

SMALL BUSINESS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MEETING

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
OFFICE OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT



Add Us In

Merging Diversity and Disability
into Business Opportunity

Final Report March 22, 2012

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Background and Purpose	5
Discussion	
Issue 1	7
Issue 2	9
Issue 3	11
Creative Solutions	13

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Executive Summary

“I like to think that disability is a key tile in the diversity mosaic.”

Mary Wright, Associate Director, The Conference Board

On Thursday, March 22, 2012, a number of small business stakeholders came together to focus on issues related to hiring people with disabilities in ways that could increase their productivity and profitability.

The Office of Disability Employment Policy’s (ODEP) Add Us In (AUI) event drew more than 24 stakeholders including small business owners, and spokespersons from regional business associations, national chambers of commerce and federal business development centers. The diverse assemblage included Hispanic, African American and Asian business owners as well as a representative from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Women-owned businesses and businesses owned by people with disabilities were also among those present.

Those in attendance were divided into three groups of eight seated at round tables with a facilitator and note takers. They were asked to address three key issues related to small business hiring practices and challenges. The three key issues discussed included: 1) Small business owners’ priority is having a qualified, skilled applicant regardless of disability; 2) Small business owners do not have time for “trainings” and “webinars” on disability, they have a business to run; and 3) Small business owners do not fully utilize incentives for disability hiring, partly from difficulty in finding information, but more generally because the system is cumbersome and is not worth the effort.

At the end of the day several common themes and suggested solutions emerged from the vigorous dialogues at each table:

- **Think Local** — AUI needs to build strong local partnerships with opinion leaders and small business organizations.
- **Build Trust** — ODEP and AUI must become trusted originators of hiring strategies; a resource for information about, or conduits to, skilled candidates with disabilities; and key support and resource providers for small business owners.
- **Increase Visibility** — ODEP and AUI must develop and execute aggressive, clear and positive educational campaigns that promote the value, benefits, and incentives for including people with disabilities in their hiring strategies. The messages should “make the business case” in a way that is concise and compelling.

- **Understand Business Priorities** — In all areas of their research and outreach to this community, ODEP and AUI must demonstrate a keen understanding of the unique needs and challenges of small businesses. Appreciation must be consistently demonstrated that the first, and sometimes only, priorities of these businesses is profit and/or survival.

In the following pages, we will provide a more detailed background on the purposes of AUI, synthesize the responses to the three key issues that were addressed at each table, and present creative solutions offered by the event participants for Add Us In to consider moving forward.

Background and Purpose

How can the Department of Labor create and strengthen policy, partnerships and practices to better engage with small business to develop solutions that will connect them with talented workers with disabilities and will increase their productivity and profitability?

Add Us In Overarching Issue Statement

To help create increased opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities, in 2010, ODEP sponsored Add Us In – an initiative designed to identify and develop strategies to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities within the small business community. Small business is the engine of U.S. economic growth, and the data on minority business growth show that minority-owned and operated firms are significant contributors to the long-term health of the national economy. Over the past 10 years, minority-owned businesses have grown at approximately double the rate of all other firms in the U.S. If one factors in the growth of additional small businesses such as those owned and operated by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; women; veterans; and people with disabilities, the influence of these businesses is even greater.

Through Add Us In, ODEP has awarded grants to eight sites that operate as collaborative consortia. The consortia are led by regional grantees and comprised of representatives from small businesses, local employment boards, and diversity, disability and youth organizations who live and work in diverse communities.

Effective information gathering is vital for policy development. All of the members of the consortia sought to gain insight into the priorities and needs of small businesses through surveys and/or focus groups. In addition, stakeholder meetings were conducted to gather information on gaps, challenges, and opportunities in order to develop policy and practices to increase the capacity of small businesses and to employ youth and adults with disabilities, including those in underrepresented and historically excluded communities.

Information gathered during previous Add Us In events supported ODEP's overall mission and objectives by addressing issues that limit the chances people with disabilities have to attain employment with small businesses. The Add Us In Small Business Stakeholder Meeting continued to contribute to these efforts by enabling ODEP to:

- Engage stakeholders, including but not limited to, small businesses, diversity-serving organizations, youth-serving organizations, and disability-serving organizations;
- Conduct a thorough conversation with a national and local network of experts skilled in meeting the employment needs of individuals with disabilities and the hiring needs of targeted business owners;
- Obtain subject matter expertise and gather information about disability employment policies and best practices that small businesses can implement to employ people with disabilities; and
- Create an action plan to further engage small business organizations and local chambers to aid small businesses to employ people with disabilities.

The issues examined during the March 22, 2012 Small Business Stakeholders Engagement were culled from the results of the work conducted throughout the year by the consortia. These issues — limitations on small business owners' time, the availability of qualified applicants with disabilities, and frustration with the current structure of tax incentives — were crafted into three assumptions with underlying questions. These became the heart of the discussion at the stakeholders' meeting.

Discussion

Issue I

“I just need an employee who will come in on time with a positive attitude and give me a full day’s work to the best of their ability.”

