

Enough with the Employer Awareness Already!

What Else Needs to Happen to Improve Access to Employment?

By Richard Luecking, TransCen, Inc.

As a result of ongoing advocacy, evolving employment methodology, policy, and even legislation, there is increasing expectation that employment for people with disabilities is both desirable and expected. In fact, a key principle of any sincere employment initiative is the presumption of employability for *all* people with disabilities. While an advocacy focus is commendable, it has its limitations, especially when it comes to communicating with employers about this issue. As a result, this article will examine some of the attempts to promote employer awareness about hiring people with disabilities — and what can be done to more successfully engage employers.

Employer Awareness Initiatives

The *Hire the Handicapped* marketing slogans of the 1960s and 1970s suggested that charity, rather than job seeker competence, would be a chief reason that employers might want to hire people with disabilities. They also put job development professionals in a supplicant position, petitioning employers to consider applicants with disabilities without offering much in return.

Although this approach has been widely discredited in recent decades, it is still common to see current appeals to employers that include only slightly more sophisticated messages and continue to “sell” disability or categories of disabilities. Many disability employment marketing campaigns still suggest a vague mutual benefit that exists when employers hire people with disabilities. Or they promote the opportunity for

employers to gain from an “untapped resource” represented by people with disabilities. These approaches imply that if only employers were more aware, they would readily consider hiring people with disabilities.

There are two main problems with these messages. First, they do not necessarily put people with disabilities in a favorable light. “Untapped” suggests unwanted, or at best, difficult to find. And promoting “hiring people with disabilities” can be inadvertent stereotyping. Second, these messages do not take employer perspectives into consideration. After all, successful employment initiatives do not occur without knowledge and appreciation of what employers need and how they operate. Similarly, efforts to create employer awareness cannot be successful without regard for or understanding of the real operational demands of employers.

What Employers Want

After years of supported employment experience and research we understand that employers are mostly interested in three things: making money, saving money, and/or operating more efficiently. Although employers are more enlightened about disability than they were before the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, their motivations for hiring are still grounded, as we should expect, in what’s in it for them. *What do they want? When in doubt, ask them!*

There is an old marketing adage that says: “It is better to find out what your customers need and want and then match it to what you have, than it is to get them to buy what you are selling.” In the context of promoting employment of

people with disabilities, this means that finding out what they want and then giving it to them best serve interactions with employers. *What do they want?* Surveys of employers tell us they want two things: partners who can help them address a particular workforce or operational need of the company; and competent help from disability employment services. *How can we give this to them?*

Demand-Side Engagement

Preparing a supply of workers, or trying to get employers' attention about a segment of potential workers, will only be as effective as the effort to create an understanding of employer demand. There are two time-tested ways to do this:

❖ **It is important for professionals who are promoting and facilitating employment of people with disabilities to get their “face in the place.”** In other words, job developers, employment specialists, rehabilitation professionals, and other involved parties need to spend time visiting and getting to know employers. One way to do this is to conduct informational interviews. These are easy and effective ways to show interest in potential employers, as well as to identify potential workforce needs. Such interviews are conducted during visits to companies where the objective is not to “*find a job that people with disabilities can do.*” Rather, they are ways to learn about employer needs, such as what kinds of people they are looking to hire or whether there are bottlenecks in the flow of work or other operational concerns that can be fixed by the strategic hiring of people who can perform specific tasks.

❖ **Employers are impressed when people offer ways to help them — in other words, when people provide them with good service.** For example, one employer stated in an informational interview that there was difficulty getting documents processed across company depart-

ments. A savvy employment specialist negotiated the hiring of an individual whose responsibility was to deliver the documents from department to department. The result was a more efficient way to get the work done and a good job for a job seeker who happened to have a disability. This was a mutually satisfying outcome. Such demand-side knowledge and competence goes a lot further in engaging employers than platitudes about hiring from an “*untapped resource.*”

The Bottom Line

The competence of both the job seeker, and of employment specialists assisting the job seeker, to meet employer needs is a better “sell” to employers than any charitable motivation. Therefore, a more focused message to employers should include reference to the competence of individual prospective job candidates, the quality of the assistance the employer might receive from those assisting the job seeker, and the service-oriented attention to employer needs that is available. When this is the case, the presence of a disability neither deters nor promotes employer hiring decisions. Rather, it is assistance with the operational or bottom line needs of the employer that drives hiring.

Promoting employer awareness about hiring people with disabilities is not an altogether ill-advised activity. However, it is not enough to change employer hiring behavior — and it's not enough to increase the long-standing low employment rates of people with disabilities. Consequently, the contemporary practice of “selling” employers on hiring people with disabilities needs to give way to more customer-oriented approaches that identify and meet specific employer needs through the careful matching of individual job seekers to workplace tasks and employer demands. Only then will the presumption of employability become less of a lofty concept and more of a commonly held expectation.

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