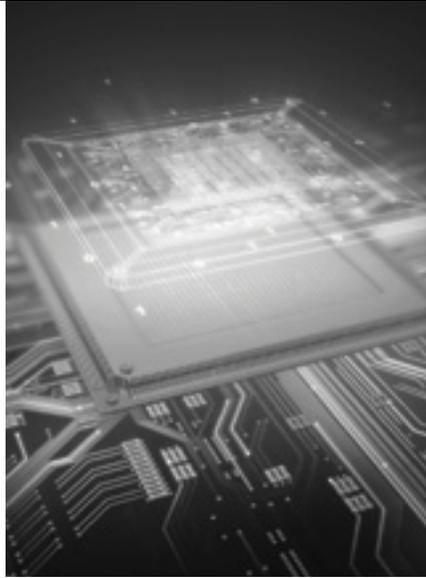


A group of federal employees tackles federal disability employment issues using a collaborative workspace. Group members collaborate and share effective practices to support Executive Order 13548.



Changing Culture and Lives Through Communities of Practice

by Colet Mitchell

Online social networking has become the way people connect, communicate, collaborate, and create in the 21st century. So it's not surprising that in the workplace, communities of practice (CoPs) are tapping into the power of the Internet to connect professionals with similar interests and goals.

In addition to providing a forum for ongoing collaboration and sharing information and best practices among people who are geographically dispersed, CoPs are being used to address complex problems. One such CoP, launched in September 2011, is eFedLink (www.eFedLink.org), made up of federal employees seeking to improve the hiring, advancement, and retention of persons with disabilities.

Coming Together to Address a Complex Challenge

The idea for eFedLink grew out of the work of the Federal Disability Workforce Consortium (FDWC), a grassroots coalition of approximately 500 federal employees committed to disability inclusion. This group sought a national forum to break federal silos and change attitudes. They discovered that an online interactive community of practice would allow them to share best practices, resources, and information, and to extend their reach "beyond the Beltway."

The group's work was further spurred by President Obama's issuance of Executive Order 13548, signed on July 26, 2010, the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The executive order called for the federal government to hire 100,000 persons with disabilities within five years and required agencies to submit implementation plans to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). These plans also called on the

federal government to design model recruitment and hiring strategies and designate agency senior officials to oversee the plans.

With these ambitious goals in mind, the FDWC steering committee identified collaborative involvement and shared leadership and responsibility across and among agency representatives as top priorities. It includes people from the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Department of Agriculture (USDA), along with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) Office of Federal Operations, OPM, and other federal stakeholders.

ODEP, whose mission is to provide national leadership by developing and influencing disability employment policies and practices, was well-positioned to take an active role.

Driving Policy to Practice

To build the platform for eFedLink and take the CoP concept to scale, ODEP turned to its employer technical assistance center, the National Employer Technical Assistance Center (NETAC) at Cornell University. Given the focus on making the federal government a model employer of people with disabilities—and the section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requirements that all electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government be accessible to people with disabilities—it was imperative that the website itself be a model of accessibility. Unfortunately, no commercial solutions or off-the-shelf platforms could be customized to meet this requirement.

FDWC decided to leverage NETAC's expertise to build a fully accessible website from the ground up. As the site was being developed, NETAC sought to ensure that future changes to the website's design and function could meet the evolving needs of the federal community.

eFedLink fosters collaboration across government. Such cooperation encourages employees to come forward with their questions and share knowledge that supports widespread federal disability inclusion policies and procedures.

Built for Inclusion: Principles of Universal Design

To ensure this social networking site provided equal access to federal employees with disabilities, the eFedLink site was developed using principles of universal design—which underpins much of ODEP's work related to disability workplace inclusion. The term "universal design," coined by architect Ronald L. Mace, refers to the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

Interactivity Driven by Information Sharing

Interactivity was another key component of eFedLink's website design. Ongoing conversations are stimulated in a variety of ways. Users can send a message via the site's Collaboration Section, or create a discussion group to explore issues, share experiences,

interact, learn together, and share documents. In addition, WebEx is available as a web-conferencing tool. Other website features include:

- web links to helpful resources
- a dashboard with announcements, events and favorite websites
- a growing archive of success stories.