Sergio Suarez, Chicago restaurant owner

The small business owners’ priority is having a qualified, skilled applicant regardless of disability status.

- *Does this resonate, what has been your experience?*
- *What is your process for recruitment, hiring, retention and promotion?*
- *What concerns come up around employing a person with a disability and how would you address it, or how have you seen it addressed effectively?*

Many participants agreed that candidates for jobs are found “any way they can be found.” That includes posting ads and on-site signs, doing online searches, or participating in job fairs. Informal business and social networks or recommendations from current employees were most often the source of applicants. All believe that in most small businesses there is an urgent time factor when they are looking for new or replacement employees. “We need them ‘just in time,’” noted one employer. “We don’t have time to wade through 250 applications,” said another.

It was suggested that ODEP should increase efforts to connect small business owners to pools of talented workers with disabilities, through trusted local organizations. All agreed that the key phrase in their hiring process was “trusted source.”

Opinions varied as to whether an applicant with a disability would be a concern. Some noted that “appearance” may be a priority in certain businesses. “Recruiters are always looking for employees that can demonstrate professionalism,” said others. It was suggested that the best approach a job seeker could use to get in the door would be to ask a potential employer for “a few minutes of their time to learn more about their business or industry.” “Sometimes this is better than the direct approach of asking for a job,” said a participant. “The employer is less pressured and the job seeker has a chance to make a good impression.”

Many suggested that an applicant with a disability should disclose immediately and openly discuss the need for accommodations or flexibility. “There should be discussion between the potential employer and candidate about how they could do the job.” Small business owners are more likely to appreciate this type of up-front honesty and openness rather than being surprised later.

For some, hiring people with disabilities depended upon what, if any, accommodations would have to be made, and whether those changes would be costly or even possible. “If you are leasing a facility, you will not want to make expensive modifications to it,” said one participant. When it was suggested that business owners should only consider renting those facilities that already have modifications for people with disabilities, a participant noted that start-up budget constraints might preclude those considerations.

For others, the skills and/or talent offered could outweigh concerns about accommodations. “The cost of accommodations is an overrated barrier,” noted one participant. “It may be simply a matter of providing a higher chair.”

At one table the accommodations issue led to a contentious discussion. One small business owner complained about having had to rearrange schedules for an employee with a need for kidney dialysis, another forcefully stated that they could not reconfigure a laboratory for a wheelchair.

At another table, a debate ensued between one participant, who emphasized that hiring people with disabilities was “the right thing to do,” and another who noted it is more important that the hire be “the more sensible thing to do for the business’s success.”

Many participants raised the issue of the need for a clearer definition of disability. It was agreed by all that the type and intensity of the disability would affect the hiring decision.

Still, a small business owner said, “Some people see disability and think trouble.” “Will I be able to fire them if they don’t work out? Will I have problems from federal regulations if my business isn’t considered accommodating?” another asked.

Some compared the challenges of applicants with disabilities with those that other minorities face — “In the end, people like to hire people that look like them,” noted one participant.

The need for AUI to “think local,” “build trust” and “understand business priorities” was echoed throughout discussions of the issue. Participants emphasized that they trusted local organizations and sources to provide information and guidance when they conducted employee searches, and often needed quick turnaround on hiring decisions.

Issue 2

“As an employer I don’t even know (skilled job candidates with) disabilities exist. There are no truly effective marketing materials or consistent outreach campaigns to create awareness.” Brett Kopelan, Executive Director, Debra of America

Small business owners do not have time for “training” and “webinars” on disability, they have a business to run.

- *Does this resonate, what has been your experience?*
- *What kinds of training, advising, consulting do small businesses receive? Where? Who delivers them? What kinds of delivery work best? What are the most effective outreach strategies?*
- *How do small businesses get their information?*

For most participants the issue presented resonated strongly. Small business owners need their information in bite-sized chunks that they can digest on the run. They need materials that are light on copy with messages that are compelling enough to encourage them to dig deeper. Media, networking and word of mouth are the key methods of getting information.

Small business owners get effective training and information from mentors, peers, trade shows, trade magazines, networking groups, industry associations, local chamber and Rotary clubs. It is best received, they said, when it is compact and easily comprehended.

Webinars may be an effective tool with some small business owners, the groups agreed, but the consensus was that a 60-minute webinar is too long. When it was mentioned that most webinars were an hour long so that HR credits could be received, one small business owner said “Who cares?” This means nothing to a small business owner who runs everything in the company including HR and who is pressed for time, he added. Webinars should be archived for viewing at will, said another participant, and the shorter, the better.

“You need to spoon feed small businesses,” said one participant. Most agreed that they need to see consistent information and images about successful hires of people with disabilities by people they trust in their communities. The groups agreed.

However, some noted that they would not know where to look if they wanted to hire a qualified candidate with a disability. There was a strong consensus that they wanted to see local success stories and stronger marketing.

