

SKILLS AND SERVICES EXCHANGE

Among Individuals, Groups and Organizations

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Barter, or exchange, provides a parallel resource to money for individuals, groups and organizations. Although usually involving goods and services, barter can also include skills, knowledge and guidance.

Barter arrangements may augment resources from:

- government
- corporations
- foundations
- nonprofits
- community groups
- individuals
- families

An advantage of barter is that it puts participants on somewhat equal footing. Since resources go both ways, dependency implicit in the provider-recipient relationship is avoided. All participants benefit as dignity and confidence are enhanced and needs met. In addition to the benefits of the exchange itself, there are opportunities for collaboration, alliances, partnerships and ultimately community building.

Exchanges Between Individuals

Barter can involve the exchange of skills and services to meet a variety of individuals' interests. Examples are:

- Literacy skills in exchange for household maintenance, shopping, child care or transportation.
- Computer skills and information management in exchange for tutoring in writing, speaking or self-presentation.
- Health maintenance, financial planning or nutritional guidance in exchange for being taught how to do carpentry, painting, upholstery, sewing or other home improvement skills.
- Work search coaching in exchange for needed services.

Exchanges Between Groups and Organizations

- Members of different groups exchange knowledge and experience in areas that serve each group's needs (e.g. management, fundraising or resource development, advocacy, leadership, grant-writing).

- Representatives of organizations and small groups guide and train one another in processes and skills related to effectiveness and self-sufficiency (e.g. lessons learned, best practices, effective presentations).
- Purchasers or users of goods or services guide producers in effective product or service development and placement in exchange for appropriate non-monetary assistance.

How a Skills and Services Exchange Can Work

Skills and services exchanges probably operate best on the community level. Since participants live nearby and share networks, they have natural connections and are more easily accountable to one another. In addition, individuals, groups and organizations can be identified and cultivated through local:

- churches, synagogues and mosques
- community action groups
- community centers
- government agencies
- companies, philanthropies and nonprofits
- apartment complexes, rental, condominium or cooperative
- professional organizations
- self-help groups

Volunteers and other managers can develop and maintain a database of available skills, services and needs as well as suggest matches. Or participants in the exchanges themselves can do this work, garnering credit for their own barter arrangements. Exchange development and maintenance costs could be met through modest charges for access and small grants from individuals and organizations. Perhaps the database would become a budding *E-Bay for barter*.

Although lists of skills, services, knowledge and experience will be available, anyone who wants to participate can specify what they want to offer and need. To ease comparison between seemingly disparate offerings, comparable credits for particular ones can be determined. Although arrangements may be made based on a one-to-one skill for service exchange, credit equivalencies for particular skills and services may also be established. The credit equivalency option could make three-way arrangements easier.

But participants can negotiate their agreement along any lines they wish. They could base it on criteria such as frequency of meetings, time to be expended, relative

difficulties of offerings, value to the recipients and/or level of need. Or hourly rates for each skill and service, using typical charges found in the community, can be used to set up equivalent credits.

Keys to the success of the arrangement are:

- effective matching of participants, including their personalities and values
- perceived fairness, clarity and ease of the exchange
- committed follow-through by all parties
- conflict anticipation and resolution processes

If participants find creating their own agreement problematic, community mediators can facilitate an agreement. The mediators will be trained separately or come from among the participants themselves, also garnering exchange credits for their contributions.

In a simple, amendable agreement, participants will define what is to be exchanged, time involved and period of the exchange. Exchanges can involve more than two people, using exchange credits when a two-way exchange is not appropriate. If misunderstandings or issues ensue, the mediators can assist.

Why Develop a Skills and Services Exchange Now?

Among other sources of assistance, government, nonprofit organizations, volunteer groups, foundations, religious groups and corporate philanthropic efforts continue to expend billions of dollars to provide goods and services. But in this time of budgetary stringency and economic uncertainty, as well as a tendency toward privatization, nonmonetary alternatives have particular value.

The amount, range and type of traditional assistance are changing as resources shift, political resolve weakens and public and private debt increases. At the same time that resources are shifting and shrinking, demographic changes, increasing legal and illegal immigration, lack of health insurance coverage, outsourcing and dependency ratios of workers to retirees are changing patterns of need.

Even if resources were not in question, certainly the design and longer-term efficacy of many current programs can be improved. For example, though much progress has been made in welfare to work arrangements and sectoral workforce development, critics as well as providers continue to seek ways to promote self-sufficiency and decrease dependency.

Skills and Services Exchanges Finesse Some Limitations of Service Delivery

The current model of social service delivery and assistance in general tend toward silos or compartments of services such as education, housing and health. Providers are generally institutionally based and recipients are individuals, thus creating a situation where people are dependent on how they “fit” with what’s offered, not to mention an imbalance of power. Such one-way giving also contributes to the dependence of the recipient who often requires proof of need, adding to the drain on dignity.

These factors cause difficulties for many recipients and challenges for providers. The whole person is rarely served. There are duplications, overlaps and gaps in services as well as administrative costs from separate operations trying to serve immediate needs, rather than longer-term movement to self-sufficiency. Since it is unlikely that present models of social service delivery and non-governmental types of assistance will soon be transformed, alternative approaches such as barter can provide additional models and parallel supports. A Skills and Services Exchange will meet some current unfulfilled needs as well as be a pilot program to investigate alternative delivery systems.

Advantages of a Skills and Services Exchange

The Exchange has concrete advantages as an adjunct to present models of assistance.

Examples include:

- utilization of existing community organizations and connections
- encouragement of cooperation based on mutual benefit
- opportunities for recipients of barter to define their own needs and deliver skills and services directly
- flexibility provided by a range of skills and services to fit a range of needs
- nonmonetary support that complements other assistance
- empowerment of participants who determine their own arrangements
- comparative speed for addressing immediate needs, thus avoiding deterioration of a situation when needs go unmet
- community cohesion as relationships and networks develop among users and local organizations collaborate
- opportunities for testing possible local partnerships and alliances
- improved dignity, hope and capacities of participants
- situations for development of community leaders

Use the Exchange As a Pilot Project

In addition to meeting needs of the participants in flexible, relatively rapid ways,

the Skills and Services Exchange provides an additional process for learning about social service delivery. Especially at the community level, the process is also a way to re-charge, strengthen and expand current assistance efforts, whether offered by individuals, small groups, organizations or larger systems.

Possible areas for learning and study through the Exchange process include:

- cooperative and collaborative arrangements among social service and community-based organizations
- mutual-help processes among people with complementary abilities
- factors contributing to self-sufficiency
- definitions of functional independence and functional literacy
- use of social contract at the community level
- cost/benefit information for a different model of service delivery
- characteristics of self-sufficient people

Key Issues to Be Explored and Clarified

- Identification of appropriate communities and support mechanisms
- Development of networks and sources of participants
- Kinds of people and arrangements appropriate for leading and managing an Exchange
- Methods of screening and matching participants
- Sources of modest funds for development and maintenance of the Exchange database and process
- Ways to anticipate and resolve misunderstandings among participants
- Effective contract development and skill-sharing
- Creation and maintenance of database of participants' skills, services and needs housed in a community Web site
- Possible tax liabilities from barter arrangements: Generally there are income taxes for bartering one's services. "The fair market value of goods and services exchanged must be included in the income of both parties," according to the IRS. There may also be state and local requirements.
- Processes for screening and ensuring security of participants

P.S. Examples of commercial barter Web sites are www.itex.com and www.nate.org.

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