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# Customer Perceptions of Technical Assistance Centers

## Issue Brief – Study of Customer Satisfaction with Two ODEP Technical Assistance Centers

The U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL's) Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) seeks to develop and influence policies and practices to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities through its Technical Assistance Center Program. In partnership with ODEP, DOL's Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Westat to conduct a study of customer satisfaction among the five centers. The overarching goals of the study were to examine the extent to which the program meets customer needs, as well as the reach and satisfaction with services provided by the individual Centers. This brief focuses on how the centers engaged with customers, the nature of customers' interactions with the centers, and customers' reasons for contacting the centers—what assistance they sought.



### Frank Bennici, Martha Palan, and Lindsay Giesen

In this brief, we present findings on customer perceptions of services received from two ODEP Technical Assistance (TA) Centers: the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN).

### Study Overview

ODEP's mission is to develop and influence policies and practices to increase the number and quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In 2016, ODEP sponsored a Technical Assistance (TA) Center Program comprising five Centers: the Job Accommodation Network (JAN); the Employer Assistance Resource Network (EARN); the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Y); the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology (PEAT); and the National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD). These five Centers sought to promote successful employment policy and practices, and each had a unique focus, including assisting customers with workforce accommodations, systems-level changes, and accessible technology, as well as finding ways to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Westat conducted the

study in two phases. Phase I focused on determining the feasibility of conducting a customer satisfaction survey of the five Centers by collecting information on their missions, the services provided, the targeted customers, and whether the Center was collecting customer satisfaction data. Phase II focused on JAN and EARN customer satisfaction with the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the technical assistance received, as well as perceptions of the extent to which the technical assistance resulted in the adoption and implementation of ODEP policies. Phase II data collection began in 2019 with semi-structured telephone interviews of customers and staff from JAN and EARN<sup>1</sup>. Staff from JAN and EARN emailed their customers and invited them to contact Westat to participate in a telephone interview.



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<sup>1</sup>By Phase II, three Centers were discontinued and data collection barriers involving privacy rules prevented Westat from contacting customers directly.

Key Findings

Customers from both Centers expressed satisfaction with the timeliness of assistance received, and viewed the staff as having sufficient expertise to answer questions and provide guidance.

Customers from both Centers expressed satisfaction with the websites, and appreciated the breadth of information provided.

Of the 67 customers who responded to questions about whether the Centers helped resolve their issues, 57 reported that the information received from the Centers helped them to resolve their issue or question

JAN customers most valued the individualized technical assistance consultations, where they could confidentially discuss a specific disability/accommodation situation with a trusted expert and receive information on the options to solve an issue.

EARN customers most valued the webinars that provided an opportunity to stay abreast of the latest disability policies, and to ensure that their internal company policies matched what other employers were doing

## Findings

### ***Ease of Contact and Availability of Center Staff***

JAN customers often contacted the Center directly with questions and requests. They reached out through a combination of online chat, e-mail, and telephone, and sometimes interacted with JAN multiple times through multiple methods (i.e., chat, e-mail, telephone) in order to resolve an issue. Among the 73 interviewed JAN customers who had utilized individualized TA in their most recent interaction with JAN, 54 reported that

they received a timely response; 37 received an immediate response, and 17 heard from JAN within 24 hours.

Customers also connected with JAN and EARN through their respective websites, [AskJAN.org](http://AskJAN.org) and [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org), where both Centers provided ready access to information on disability employment policies and practices. The Centers posted written publications and guidance, and also listed upcoming events and links to sign up for e-newsletters. More than one-third of customers interviewed (30 JAN customers and 3 EARN cus-

tomers) reported that they searched for information on the Centers' websites. Both websites also gave customers a means to contact the Centers with additional questions. For example, customers submitted questions and requests through a form posted on JAN's website, or using the online chat tool noted above. EARN's website listed an email address for customers to contact its staff with questions or requests.

