part of this concept? Would it deter you from using the service?
- Have you seen a website like this? Used it? [if used, probe – Do you continue to use it? For what? If not, why not?]
- How interested would you/your company be in using this service? Why/Why not?

### ***Concept 2: Web-based Job Posting and Screening***

READ CONCEPT [see Exhibit 4] AND ASK REpondENTS TO WRITE DOWN ON PAPER, WHAT IS MOST/LEAST IMPORTANT AND WHAT IS POSITIVE/NEGATIVE ABOUT THE CONCEPT.

- First of all, what was the most important piece of information about this concept?
- What was least important?
- What was the best part of this concept? What benefit does it have for you?
- What is the least attractive part of this concept? Would it deter you from using the service?
- How interested would you/your company be in using this service? Why/Why not?
- What does the term “pre-screening” mean to you? How would it have to work in order to be useful to you?
- What skill levels do you think are represented on this site? Would this duplicate or complement other career web sites? In what way?

**Wrap-up (if time permits)**

If the State were to offer some of the services we've talked about, how would you prefer to hear about them? *e.g.* –

- Mail?
- Email?
- Stories or ads in the newspaper or business press?

THANK YOU!

## **Exhibit 2. LMI examples**

### **Examples of information tracked for each state and county**

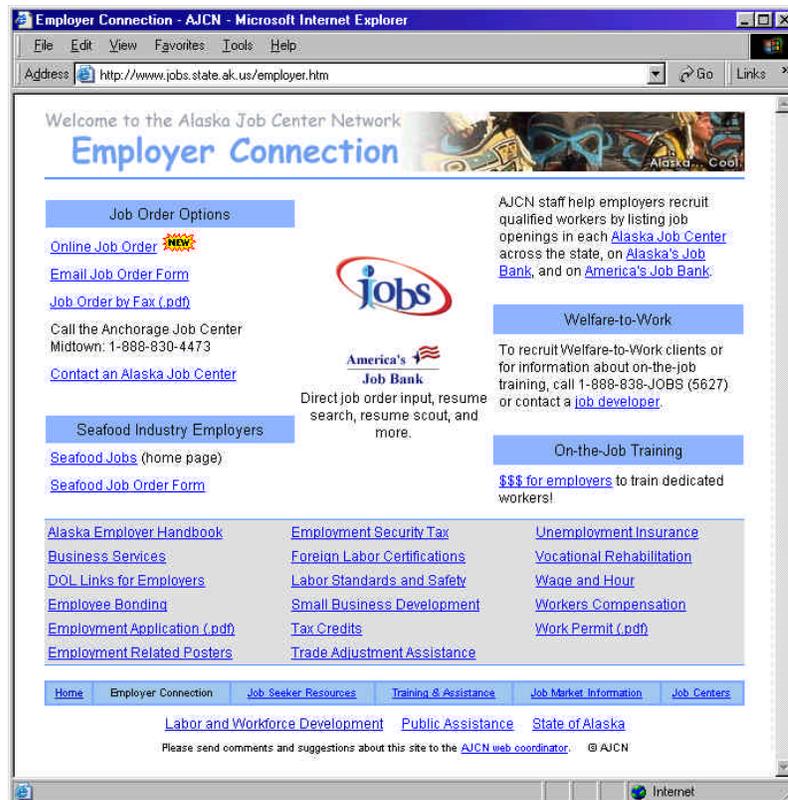
- Population, demographic, and income trends
- Average wages by industry and job type
- Unemployment rates
- Employment trends and projections by industry type
- Number of workers by skill and education levels
- Rising and declining occupations
- Number of firms by size
- Number of firms in each industry

### Exhibit 3. Sample websites

Full-page, color printouts of the following web pages were distributed for participant reactions (see *Concepts and Reactions* section in discussion guide, Exhibit 1):

1. Alaska - <http://www.jobs.state.ak.us/employer.htm>
2. Montana - [http://www.mtjobline.com/services\\_employer.htm](http://www.mtjobline.com/services_employer.htm)
3. New Hampshire - <http://www.nhworks.org/employers.html>
4. Missouri - <http://www.works.state.mo.us/mw2b.htm> (with 'Related links' for employers appended)
5. Iowa - <http://www.iowaworkforce.org/files/employer.htm>
6. Kentucky - <http://www.employky.net/>

*Alaska's sample page:*



## **Exhibit 4. Job posting/pre-screening concept**

[New Hampshire version]

Find job seekers who meet your needs.

NH WORKS not only helps you find potential employees—they'll pre-screen them to meet your needs.

The state's job match system offers you direct access to thousands of workers. You can conveniently post job openings for free.

But there's more to NH WORKS than just Internet job listings. Their staff can discuss your needs, then pre-screen applications according to your criteria. You'll save time by reviewing only those applicants who meet your needs.

It's the least expensive and most productive way to find the right people.

**Exhibit 5. Focus group recruiting screener sample**

**RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE LS5549MO - ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI**

**ASK TO SPEAK TO THE DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES, OR EXECUTIVE WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ORGANIZATION'S HIRING AND TRAINING PRACTICES**

Hello, my name is **(full name)** with **Lucas Market Research**,<sup>2</sup> an independent market research firm located in **St. Louis**. We are conducting research for the state of **Missouri** among business executives who are directly involved in their firm's human resources management.

I can promise you there are no sales connected with this call. The purpose of the research project is solely to understand what types of resources employers use to find and train employees, and how the state can better serve them.

We are conducting an informal focus group discussion on the evening of **Tuesday, June 4**. Participants in this discussion will receive **\$100** in cash as a thank you for two hours of their time.

