



Interview with John Dorrer
Director, Center for Workforce Research and Information
Maine Department of Labor

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the NTAR Leadership Center. Helping state leaders help adults with disabilities to employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and change.

[Laurie Harrington] Welcome to "Research in Brief", a feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host, Lori Harrington. John Dorrer is the director for the Center for Workforce Research and Information in Maine's Department of Labor. He's an economist and research administrator focused on workforce development, human capital, and labor market policies at the state and local level. He is responsible for overseeing the State of Maine's workforce statistics systems for measuring employment, unemployment, and labor market development including forecasting skill requirements and workforce needs. He works closely with Maine employers, industry associations, economic developers, and education and training agencies to analyze workforce requirements, trends, and developments. Thank you for being with us today, John. Why do you think labor market information is important for policymakers and practitioners to understand?

[John Dorrer] Well, we invest literally billions of dollars in education and training on an annual basis to guide people towards employment and guide people towards careers. If you're doing that without really understanding the marketplace that you're guiding people into, then I don't think you're doing it very responsibly. So I think it's critically important that we understand what labor markets look like, what labor markets are doing in terms of dynamics and changes that are underway. We all, those of us who are in the business of guiding people into work or into careers need to fundamentally understand the markets that we're guiding them into.

[Laurie Harrington] In your opinion, what are the best publicly-available data sources that policymakers and practitioners should use?

[John Dorrer] There are many, and what I recommend is that people pay attention at the beginning of every month when the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the U.S. Department of Labor releases data on the monthly employment situation. We hear on the news about the unemployment rate, what's happening to non-farm jobs, what's happening to the size of the labor force, and generally on a month-to-month basis we get current news about developments in the labor market. Typically, two to three weeks following the release of this national news, the same information is made available at the state and, and local level as well. So there is a very good current reading of what are the developments in the labor market both at the federal, state, and local level. I think any policymaker and practitioner working in this area needs to, obviously, pay attention to these month-to-month developments. So that's the data source, and you know, a set of events that I would point a lot of people to, whether they're policymakers or practitioners because it really is having a pulse on the labor market that I think is, is a starting point. In addition, there's also lots of publicly-available data, typically through your state department of labor and labor market information unit, that gives you a deeper picture of what are the



developments underway in the labor market. Picture of what industries are hiring, what industries are shedding jobs, where the growth is going over time, and, you know, I think paying attention to industry employment developments is a critical kind of monitoring function that policymakers and practitioners both need to rely on. There's also detailed occupational data that's collected through something called the Occupational Employment Survey. So we, in effect, states in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics survey employers on a very regular basis and in effect find out how many people are employed by occupation, what their earnings are. And so we have a pretty good picture of what's happening in terms of occupational employment and occupational wages. Those data are typically updated every couple of years, easily accessed through websites that are run by states. The user interfaces are relatively simple and straightforward to use, and so there's another great resource that is available to folks to really learn more about the performance of labor markets and the direction in which the state and regional economy is moving in, and there's some really valuable information that should be passed on to job seekers and people making career plans and, and career-related decisions. In addition, there's other information available through, for example, looking at state unemployment insurance claims, who's being laid off, what industries are people being laid off from, what occupations are people being laid off from, who suffers unemployment spells over longer durations. Those are all very important inputs to piece together a picture of what is going on in the state or regional labor markets, and I think both policymakers and practitioners should be consulting those kinds of data sources and put together, if you will, dashboards about labor market performance I think as a matter of routine because it's what we're really being called upon to pass on to a lot of folks who simply don't have access or don't have any knowledge, and so, therefore, need an intermediary to help them connect to this information.

[Laurie Harrington] Typically, how far does LMI lag to be considered current?

[John Dorrer] Well, I think while it's, it's a reasonably good measure, I think all of this needs to be taken with a certain degree of caution. And I think one of the things I was just going to say at the outset don't ever rely upon one single source of data as a means to arrive at an analysis of the labor market. So it's all, it's critically important to draw upon multiple data sources and put those data sources together and make an assessment that requires some judgment and requires some, what I call labor market intelligence development, you know, before we sort of rest on one simple data source. I mean, there is currency in the monthly release of employment, unemployment, and labor force. So we get a pretty current picture on a monthly basis in terms of whether, what are the developments underway in the labor market. Now, it should also be pointed out that while sometimes those data scream out at us and, and point to certain kinds of situations that are unfolding, there's also the process of revision of data that takes place over time as those who are doing these series get better information and are able to, you know, in effect, make corrections. So current data on a monthly basis, pretty good source. Pay attention, though. It is subject to revision. The occupational employment data typically has about two years' lag time before the reports get published and put together. I've got many people coming to us and saying, "Well, gee whiz. This data is two years old." Well, I mean, that's yes and no in terms of advantage, disadvantage. Sometimes it's good to be able to sort of process data and get a real perspective because oftentimes if you're simply looking at current data and react to the moment, it might be real time, but it might be about aberration, or it might not be in proper context. So we



