

Chapter 6: Catalysts: Business-Affiliated Organizations Leading Disability and Employment Partnerships

Profiled in this chapter:

- *disabilityworks*
- The Oregon Business Leadership Network

This chapter features profiles of two business-centric organizations that include within their organizational missions and frameworks many aspects of the collaborations addressed in this report. These organizations include businesses as members and business leaders on their boards of directors, yet draw upon a range of nonprofit and government workforce development agencies and leaders to meet their missions. Both *disabilityworks* in Chicago and the Business Leadership Network in Oregon were founded because local employers and policymakers believed there was a market for the talent of people with disabilities and wanted to serve that market. The qualities of innovative partnerships discussed in the other chapters in this report are integral to the organizations profiled here — a single point of contact, employer interest and commitment, as well as the presence of a high level of social nonprofit management expertise.

William G. Parrett, President of Deloitte & Touche, said, “There is a war for talent and anyone who intends to win it better realize two things: First, that it is a global war and, second, that if you restrict your search for talent in any way...you will be giving your competitors the edge they need to put you out of business.”⁸⁸ The organizations profiled here are executing their agendas using every function of successful business practices — strong marketing and communications, attention to customer relationship management, commitment to efficient execution and operations, and high-performing executive management — because of their passion and their urgency for bringing employers and job seekers together. In many respects, these two models are the most promising for national replication in communities across the nation, as they provide the one-stop shopping for employers that are characteristic of workforce intermediaries at their most effective.

disabilityworks: A Catalyst for Collaboration

Introduction

disabilityworks is a joint initiative of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), and the City of Chicago. The organization serves as a hub linking business, nonprofit, and community partners under a common goal to “increase economic and employment opportunities for people with disabilities while meeting workforce needs throughout the State of Illinois through the development of collaborative partnerships between the private and public sectors.”⁸⁹ The organization, established in 2005, is recognized as an effective catalyst and change agent bringing public and private players together to fulfill the challenge cited in the words of the Mayor’s Taskforce report:

...[T]he United States spends an estimated \$300 billion annually to support unemployed people with disabilities who should be, and are willing to be, employed. Unemployed people with disabilities face an unnecessary loss of self-esteem and community integration, while the economy experiences the loss of income taxes and other related revenues.

Increasing the employment of people with disabilities yields significant benefits to our City, our nation, our economy and most importantly, to the people themselves. When people with disabilities become employed, they achieve a “vocational identity,” an identity that everyone in this country values. People with and without disabilities who achieve this vocational identity have more disposable income, pay taxes, purchase more goods and services and have increased financial security. Subsequently, people who are gainfully employed are more independent, self-confident, make greater contributions to their communities and in many instances, no longer rely on costly government subsidies, programs and services.⁹⁰

Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley established the Taskforce through an Executive Order in 2002 to address his administration’s concern over sustained underemployment among people with disabilities. The mayor sought a coordinated and aggressive citywide plan to bring more people with disabilities into the workforce. The Taskforce included members from several city departments, disability advocates, business and education leaders, state policymakers, and members of the community. For three years, Daley’s Taskforce examined the barriers to, and conditions of, employment for people with disabilities in Chicago. The Taskforce’s final report, issued in July 2005, established a comprehensive plan designed to directly address the challenges that result in the lack of opportunities and resources available to people with

disabilities that keep them from finding employment. The report has been widely praised and credited for motivating numerous innovations and changes to foster stronger business-agency partnership and cohesion.

