

# INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

---

Change within the workplace is occurring at a staggering pace. Over the span of a relatively few years, we have seen the shift from a manufacturing to a service industry base, from the United States occupying a dominant international position in trade to having competitive difficulties. We see advances in technology changing the nature of jobs. And we see changes in the work force, with demographic trends reflecting greater diversity. It is appropriate, even necessary, for rehabilitation professionals to acquire information about these changes and seek an understanding of how rehabilitation practices must adjust in order to be effective at promoting jobs and economic well-being for people with disabilities. This issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* focuses on business, in particular, on how rehabilitation service and support is "marketed" given the influences of change on the business community.

In the final years of this century, people with disabilities face a daunting task of maintaining and increasing the employment gains made steadily over the past 50 years. The Americans with Disabilities Act has increased our optimism that job opportunities will continue to grow. However, there is no certainty that this will be the case. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities remain far higher than for any other minority group, exceeding 60%. Wages and work hours are frequently low, reflecting dead-end jobs that do nothing to lift people out of poverty. These problems will not be eliminated unless people with disabilities are included in current business and government efforts to invest in a well-trained work force.

We have assembled an array of contributions that range from successful approaches for securing employment to discussions of changes that may be required of rehabilitation professionals to advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities. How will global competition influence rehabilitation services and results? Kenneth Ramsing and his colleagues examine how quality improvement trends in business are finding their way into human resource management. Dr. Ramsing notes the opportunity that exists for rehabilitation professionals who seek to understand and influ-

ence these changes and who are willing to change their own roles to conform to the new workplace.

John Kregel and Darlene Unger also briefly summarize the significant trends that are influencing both rehabilitation services and the attitudes of employers in the 1990s. In reporting on one of the first studies of employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities conducted since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Dr. Kregel and Ms. Unger add evidence that employers generally hold very positive attitudes regarding the employment potential of people with disabilities. This study, which sampled 46 employers in the Richmond, Virginia, area, provides both encouragement and evidence of significant service implementation issues with implications for building working relationships with employers.

The challenge to examine rehabilitation practices extends beyond business trends to the efficacy of many of our traditional job development and support systems. Kathy Bloom, a personnel officer at a manufacturing plant, levels criticism at a well-intentioned rehabilitation support system that is frequently ineffective at best and oversteps its bounds in ways that interfere with business shouldering its normal responsibility for its employees. Says Ms. Bloom, ". . . (a) system that will go to the extraordinary length of providing a paid public employee to work within a factory as a job coach seems to do little to understand the needs of employers. A few of these 'needs,' from my experience, are the need to be free of specialized language and jargon, the need to be responsive to business time frames, and the need to be free of further government intrusion."

The attempt to more effectively use the resources and interests of employers is at the heart of the article by Dennis Sandow, Deborah Olson, and Xiaoyan Yan. They trace how the concept of support for people with disabilities has changed from essentially a care-provider-driven model to one based on the use of supports that are derived within the "natural" environment of the workplace. Insights are provided on how employment services, which rely on a "parallel system of rehabilitation service delivery," have often failed to serve the needs of businesses that are interested

in hiring people with severe disabilities. The rationale for taking full advantage of naturally occurring support networks is presented as a means to ensure greater employment outcomes and leverage badly needed new resources.

What will constitute effective job development strategies in the 1990s? John Nietupski and his colleagues provide one model for job development that emphasizes the necessity of broad-based community support. The referral model approaches job development through the use of nonrehabilitation professionals, called third-party advocates, who have connections with employers.

A major success in another industry is described by Richard Balser and Brenda Harvey. The Maine Medical Center implemented a model for working within the hospital industry that has been successful with people with chronic mental illness and other disabilities; the model uses hospitals as training and employment sites. For the past decade, this program has exemplified the capacity of private industry to evaluate, prepare, and employ people with disabilities.

Both Drs. Nietupski and Balser and their colleagues present strategies that rely on ties to community and employers to generate jobs. Strategies must also be incorporated within the framework of culture, whether the culture be that of an employer, a community, or a state. Dorcas Hernandez-Arroyo provides us with a glimpse of how a commonwealth without a well-developed network of vocational rehabilitation service providers was able to influence professional networks and establish supported employment in Puerto Rico through a business consortium, educators, the Division of

Mental Health, and Puerto Rico's Developmental Disabilities Council.

Education reform is being driven by many of the same economic and social forces influencing vocational rehabilitation. Vocational educators and others involved in the transition of individuals with disabilities from school to work cannot provide effective vocational preparation and experience separate from the restructuring occurring in today's workplace. Dennis Sandow and colleagues from schools and private industry argue for building partnerships between public schools and community businesses to benefit and include special education students. This article draws on the work of several ad hoc groups organized to promote business/school ties, providing many examples of ideas for building collaboration.

Finally, Jim Harper presents an additional business viewpoint. Mr. Harper, a human resource director, describes the benefits of building a rehabilitation/business partnership. Mr. Harper advances the idea that the successful hiring of people with disabilities is an agenda for both rehabilitation and business. Mr. Harper describes several aspects of rehabilitation that he has found useful in his company.

The articles in this issue challenge us to rethink the tasks we have assigned to rehabilitation professionals, from how jobs are "developed" to how supports are most effectively delivered. This is a time of dwindling public resources, yet a time when expectations for quality services are on the rise. To be successful, we must work to understand and influence the changes occurring in the workplace.

*Larry Rhodes, PhD*