

Caseworker training reimagined

Turning virtual experiences
into expertise



Asking the right questions

Government-funded benefit programs play a crucial role in society, ensuring that people in need have access to necessities such as housing, food and health care.

Despite each jurisdiction's typically having a clear policy to determine eligibility for social services or social benefits, in many instances it falls to caseworkers to assess if a family or an individual should receive financial assistance. Understandably, this can place a significant mental and emotional burden on caseworkers as they see firsthand the impact their decisions can have. A successful caseworker relies on a mixture of experience, skills and confidence to make the best decisions in each individual case. This requires extensive initial and ongoing training.

It can take years for caseworkers to develop the necessary skills and confidence for the job. In some instances, they may go through months of training only to realize the role isn't right for them. As a result, organizations can make significant investments in training and see no return, posing a major issue in an industry with tight budgets and an already-high turnover rate.

San Diego County ("the County") wanted to address error rates in eligibility decisions affecting whether families get the essential benefits needed to access food, health care and basic needs. The County recognized that new caseworkers needed more "real world" experience to help them conduct interviews to validate eligibility. And so, the County turned to Accenture to explore a new and better way to train caseworkers on the human side of social work.

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Call for change

Accenture and the County selected the award-winning Accenture Virtual Experience Solution (AVenueS) to train eligibility caseworkers so that they can feel confident on day one.

The goal was to create a new learning module for the AVenueS program that focused specifically on eligibility. This came at a time when the pandemic was complicating matters by forcing benefits appointments to be online and by phone. New eligibility workers were not able to shadow seasoned caseworkers or experience the nuances of an eligibility interview in person. They were missing essential de-escalation techniques and the learning that happens experientially. Fortunately, the AVenueS scenario that the County created with Accenture would proceed to solve for this and create new benefits for County caseworkers.



When tech meets human ingenuity

Translating virtual experiences

AVenueS is an interactive virtual reality (VR) training approach that uses immersive storytelling and experiential learning to reimagine strategies for staff development, screening and recruitment across human services. It's a learning platform that simulates real-life situations caseworkers face in the field and office.

It's unlike typical virtual reality in that it uses interactive voice-based technology. The experience is completely voice activated and hands-free, requiring only a stand-alone virtual reality headset without smartphone pairing. A cloud-based conversation engine uses machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) to recognize and interpret the user's questions and statements. The result is an incredibly lifelike experience that's completely immersive.

AVenueS does not use joysticks, avatars or computer-generated imagery. Instead, it's a realistic, fully immersive, 360-degree experience

filmed in a real office with real actors whom users speak with as they navigate the scenario. Put simply, if someone in the virtual world asks a question, the user can respond in the real world. That response is recognized in the virtual space and impacts how the scenario unfolds. Think of it as a "choose your own adventure" in human services, where user analytics track performance and obtain insights about the user's approach to decision-making.

The County worked closely with Accenture to build a virtual reality scenario in which trainees interview applicants to validate and obtain the information necessary to make benefits decisions. In the scenario, the trainee conducts an in-person intake interview for medical insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits — known in California as Medi-Cal, CalWORKs and CalFresh, respectively.

When tech meets human ingenuity

When trainees put the headset on, they find themselves in a county cubicle, with a family sitting across from them. Outside the cubicle, the trainee can hear a busy county office where other customers are being called for appointments, babies are crying and people are talking. All these distractions create a fully immersive virtual world that realistically simulates the experience of working in a busy county office.

As the trainee navigates the scenario, they walk through the basic benefits application, choosing between three potential questions to either verify or obtain more information. Asking a question moves the scenario along and provides an opportunity to interact with a family on the brink of hunger and homelessness. At the end, the trainee is given a choice of how to inform the family of its next steps, which elicits a reaction from the family.

When the trainee takes the headset off, the real learning begins. Trainees participate in a seminar where they work together to unpack their thinking, review their experiences and biases, and learn essential skills. This is done through guided discussions and a custom-learning curriculum — all of which boost the trainee's ability to inquire, observe and interpret human behavior.





A valuable difference

Confidence and skills

The County and Accenture set out to create a training solution for Accenture's successful AVenueS program that enables participants to increase their interviewing, empathy, service and accuracy skills.

Learning these skills in a virtual environment, rather than on the job or while shadowing experienced workers, protects potential applicants from frustrating, upsetting or embarrassing situations. AVenueS can be used in the hiring process as well, giving applicants the opportunity to experience an accurate representation of the role to determine early on if it is the right fit, saving the organization and the candidate precious time and energy.

AVenueS improves the ability of new and seasoned caseworkers to use an appropriate question style to gain the information needed without using jargon that confuses the applicant. The accompanying curriculum and training seminar allows participants to reflect on their skills as well as the power dynamics present when working with individuals and families. In the end, participants feel like they can ask questions in a

way that elicits more positive responses, isn't disrespectful and wouldn't be interpreted as accusatory. Over 90% of AVenueS participants have reported that the training improved their skills in engaging individuals and provided a realistic expectation of their new role. And 100% of AVenueS participants have said they would recommend the experience to a coworker.

The eligibility program has been so successful that the County won the Information Technology Solutions Management for Human Services (ISM) affinity group national award for the Best Use of Technology for Operations with an Internal Focus. This award recognizes the innovative use of technology to enhance and improve the internal productivity and efficiencies of a human services organization.

Helping families receive essential benefits is a job with many ups and downs. Fortunately, caseworkers in San Diego County now have another tool to do their jobs effectively and confidently.

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