## Expertise of Center Staff

### JAN Customers

All JAN customers reported that the staff person who provided technical assistance had sufficient expertise to address questions by providing targeted feedback and guidance. Four customers appreciated that JAN staff directed them quickly to a specific person who could help them. One customer, who worked at a local service provider, particularly appreciated that JAN specialists could speak to particular types of disabilities and accommodations:



*I enjoy the fact that JAN has specialists that are within a subgroup. It's not necessarily generalists. It'll be those specialists that have a deep wealth of knowledge and information about a particular type of disability, such as neurocognitive or disabilities that maybe are physical in nature. The way that JAN has those subject matter experts within this category is, I think, very helpful, because I know that the person that I'm talking to has a good grasp of the limitations and restrictions that may be associated with that particular condition more than standard generalists would have.*

- Service Provider, JAN Customer

Customers commented repeatedly on the nuances involved in navigating disabilities and accommodations, and the difficulty of determining a path forward. For that reason, customers valued JAN staff as expert resources to provide the guidance and information needed to resolve their questions.

### EARN Customers

The EARN customers interviewed were webinar attendees, so their interaction with EARN staff was very limited. However, there were four EARN interviewees who commented on the expertise of EARN's staff. These customers were pleased with the staff and found them to be well matched to their needs. One EARN customer explained:



*I think that what I find most helpful is that I believe that they are all well versed in their general areas of expertise. And if they don't have the information, they will put you on hold I'm going to go grab Brett and have him come over and answer this question because I think he has more experience in this area and might be more helpful. But they don't transfer... My experience has been they don't transfer me to another individual. They bring another individual into the conversation. So it gives them the opportunity to hear what's being shared and to learn from that as well.*

- Employer, EARN Customer

Another EARN customer was satisfied with how quickly EARN staff was able to comprehend and address the issue:



*I was really happy with how well they understood what I was looking for, and be able to give me practical resources.*

- Service Provider,  
EARN Customer

## Quality of Services Provided

Forty customers (34 from JAN, 6 from EARN) discussed the services they valued the most, either for the quality or relevance of those services. Individualized technical assistance consultation services and the Centers' web sites were most valued. Although customers used the newsletters and listservs, none indicated these were valued most.



*....You can only go so far dealing with just getting information off the website. You do need a specialist who can point you to more nuanced information that's very specific to your situation. So I tend to value people more than just going to a website.*

- Employer, JAN Customer

**Table 1** Most valued service by customer type and customer history

Customer type	Total	Individualized TA	Website	Webinar
Person with a disability	10	9	1	0
Employer	23	14	8	1
Relative or friend of a person with a disability	3	3	0	0
Rehabilitation professional/Service provider	4	0	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>

Source: Westat qualitative interviews with customers.

**JAN Customers**

JAN customers mostly valued the individualized technical assistance consultation services. When asked what they valued about the individualized technical assistance consultations, JAN customers pointed to the following three features:

1. The opportunity to confidentially discuss a specific disability/ accommodation situation with a trusted expert;
2. Receiving multiple options to solve a problem; and
3. Receiving support and validation.

Five customers reported that they often felt uncertain about where to start looking for guidance on specific disabilities and accommodations. Being able to directly contact an expert saved them time and guesswork. One JAN customer was quick to point out the value placed on the Center’s longstanding expertise:

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I know JAN has been around for a long time. I think that’s part of it too - they’ve earned my trust. .  
- Person with a Disability, JAN Customer

Other JAN customers echoed that sentiment, comparing the Center’s ability to quickly provide trusted guidance and potential solutions to their experiences contacting other organizations with disability questions, where the organization transferred them from one staff person to another without ever having their questions fully resolved. Finally, two JAN customers emphasized the value they placed on the opportunity to speak confidentially with the Center. One explained that,

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there’s no fear in reaching out to make sure that we’re being compliant. It doesn’t put us on a radar somewhere, you know. .  
- Employer, JAN Customer

Four interviewed customers said they appreciated that the individual consultations provided them with multiple avenues to pursue.