could jump to conclusions, and jump to the wrong conclusions because what we've got to really do is look at this data over time, look at trends, and look at in context. So I'm, I'm a fan of looking at data over time, analyzing trends, and also consulting multiple data sources as a means to get an accurate picture. I think that a lot of the, the quests for labor market information turns on, "Well, gee whiz. Can I get it in real time?" And so there are some new things on the market that are in, in effect responding to this need. Increasingly with the Internet as a provider of, of job ads and, and job postings information, more aggregation of these job postings is being done, and very timely kind of analysis of what jobs are hot and what jobs are in demand is available through use of Internet-based job banks and the aggregation of Internet job banks data, and there are increasingly efforts underway to build a set of analytics looking at the current labor market. For example, the conference board puts out a 16-week current picture of job trends, a four-year average picture of job trends. So you can kind of take a look at this both in the present context and over time, and in many respects giving you this, this very accurate kind of impression. Of what's happening in the labor market here and now. But again, I would just say beware. Interpret this with a certain degree of caution, and as I say, never rest on one source to reach a conclusion.

[Laurie Harrington] What in your opinion is the best use of LMI for front-line workers who are helping people with disabilities find employment?

[John Dorrer] Well, I think whether it's people with disabilities or unemployed workers in general, they walk into a career center or they walk into a service center, and usually the question that they ask is how do I get a job. [laughs] And so the most fundamental question that we have to respond to is where are job opportunities, and what are the requirements to get hired, and what do those jobs pay. So very basic kinds of information about what job opportunities are out there. What do they require in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and what do they pay? We have to have that kind of information at our fingertips because that's what people are asking for. It is also the basis, I think, for starting a conversation because oftentimes many of the people who show up at the doorsteps of the career centers or in disability service organizations, sometimes their skills don't match up with the demands in the labor market, and so we owe them at least some help in doing the analysis about, OK, here are the job opportunities that are out there. Here are the requirements to be able to get those kinds of jobs, and now let's assess what your knowledge, skills, and abilities look like in relation to the jobs that you might be interested in, and to assess, in fact, what, what are the gaps that need to be remedied through education, training, and perhaps additional kind of seminars and course work that's offered through service providers where people can in effect narrow the gaps and remedy some of the gaps that they have by way of knowledge, skills, and abilities that they need to compete. And so that, to me, is, is fundamental, and beyond, you know, the job match kind of function, I think people are also interested in not just getting a job but building a pathway for a career. And so it may take more than simply immediate job information. It may take more in the way of what job outlook is about in terms of ten years out or something like that. So people can say, "Well, you know, I'm really interested in making a fundamental change, improving my economic lot in life, earning higher wages. I recognize that I have to go to school, but will it help me make some choices as to what are strong career paths and directions to move in, and what are the investments that I need to make in education and training to get there?" And I think those are all fairly standardized conversations that take place every day, and I worry sometimes that we don't resource them



enough with good information that we know is out there, that can be brought to bear on helping people make better decisions, more solid choices, and in the end I think be more satisfied and be less disappointed in the outcome.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you discuss the State of Maine's partnership with the Department of Labor and disability service providers and their use of LMI with front-line workers?

[John Dorrer] Yeah. This is actually a, a process that was initiated by a couple of individuals from Maine Medical Center Rehabilitation Services, who came and visited us and said, "Look. We really would like to have our staff be better equipped with knowledge about the economy, deeper knowledge about careers and occupations, how labor markets work," and I think they laid out a very far request. And we basically said, "OK. We should jointly develop a training program as opposed to a usual kind of response, which is OK, we have a website. We can give you, you know, tons of publications. Good luck." We sat together with the leadership from Maine Medical Center Vocational Rehabilitation Services and said what should we be creating here. We should be creating a learning environment. We should be creating something that is interesting and challenging and meets people where they are at. And so we set about to create a labor market information academy. The joint effort between us who are producers of labor market and work, force information and Maine Medical Center Vocational Rehabilitation Services. They are the consumers. So we spent some time putting a curriculum together, making sure their staff had plenty of input, to be able to make sure that we were aware of what it is that they wanted to know, what they had the capacity for, what they had the interest in. We brought all of that together, built a curriculum, and then set about through jointly staffing the academy, and moving a series of these academy sessions around the state where we invited in staff from private and public rehabilitation programs to be able to get this, this first-hand kind of exposure to what's available by way of labor market workforce information, resources. How can it be applied? What's the story behind the story? How do you get more intimately connected to using this kind of information in helping to make decisions?

[Laurie Harrington] Thank you, John, for speaking with us today. I've been speaking with John Dorrer, the Director for the Center for Workforce Research and Information in Maine's Department of Labor. This is Lori Harrington for "Research in Brief" with the NTAR Leadership Center. [music] For more information about the NTAR Leadership Center and its research activities, visit www.ntarcenter.org.

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