The small-group feature has been "very popular," says Dave Brewer of NETAC. "Users have the ability to create a private discussion group that can then be turned public. The "Federal Initiatives" section, where users can get answers to common inquiries around hiring people with disabilities, also has been warmly received."

An example of a recent successful collaboration by the community of users was the creation of an online WebEx presentation called "The News Hour." The News Hour used the eFedLink virtual platform to connect with the community and share information about federal agencies' progress toward meeting the goals under Executive Order 13548.

The chat feature allowed for questions and answers, information sharing, and status updates. About 120 participants across many federal agencies took part in this presentation.

Through interaction made possible by eFedLink, CoP members are developing a repertoire of formal and informal resources, and are tapping into their collective expertise to engage in activities such as solving problems, getting and sharing advice, sharing and reusing tools and assets, discussing developments, documenting projects, and identifying knowledge gaps.

Jim Anderson of the Social Security Administration and a regular user of eFedLink, says, "It's really a time-saving website in the sense that there's no way you'd be able to find all these resources if you started calling the circle of colleagues that you know."

Effective Outcomes for the Federal Community

The continuing evolution of eFedlink and the FDWC CoP is managed by a steering committee of ODEP managers, NETAC staff, and other disability leaders in the federal government who meet biweekly. Having this collaborative workspace has allowed the group's members to effectively network and share effective practices in real time. This includes the strategic framework of effective practices in seven key areas that ODEP, the EEOC, and OPM gleaned from their

Ongoing conversations are stimulated in a variety of ways. Users can send a message via the site's Collaboration Section, or create a discussion group to explore issues, share experiences, interact, learn together, and share documents.

review of 10 agency plans to implement Executive Order 13548.

In fiscal year 2011, 14.7 percent of all new hires (18,738) had disabilities. Employees with disabilities in the Executive Branch represent 11 percent of the overall federal workforce.

The number of non-seasonal, full-time permanent federal employees with disabilities was approximately 204,189. This is more people with disabilities in federal service both in real terms and by percentage than at any time in the past 20 years. These statistics come from OPM's report, *Employment of Individuals with Disabilities in the Federal Executive Branch Report: Data for Fiscal Year 2011*.

Using the Power to Connect

Federal agencies are increasingly reliant on electronic and information

technology in their day-to-day operations and in providing services to citizens. CoPs such as eFedLink facilitate continuous learning and improve collaboration. Innovation and creativity made possible by advancements in information technology enables us to move away from using technology to simply manage documents to using its power to connect people from diverse corners of the world to address complex problems and achieve shared goals.

Technology is being used to facilitate collaboration within and among federal agencies to foster the adoption of best practices; contribute to reducing agency costs; and save taxpayer dollars. eFedlink is one example of the harnessing of technology into a tool for collaboration and creativity.

Colet Mitchell is the lead policy analyst on the employer team in the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. She is an educator and has worked for several federal agencies. She holds a BS and MS from the State University of New York. She can be reached at Mitchell.colet@dol.gov.

Join and Share

Since its inception, eFedlink has attracted 582 members and developed 26 collaborating groups. The last quarter of 2012 saw more than 12,410 page views, averaging some 149 page views daily.

If you have a role in increasing employment of people with disabilities in the federal government or expertise or resources to share, we invite you to join.

eFedlink is free and password protected. Go to www.eFedLink.org and click on "Register here." For more information, contact Akinyemi Banjo at banjo.akinyemi@dol.gov.



For more info

www.dol.gov/odep

The Framework for Federal Disability Inclusion, www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/FAESTrategies.pdf