

Business Linkages

As labor shortages persist in our country in recent years, the unemployment level of individuals with disabilities has received increased attention. A number of federal agencies, public policy makers, consumers groups, professionals, and corporations have focused significant attention on why the unemployment rate of people with disabilities remains so high. This unemployment rate has consistently hovered in the 60 to 70% range for decades. Some 7.5 million unemployed Americans with disabilities will draw \$73 billion in Social Security benefits this year, with only 1% of those receiving benefits becoming self-supporting through employment. Yet, many would suggest that the real economic cost of disability is the loss of production from individuals who are not working. Advances in assistive technology, health interventions, job coaches, natural supports, new training techniques, and progressive laws support the entry of people with disabilities into the competitive work force. Unfortunately, these advances have not yet resulted in a significant improvement in the employment rates of people with disabilities.

The United States Chamber of Commerce has identified the lack of skilled workers as one of its top issues. "But many businesses haven't developed strategies to get people with disabilities into the workplace," said Tom Donohue, President and CEO of the US Chamber of Commerce. The fact that most businesses have not hired people with disabilities should not signal that companies are not willing. Businesses are looking for demonstrations and business models that promote the economic advantages of hiring, retaining, and advancing the employment of people with disabilities.

Rich McGinn, CEO of Lucent Technologies, said it best in an interview with *Fortune Magazine*, "We are in a war for talent. And the only way you can meet your business imperatives is to have all people as part of your talent pool – here in United States and around the world." Is it a coincidence that as a group, the top ten companies, including Lucent, identified by *Fortune Magazine* to be the best companies for minorities such as Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics, consistently outperform the S&P. Minority friendly companies are supe-

rior performers. Companies with a diverse workforce have a competitive advantage, and business practices that lead to improved results are the best way to get a CEO's attention.

More than 75% of the Fortune 500 companies have formal diversity programs in place. But many of these programs do not tap the brain power and contributions of our nation's largest untapped pool of talent, people with disabilities. Those companies that are having the most success in hiring, retaining and advancing people with disabilities report that they include people with disabilities as part of their diversity program. Some examples of corporate leadership include:

Booz, Allen & Hamilton: Nationally recognized for their Task Force in Disability and their newly initiated corporate internship programs for college students with disabilities.

SunTrust Bank: Aggressively recruits people with disabilities and has demonstrated an exemplary program on telecommuting, along with their partner at the Virginia Department of Rehabilitation Services.

Manpower, Inc.: National leader in the employment of people with disabilities, matching people with and without disabilities to jobs across the country and around the world.

IBM: Aggressive recruiter of workers with disabilities, including college graduates in the information technology field.

Philip Morris: Recognized for a diverse workforce as well as its return-to-work programs for workers who become disabled and want to retain employment.

Bank of America: Corporate leader in hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities with a central accommodation budget, reducing managers local cost center and increasing employment for people with disabilities.

This special issue of the *Journal of Vocation Rehabilitation* focuses exclusively on business issues and the employment of people with disabilities. It is my

hope that the readership will obtain new knowledge and awareness from the corporate community that participated in this journal issue and as a result will reevaluate current practices while disseminating best practices strategies for increasing the employment of people with disabilities.

In the first article Bob Peck, Vice President of Operations with SafeCard Services along with Lynn Kirkbride, Director of the Business Relationships with the Cheyenne Business Leadership Network (BLN), share a business perspective on the unspoken fears within the employer community regarding the hiring potential of employees with disabilities. Peck and Kirkbride describe several useful strategies that the Cheyenne BLN has used for combating these issues. Roger Van Lieshout, Director of the Colorado Business Leadership Network shares his expertise of this national strategy in the second article, with tips on partnering and development concepts. The third article by Howard Green and myself shares information we have learned through our work with the US Chamber of Commerce and with the members of the VCU Charter Business Roundtable as we identify factors in the workplace that inhibit or enhance the employment rate and career advancement of people with disabilities. In addition, we provide information on a model business seminar for opening business to people with disabilities that was developed in conjunction with Southern States, Bon Secours, and Capitol One. A fourth article, entitled Getting Corporations Ready to Recruit Workers with Disabilities was written by Nadia Younes, Vice President, Diversity Initiative, Wells Fargo & Company. Ms. Younes shares her wealth of experience as a corporate diversity expert by providing eight practical steps for successfully hiring employees with disabilities. The fifth article in this business issue is by Kelly Egan, President and Co-founder of HirePotential. Supplemental staffing organizations are proving to be the key to reducing the high unemployment figures facing people with disabilities. Ms. Egan and HirePotential developed specific policies and techniques for moving people with disabilities from employees of a staffing company to permanent jobs with corporate customers.

The next three articles provide new and exciting ways for meeting the needs of business and employees with disabilities. Jane Anderson, Executive Director of the Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education along with John Bricout, Assistant Professor at Washington University and our own Michael West, with Virginia Commonwealth University, describe the growth of telecommuting as employment alternative and its ap-

plication for employees with disabilities. Rich detailed information is provided to answer employers concerns about the use of telecommuting specifically with employees with disabilities. This paper further explores a research agenda to examine the best use of telecommuting for meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Peggy Anderson, a leader in the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, reviews the basic principles of marketing and applies them to partnerships between staff in vocational rehabilitation organizations and the business community. Guidelines are provided that are designed to strengthen the business – rehabilitation partnership. The third article in this series, written by VCU's Michael West, Pamela Targett, Gail Steininger, and Newton Anglin, provides outcome data of a demonstration project that addressed the systematic barriers to post-school employment of students with disabilities through a corporate/employer-driven model of transition to supported employment. This paper demonstrates how students can be assisted with employment through the use of business mentoring and other support services to achieve competitive employment success.

The final three articles share additional information on factors for improving the business success in the hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. John Stelle, from the Employer's Forum on Disability in London, England, gives a summary of how to position disability as a strategic business priority. Experiences in the United Kingdom are shared as well as research findings. The next article is written by Deborah Olson, Andrea Cioffi, and Paul Yovanoff with University of Oregon and David Mank with University of Indiana; they share findings from their research on employers' perceptions of employees with mental retardation. Employers from companies of all sizes report favorable experiences in employing people with mental retardation and value the training provided by supported employment service providers. The final article is written by Melinda Mast, Joanne Sweeny and Michael West; it shares the field test results of using presentation portfolios as a job development tool for individuals with disabilities. The field test was done with significant input from several vocational rehabilitation agencies and employers.

I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of our corporate partners, including the US Chamber of Commerce and their Center for Workforce Preparation, the Society of Human Resource Management, the American Staffing Service, the American Telecommuting Association, the International Telecommuting Associ-

ation, Workforce One, and all the members of VCU's Business Roundtable (See www.worksupport.com for a complete list of the VCU Business Roundtable Membership). Over the last several years we have come to view our Roundtable companies as an extension of our faculty at the VCU-RRTC. The Center's mission of enhancing the employment rate and career advancement of people with disabilities is truly a shared goal among all of our corporate leaders. With this level of corporate commitment and dedication, I remain extremely

optimistic about the future employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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