To ensure we include the opinions of a variety of people, I need to ask a few questions.

1. I need to speak with an executive who is responsible for your organizations' human resources decisions. By that, we mean hiring, training, layoffs, and recruiting. Would that be you?

(CONTINUE.) ← Yes 1

(ASK FOR A REFERRAL IN THE COMPANY AND GET TRANSFERRED OR  
CALL BACK. USE INTRODUCTION, THEN BEGIN WITH Q. 1.) ← No 2

(TERMINATE.) ← Refused 3

- 2a. How involved are you, personally, in the recruiting, hiring, training, and other human resources practices in your company? Would you say you are . . .? **(READ LIST.)**

(CONTINUE.) ← Extremely involved 1

(CONTINUE.) ← Very involved 2

(ASK FOR REFERRAL AND TERMINATE.) ← Somewhat involved 3

(ASK FOR REFERRAL AND TERMINATE.) ← Not very involved 4

(ASK FOR REFERRAL AND TERMINATE.) ← Not at all involved 5

(DO NOT READ. TERMINATE.) ← No response 6

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<sup>2</sup> Lucas was the subcontractor that handled St. Louis recruiting for Horizon Research

2b. About how long have you been involved in the recruiting, hiring, training, and other human resources practices in your company? Would you say...? **(READ LIST.)**

- ← (TERMINATE.) Less than 6 months
- ← (CONTINUE.) 6 months to 1 year
- ← (CONTINUE.) 1 to 2 years
- ← (CONTINUE.) 2 to 3 years
- ← (CONTINUE.) 3 plus years
- ← **(DO NOT READ. TERMINATE.)** No response

3. Have you participated in any previous focus groups, round table discussions, or personal interviews about the state's resources for employers?

- (TERMINATE.) ← Yes 1
- (CONTINUE.) ← No 2
- (TERMINATE.) ← Don't Recall 3

4. About how many full-time employees work at the location or locations where you have human resource responsibilities in Missouri? All I need is a rough estimate.

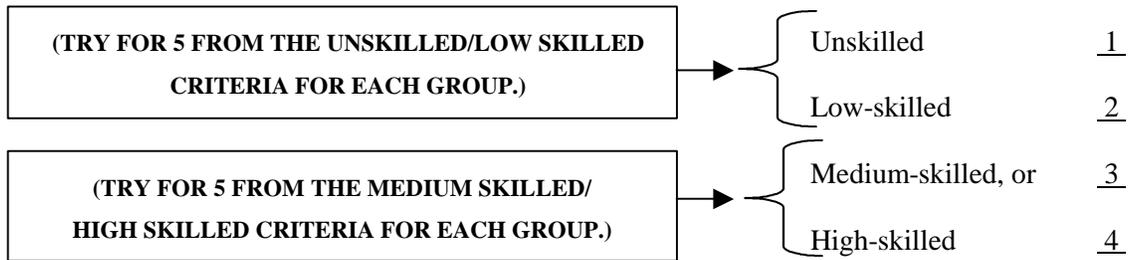
(CHECK QUOTAS. IF FILLED, TERMINATE. OTHERWISE, CONTINUE.)

- (TERMINATE.) ← Less than 10 1
- (QUALIFIES FOR THE 6:00 P.M. GROUP.) ← 10 to 74 2
- (QUALIFIES FOR THE 8:00 P.M. GROUP.) ← 75 or more 3
- (TERMINATE.) ← No Response 4

5. During the time you have had responsibilities for human resources at your company, has the company experienced any periods of significant growth? By that, I mean an increase in headcount of at least 10% during a particular year.

- (TRY FOR 2 OR MORE IN EACH GROUP.) ← Yes 1
- (CONTINUE.) ← No 2
- (CONTINUE.) ← Don't Recall 3

6. How would describe the skill level of the majority of your company’s jobs? Would you say it is mostly...?  
**(READ LIST.)**



**(DO NOT READ. CHECK GROUP QUOTAS. CAN USE THIS** ← Have a mixture  
**(RESPONDENT IN EITHER THE 6:00 PM GROUP OR THE 8:00 PM GROUP.)** of these types of  
 people 5

**(DO NOT READ. TERMINATE.)** ← Don’t Know 6

7. Are you aware of a state program called “Missouri WORKS”?

**(TRY FOR AT LEAST 2 AND NOT MORE THAN 7 FOR EACH GROUP.)** ← Yes 1

**(CHECK QUOTAS. CONTINUE IF AWARE CRITERIA HAS BEEN MET.)** ← No 2

**(CONTINUE.)** ← Don’t Recall 3

8. Which of the following terms best describes the type of business conducted by your company?  
 Would it be. . . ? **(READ COMPLETE LIST BEFORE ACCEPTING AN ANSWER.)**

**(NOTE: TRY FOR A MIXTURE OF INDUSTRIES.)**

- Agriculture 1
- Mining 2
- Construction 3
- Manufacturing 4
- Transportation 5
- Wholesale 6
- Retail 7
- Health Care 8
- Financial 9
- Education 10
- Technology 11
- Telecommunications 12
- Government 13
- Market Research Firm 14
- Advertising Agency 15
- Public Relations Firm 16
- Marketing Consulting Firm 17
- Services (Specify): 18
- Other (Specify): 19
- No Response 20

9. What is your job title? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What length of time have you been in this position? \_\_\_\_\_ (months/years)

11. How long have you been at the company? \_\_\_\_\_ (months/years)

12. RECORD GENDER.