While the Taskforce was still in session, it established the Chicagoland Provider Leadership Network (CPLN), a network of provider organizations that help people with disabilities find jobs and training. The Taskforce also brought in the already existing Chicagoland Business Leadership Network (CBLN) to join in a combined effort that developed both a supply and demand action that would address the employment of people with disabilities. After the Taskforce finalized its charge, a decision was made by the City of Chicago, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, and the State of Illinois to place the new *disabilityworks* at the Chamber to set the foundation for the recommendations made by the Taskforce. In naming the new organization, the Mayor's Commission noted that, "The *disabilityworks* brand conveys the City's acknowledgement that Chicagoans with disabilities, when provided with opportunities, can be among the finest employees that any company can hope to employ. Leveraging opportunities under the *disabilityworks* brand, public and private sector organizations share talent and resources to increase the employment and community participation of people with disabilities throughout the Chicagoland area."⁹¹

Chicago Mayoral Taskforce on Employment of People with Disabilities

Established by Mayor Richard M. Daley by executive order in October 2002, and co-chaired by the Chair and CEO of Northern Trust Company, the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, and the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, this Taskforce, with more than 100 members, was divided into five work groups, each of which addressed a specific employment-related goal. These included:

- An evaluation of "supply-side" issues such as the effectiveness of job development programs and the adequacy of the labor pool of job applicants with disabilities,
- Revision of Chicago's procurement policies designed to increase economic opportunities for businesses owned and operated by people with disabilities,
- The City of Chicago becoming a model employer of people with disabilities,
- Improvements to transition services and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities, and
- The establishment of private-public sector partnerships designed to increase economic incentives for businesses hiring people with disabilities.

Gerald Roper, President and CEO of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, felt strongly that in order for this effort to be successful and sustainable, it had to be placed inside a business organization. He advocated for the Chamber to take the lead. By including the Chamber and private employers in the leadership and board of *disabilityworks*, Mr. Roper believed the Chamber would market the value and benefit of hiring people with disabilities directly to Chicago businesses. Since 2005, *disabilityworks* has officially been part of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce where the CBLN and the CPLN represent two of three divisions of the *disabilityworks* initiative.

Karen McCulloh, former Executive Director of *disabilityworks* at the time this research was conducted, maintained close relationships with the business community, while educating many constituencies and advocating for systemic change within the workforce development system directed to the employment of people with disabilities. Ms. McCulloh had previously held a federal appointment to the U.S. Department of Labor Job Corps Advisory Committee where she served as the Chair of the Disability Committee. Resigning from that appointment, she became a member of President-Elect Barack Obama's Education and Labor Transition Team, focusing on employment-related efforts for people with disabilities. She works to influence disability policy on a local, state, and national level, including promoting health care careers for people with disabilities, transition services for youth with disabilities, and the admission of students with disabilities into vocational training opportunities and into higher education.

Recognizing the important work accomplished by the Taskforce, DCEO, under the leadership of Jack Lavin, entered into a partnership with the City of Chicago and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce that brought valuable financial and other resources that have been used to support *disabilityworks* as an organization and to implement many of the Taskforce's recommendations. From that point on, *disabilityworks* has held two identities: as a workforce development initiative of the State of Illinois and as an innovation of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

In 2006, *disabilityworks* was one of the recipients of the U.S. Secretary of Labor's New Freedom Initiative award for targeting both the supply and demand sides of employment through strategies that include reaching out to businesses to develop employment opportunities, engaging educational programs for youth and adults with disabilities, and building awareness of work incentives and workforce development services.⁹²

How the Organization Works and Gets Results

With its origins in a Mayoral Taskforce, *disabilityworks* had an initial road map for its work within Chicago. When it became part of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, seed funds were granted by the City of Chicago while the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity contributed funding so the scope of activities extended to the northeast region of Illinois, an 11-county area covered in part by the Chamber. On July 1, 2007, *disabilityworks* became a statewide initiative, with the hiring of eight people who had

previously been Disability Program Navigators. (Disability Program Navigators were part of a national U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration initiative to increase and improve services to individuals with disabilities in the One-Stop Career Center system across the nation.)

disabilityworks is the umbrella organization for CBLN, CPLN, and disability Resource Coordinators (dRCs), each of which is overseen by a *disabilityworks* managing director. *disabilityworks* also provides employment-related job leads and news directly to people with disabilities who register on its Web site for this information. Approximately 400 people with disabilities have become employed as a result of the job leads. Even though there is delegation of responsibilities to each division of *disabilityworks*, the organization's mission provides the primary motivation to keep all staff on track.