This issue was the most strongly debated of the three and seemed to elicit the most suggestions for solution-oriented activity. All complained that there did not seem to be enough information readily and easily available to them about hiring candidates with disabilities. At one point a participant picked up a brochure that had been placed in the center of the table and slapped it down to make the point that it was too busy and dense for him to quickly absorb and pique his interest.

It was suggested that all materials targeted to the business community should be assessed in advance for effectiveness through focus groups or surveys among the target audience before more are produced. “For example, webinar metrics should be tested, a participant said. “If viewers drop off after the first five minutes then the content is wrong or the format is too long.”

Materials should also use “business language.” For example, one participant noted “We should talk about succession planning not simply about hiring an employee.”

It was echoed at every table that ODEP and AUI must “increase visibility” for their efforts to encourage small businesses to consider people with disabilities as potential hires. The information, they noted, should come from “trusted local sources,” and should “make the business case.”

Issue 3

“It’s productivity, not tax incentives, that resonates with me.”

Elaine Robnett Moore, Jewelry Marketing Business

Small business owners do not fully utilize incentives for disability hiring, partly from difficulty in finding information, but more generally because the system is cumbersome and is not worth the effort.

- *Does this resonate, what has been your experience?*
- *How can this be improved or is there a better alternative?*
- *What other incentive-based models (whether for hiring or other small business concerns) are you aware of that may be more effective?*

Most participants agreed that “information from the federal government is hard to find, hard to comprehend.” The system is cumbersome and the paperwork is daunting, some added.

Others said that there is no real understanding of what “tax incentives” mean. “What small business can afford to upfront accommodation remodeling that might cost as much as \$15,000 in the hopes of getting a tax rebate next year?” one asked.

“We need more simplified materials about these incentives and more help understanding how they work,” said one participant.

Some were eager to learn more about services that offered to do the paperwork for rebates or other financial incentives in exchange for a percentage of the rebate. More interest was expressed about co-employment incentives and programs that offered to pay a percentage or all of the salary of an employee for a period of time while they were training or ‘getting acclimated.’

One key concern that was voiced on this topic was how to communicate the subject of incentives without de-valuing the employee. “The public has to be educated about the productivity of disabled persons,” a participant suggested, and “ODEP must create an education and outreach campaign to educate and promote incentives for small business owners.”

This issue was the least debated of the three as there was widespread agreement that incentives to hire people with disabilities were not well marketed or understood. Conversation lagged at all tables because no one seemed to have answers to the questions that were posed: What incentives actually exist? How have they been used effectively? Where do you go to find out more about incentives?

Once again the themes of “increase awareness” and “build trust” were offered by participants as they struggled with getting information and understanding how to use incentives for disability hiring.

Creative Solutions

“I think this was an awesome and enlightening meeting. I am going to double back to talk about how my organization can serve as a partner in Georgia. I hope the goals for bringing us together were met.”

Leona Barr Davenport, Atlanta Business League

Participants at the meeting were eager to offer creative ideas and solutions to the challenges of engaging small business owners in hiring people with disabilities. The most urgent call was for Add Us In to **Increase Visibility** through an aggressive national education and outreach campaign targeting small businesses with compact materials and compelling success stories. The campaign should utilize both paid and public service avenues to present messages.

The campaign should **Think Local**, they noted. Identify major markets and utilize trained and trusted local spokespersons on a number of fronts. The AUI representatives could create strong partnerships with local chambers, business organizations or Rotary clubs in key communities. It was suggested that ODEP host small business networking events in selected markets. One participant suggested the creation of local “Small Business Councils” by ODEP “to meet and discuss incentives and strategies.”

AUI also needs to **Build Trust** with the target audience. “AUI must begin building real business relationships,” said one participant. “This will not only make the organization a ‘trusted source’ (of information and direction), but will also motivate people to personally attend its events and meetings.” Another suggestion was to have AUI send out “ambassadors” to join weekly/monthly networking meetings (i.e. Business Network International) “to build some concrete social links.”

Local chapters of Service Corps of Retired Executives and Procurement Technical Assistance Program, funded by Small Business Administration and Department of Defense, which are trusted sources dedicated to helping small businesses get started, achieve their goals, and use economics incentives, should include disability experts in the mix, a participant suggested. Incentives to hire skilled people with disabilities should also be included in the curricula at Small Business Development Centers.

And, ultimately, AUI must **Understand Business Priorities** when addressing this audience. The campaign must “make the business case,” group members insisted. “What is altruistic or based on emotional appeal will not work.”

Various tools were suggested to enhance AUI outreach including:

- A compelling, one minute, hip/fun video message on the website that could tell small business owners why they should be interested in the AUI initiative.
- Develop and disseminate a three-step kit to highlight the steps that small businesses organizations’ and local chambers’ members could take to hire qualified, skilled employees with disabilities.
- Develop and disseminate a factual “Did You Know” letter with questions and answers (i.e., Did you know there are X number of qualified candidates with disabilities in your area? or Did you know there are incentives and benefits to hiring people with disabilities?).” All participants agreed this would be an effective and efficient way to inform and educate small businesses.