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“She was receptive of what I needed and then she provided the different resources and I decided which one would be best for my situation. I was very appreciative for that.”  
- Employer, JAN Customer

commented one employer customer. Customers also indicated that JAN staff emailed links to them for additional resources where they could learn more about the possible accommodations for a disability, and what was tried in the past.

Another aspect of the individual technical assistance consultations valued by customers was the support and validation they received. Two persons with a disability called their consultations with JAN “empowering,” and said it helped them to receive information they could take back to their

employers to self-advocate for an accommodation. Employers spoke about the value of being able to use the Center as a sounding board to verify that their policies complied with current laws and industry norms.

The nine JAN customers who said they most valued the information provided via [AskJAN.org](http://AskJAN.org) indicated that they appreciated the breadth of information, the practical templates, and examples provided. Employers, in particular, appreciated using the web site to search for potential accommodations they could provide to employees with varying disabilities and needs. People with disabilities and employers said that they appreciated the sample forms and templates provided on the web site to help individuals disclose a disability to an employer and request an accommodation, and to help employers respond to such a request.

**EARN Customers**

Three of the EARN customers interviewed, two service providers and one employer, named the webinars as their most valued service. They appreciated having the webinars as a means to stay abreast of the latest disability policies, and to ensure that their internal company policies matched what other employers were doing. And another EARN customer said that the EARN website was the most valuable service because of the wide range of topics covered by the information available.

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*As a government contractor, we do...a lot of our business on military bases. Shockingly, we were getting pushback from our government customer about one of our people with disabilities utilizing a service animal. EARN helped me. Literally, I think I took verbatim some of the language and cut and pasted it into an email saying, ‘Look these are the regs. This is what we have to do to comply as an employer.’ It helped. The customer didn't push back after that.*  
 - Employer, EARN Customer

**Relevance/Usefulness of Provided Services**

Sixty-seven of the 89 interviewed customers indicated whether the services they received from JAN or EARN helped them to achieve their desired outcomes. Fifty-seven of those stated that the information received helped them resolve their issue. The other 10 said that the information was not helpful (Table 2). Among the 22 customers who did not answer, the question was not applicable for six because they did not contact the technical assistance Centers for help with a specific issue, but instead attended a webinar for continuing education. The other 16 interviewed customers were unable to answer the question definitively because their issue was ongoing and it was too soon to judge whether they had achieved a solution to their issue.

**Table 2** Whether Customer Accomplished Outcomes by the TA Center

Center	Issue Resolved		
	Yes	No	Total
JAN	50	9	59
EARN	7	1	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>67</b>

Source: Westat qualitative interviews with customers.

According to Figure 1, all of the service providers and almost all of the employers reported having their issue resolved by the Centers. Twice as many persons with a disability reported their issue was resolved as

those who reported their issue was not resolved. Of the customers who stated that the information received did not help them to accomplish their desired outcome, nine (8 JAN customers and 1 EARN customer) of them were first-time users of services (not shown).

**Customers who Accomplished Outcomes**

A total of 57 JAN and EARN customers reported having received sufficient information from the Centers to resolve the issue they had contacted the center about. Of those 57, 50 were JAN customers and seven were EARN customers (Table 3).

**JAN Customers**

The 12 people with disabilities who accomplished their desired outcomes had contacted JAN for help with a specific issue, typically a request for a workplace accommodation, often in preparation for a conversation with their human resources department about a request for accommodation. Six customers reported feeling validated and emboldened to advocate for themselves. One customer said that the information he received from JAN helped him to understand his rights as an employee, and helped him determine whether legal action would be required to resolve a problem.

**Figure 1** Whether Customers Accomplished Outcomes, by Customer Type



Source: Westat qualitative interview with customers.