CBLN provides a forum for businesses to share their knowledge, expertise, and experience with other businesses. Membership in the CBLN is free and open to professionals from for-profit businesses, health care institutions, chambers of commerce, and educational attractions (i.e., zoos, museums) in the northeast region of Illinois. The CBLN has developed "A Business Case: Top 10 Reasons to Employ Qualified People with Disabilities,"⁹³ and one of the CBLN members worked to develop employer best practices for recruiting, hiring, training, retaining, promoting, and accommodating people with disabilities. Selima Ani, the *disabilityworks* Managing Director for the CBLN, finds out what businesses want to know about disability-related issues, understands business concerns, and responds to business needs. CBLN also provides information not only about the benefits to the business bottom line in hiring people with disabilities but also emphasizes the benefits of reaching out to this customer base. Many companies are now interested in recruiting veterans with disabilities, and *disabilityworks* is tapping expert resources to assist members in pursuing this.

Many business members want to accommodate existing employees that have developed disabilities, especially experienced employees that have developed conditions after they started working. Karen McCulloh believes that engaging businesses in their areas of interest and addressing the information they need leads some "to be more open to talking about and learning more about the skills they need to interview, hire, accommodate, retain, and promote people with disabilities into their workforces."

CBLN co-chair Robye Smith, of Harris Bank, has been involved with *disabilityworks* since it began. Ms. Smith notes that the CBLN is free and local, that it allows her to engage with her peers, and that it is a cost-effective, time-effective way to be connected and share ideas. Several factors drive her company's participation with *disabilityworks*. These include respect for customers. The disability community, as a group of bank customers, is important to the business. Additionally, the bank wants to attract, hire, retain, accommodate, and develop the best talent, including people with disabilities. Finally, having a partnership with *disabilityworks* holds the bank to a higher standard, a higher performance level, in a creative and cost-effective way. For example, because of *disabilityworks*, the bank's Web site on careers is now accessible to people with disabilities, and the bank's online and print bank statements are now available in accessible formats. As a result of its involvement on the CBLN, Harris

Bank has hosted “lunch and learn” case studies for its managers, has become more receptive to employees who need accommodations, and has encouraged those who need accommodations to self-identify in a safe and accepting workplace environment.

The CPLN is a network of organizations that offers employment-related services to job seekers with disabilities. The CPLN has over 300 unique member organizations with more than 500 staff participating. These are primarily job developers who work to place people with disabilities into employment. According to Joe Chiappetta, *disabilityworks* Managing Director for the CPLN, the network grew out of a demand from employers to coordinate organizations that were each vying for attention from employers, sometimes in competition with each other. Through membership in the CPLN, members can gain access to business relationships developed by *disabilityworks*. The CPLN also enhances providers’ capacity and encourages communication among providers to improve services provided to people with disabilities. The CPLN pays particular attention to job developers and job placement professionals who work for service provider organizations. Training for job developers is conducted on a regular basis, and the CPLN has developed “job-matching best practices” for service providers.

Once the seed funding from the City of Chicago was exhausted in 2006, DCEO became the major funder, supporter, and partner of *disabilityworks*. At the outset, in 2005, DCEO committed to funding for the development of the *disabilityworks* Web site and financial support for the salaries of the Managing Director of the CBLN and the Executive Director and, since 2006, has been the primary funder through the utilization of Workforce Investment Act and other DCEO funds. However, in looking to the future and the organization’s sustainability, *disabilityworks* has also received two grants from the Chicago Community Trust, two grants from Field Foundation of Illinois, a Polk Brothers Foundation grant, and significant contributions from corporations.

