

Introduction

Business Collaboration with Public Sector

The decade that has passed since the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law in 1990 has seen tremendous changes in the way businesses think and act around hiring individuals with disabilities. As a whole, the business community appears to have increasingly embraced the employment of individuals with a disability as a sound business strategy, and invested substantially in appropriate supports. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management reports that of 813 human resource executives found that 75 percent of respondents had changed their procedures for hiring new employees since the passage of the ADA to better accommodate job applicants and new hires with disabilities.

Further evidence of increasing employer support for hiring workers with disabilities is found in a 1998 survey, conducted jointly by the UNUM/Provident insurance company and the Washington Business Group on Health, of human resource professionals at 35 companies. The vast majority of the survey respondents (78%) reported that their efforts to accommodate workers with disabilities were greater than in the past. The survey also found a five percent increase in written return to work policies for workers with disabilities since the previous year's survey. This is significant because return to work policies and other disability-related policies have been linked to better work environments for workers with disabilities [2].

Finally, Unger [8] in a major study investigated the attitudes of 255 supervisors, within 43 large businesses toward people with disabilities. The participating businesses were diverse in terms of types of industry. The supervisors were asked to rate the employee with a disability on a scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied) on items such as timeliness of arrival and departure, punctuality, attendance, task con-

sistency, and work speed. The 255 supervisors indicated they were satisfied with the work performance of the worker with a disability in the areas of timeliness of arrival and departure, punctuality, attendance, and consistency in task [8]. The supervisors then ranked the employee work performance in relation to their nondisabled co-worker. Unger [8] found in the areas of punctuality, attendance, work quality, task consistency, and overall proficiency, supervisors rated the work performance of employees with disabilities the same or better than coworkers. This research is significant because it helps to dispel the myths and misconceptions many employers have of hiring employees with disabilities.

The business role in providing workplace supports

As noted above, it appears that business is increasingly receptive to hiring persons with disabilities. Clearly, the role of business in providing workplace supports for individuals with disabilities is much expanded today. Employers have emerged as an increasingly visible initiator of work supports, not only in terms of more traditional accommodations such as job carving, but also in terms of assistive technologies and new work arrangements [3–7]. In addition to providing financial and human resources for workplace supports, businesses have also turned to other entities for the means to provide needed supports. For example, businesses have utilized external resources from both government-sponsored (e.g., Sections 44 and 190 of the IRS Code – The Disabled Access Tax Credit) and non-governmental organization-sponsored funds (e.g., the Association for Retarded Citizens' wage reimbursement program) to expand their hiring, training and accommodation of workers with disabilities [1]. These

funds flow through businesses and require businesses to be knowledgeable about such financial resources, and committed to getting them. Thus, these financial supports, like workplace accommodations are mediated by the business 'hosts'. The vital role played by business in providing supports can thus be conceptualized in terms of 'mediating' workplace supports which businesses administer, implement and evaluate, either solely or in conjunction with other parties (e.g., government, rehabilitation, human service or supported employment agencies). The critical aspect of 'business-mediated' workplace supports is that they would not be possible without the active, ongoing participation of the employer or business.

Business-mediated workplace supports refer specifically to work arrangements, programs and policies that permit a qualified worker with a disability to meet essential job functions [9]. These supports may include accommodations (e.g., adaptations for workers with a disability), such as job restructuring and schedule modifications, but are not limited to accommodations only. Also included in business-mediated workplace supports are work arrangements and programs that are also available to non-disabled workers, and may therefore not constitute "accommodations" as such; for example, transitional work and telework. Whether businesses enter into partnerships with other organizations, or contract with other organizations to provide workplace supports, they 'mediate' the support programs, practices, policies and procedures for workers with disabilities. Thus, businesses become invaluable allies to supported employment providers in the designing, mounting and assessing workplace supports for individuals with disabilities.

It is important to expand the role of businesses in creating appropriate workplace supports because it is the employer who evaluates the disabled worker's performance, individually, and in the context of his or her contribution to the efforts of a work group or team. The employer establishes performance standards and the criteria by which those standards are assessed. One clear advantage of business-mediated supports in this regard is that the employer incorporates workplace supports into the strategic planning for the work group and thus becomes invested in the efficacy, and ultimately,

success of such supports. Business-mediated supports thus create a partnership between the worker with a disability and the employer. In this issue a number of papers directly address the role and importance of business in the employment of persons with disabilities. Several different critical topics are presented which should be of significant value to practitioners.

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