**Table 3** Customer that Had Issue Resolved, by Customer Type and by Center

Customer Type	JAN	EARN
Person with a disability	12	0
Employer	29	5
Relative or friend	2	0
Service provider	6	2
Other	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>7</b>

Source: Westat qualitative interview with customers.

Twenty-nine JAN employers reported having received sufficient information to resolve their issues. These employers contacted JAN for assistance with navigating an accommodations request by an employee. They sought feedback from JAN on things like what accommodations had been tried elsewhere and whether a draft response to an employee's request met all the current requirements. One employer described how his company used the information received from JAN:

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*[I] sat down with our ADA committee and sat down with the supervisor of this particular employee and discussed the situation. And I looked up all of the information that [JAN] had sent me, and so I provided that information to the ADA committee and to the supervisor over this employee. And as I thought about those suggestions, then there were a couple other things that came to mind, and I laid those out as options for them.*

- Employer, JAN Customer

A service provider organization explained that the assistance from JAN helped him find a job for a client:

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*[The JAN staff] were just outstanding. ...And we hashed ideas back and forth and we came up with, that we would disclose in a cover letter. Her abilities, disabilities, you know, just try to put something together and it landed her a job.*

- Service Provider, JAN Customer

Another service provider explained that he has extensive knowledge of accommodations and disability employment related issues but still found new information through JAN:

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*It was a request of a group of hiring managers, and a consulting company that was helping to educate hiring managers of corporations about the strengths of people with autism, and how people could be accommodated. And we have a lot of experience here with employing people with every disability. However, we wanted to check our perceptions of what is available. And indeed, indeed, I learned a lot of ideas for reasonable accommodations that we had not previously tried or known.*

- Service Provider, JAN Customer

### **EARN Customers**

Four employer customers said that they relied on EARN to keep them informed of emerging issues related to disability employment as part of their continuing education efforts. One such employer explained that he used EARN's resources and services “to reinforce what I know and just to make sure I'm on top of my game at this point.” Another employer stated that she used EARN's resources regularly for “professional, personal education. Education for myself.”

One employer explained how information from EARN helped answer questions about ensuring that the application process to his organization is as accessible as it could be. He explained:

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*Really in our looking at the strategy of the company as far as inclusive hiring, what was going to be our next step for, again, this was about digital accessibility, so making sure a candidate can apply online for a job with us. They can navigate the different systems we have after an interview. And also how to find a vendor to help companies with all that. And there were a lot of tips.*

- Employer, EARN Customer

### **Customers who did not Accomplish Outcomes**

Ten customers reported that their interactions with JAN or EARN did not help them to accomplish their desired outcomes. However, as noted below, misplaced expectations and employer pushback were largely to blame.

### **JAN Customers**

Five of JAN's customers, all people with disabilities, explained that they required legal assistance or help advocating for an accommodation request, but JAN did not provide such services. Three other JAN customers indicated that they received the information they needed, but did not achieve their desired outcomes because their employers ultimately

denied their requests for accommodations. Moreover, an additional JAN customer could not resolve his problems because the information or guidance JAN provided was not specific enough to provide a clear path forward.

### **EARN Customers**

Only one EARN customer stated that he did not receive sufficient information to resolve the issue about which he contacted EARN. In this case, the customer received information from EARN that was difficult for the customer to understand. The customer explained: "I felt that the information was a little over my head." This customer suggested that the information provided in the webinar was too technical for his understanding.

### **Study Limitations**

Because this was a descriptive study, it did not provide for making causal inferences. Further, Westat did not have control of sampling of the customers. JAN staff invited 2,500 customers to contact Westat, and EARN staff invited about 200 customers to contact Westat, to complete an interview. Westat completed interviews with 75 JAN customers and 14 EARN customers. This limits the generalizability of the data to only those few customers who responded to participate in the interviews. A total of 89 customers self-selected to participate; they were not randomly selected. Thus, the findings are not generalizable to all customers of JAN and EARN, and reflect only the views and experiences of those who participated.

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