In late 2006, DCEO wanted to sustain the concept of Disability Program Navigators but wanted them to be within a centralized structure, part of an overarching organization that specialized in people with disabilities. DCEO had come to the conclusion that people with disabilities were not visiting Illinois workNet (One-Stop) Centers, and that employers were not accessing the market of individuals with disabilities as workers. DCEO was interested in bringing the two together —businesses and workNet Centers — around the issue of employing people with disabilities. They wanted the navigators to go beyond offering direct service at workNet Centers, to becoming “circuit riders” within the economic development regions. They wanted an organization, like *disabilityworks*, with connections with the business community. Out of this grew the current contract for dRCs. In addition, *disabilityworks* assisted DCEO in ensuring that the Illinois workNet Web site is fully accessible. DCEO was in a partnership with CareerBuilder.com for its high-growth job training initiative. With advice from *disabilityworks*, CareerBuilder has changed its software to achieve accessibility.

Speed Networking: Business Leaders Meet Nonprofit Leaders

Members of the CBLN met members of the coordinating council of the CPLN for an afternoon of speed networking on September 23, 2008. CBLN member businesses interested in hiring people with disabilities engaged in a highly interactive series of four-minute exchanges with service providers that provide employment placement services for people with disabilities.

This experience resulted in providers developing a greater understanding of the workforce needs of individual businesses and created linkages with service providers that represented a cross-disability population of job seekers with disabilities.

On July 1, 2007, DCEO awarded *disabilityworks* the responsibility for employing, managing, and supervising staff that were previously known as Disability Program Navigators and had been employed by local workforce area organizations. There are currently eight dRCs, who are assigned to the state's eight economic development regions and cover all 46 Illinois workNet Centers. The dRCs have a home base office at one workNet Center and travel on a regularly scheduled basis to spend time at each workNet Center to which they are assigned. They improve access for people with disabilities to the services of the workNet Centers. They also work with Chamber of Commerce organizations, business representatives, and others in their specific economic development regions of the state. They are supervised by *disabilityworks* Managing Director, Jonathan Wheat.

One dRC describes herself as an “educator, resource, model, translator, and expert on disability systems.”⁹⁴ Another sees herself as a resource for transportation, housing, income, insurance needs, and referrals to service providers. They train staff at workNet Centers in disability etiquette and using assistive technology. One dRC has partnered with Comcast to engage in a new pilot program focused on increasing hiring of people with disabilities in IP support and call centers after a 12-week training program.⁹⁵

The organization's board of directors is co-chaired by Mark Schiller, the CEO of Quaker Oats (a division of PepsiCo), and Jana Schreuder, President of Worldwide Operations and Technology for Northern Trust Corporation, and includes high-level representation from corporations such as Walgreens, McDonalds, and Aon, small businesses, and business organizations, as well as DCEO and the President and CEO of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

Board members like the fact that *disabilityworks* is focused on employment. They believe in the business case for recruiting and hiring people with disabilities, and they contribute to *disabilityworks*, both individually and through corporate contributions. They support *disabilityworks'* efforts to secure grants from other businesses and organizations. Jana Schreuder says that it must be made as easy as possible for businesses to access qualified people with disabilities.

A Catalyst for Collaboration

Initiated by the Mayor's Taskforce, *disabilityworks* commissioned DePaul University to conduct a study comparing employees with disabilities to those without in three key sectors of the economy in the Chicago area. The findings of the research, *Exploring the Bottom Line: A Study of the Costs and Benefits of Workers with Disabilities*,⁹⁶ issued in July 2007, are being used to bolster the case for hiring people with disabilities to employers who may be reluctant based on perceived costs of accommodations, absenteeism, or performance.⁹⁷

With encouragement from the executive level of Walgreens' retail store division, a district manager in Chicago agreed to a pilot project in eight retail stores in downtown Chicago. The pilot, which became operational in February 2009, establishes *disabilityworks* as the single point of referral for people with disabilities from six service provider agencies to the eight Walgreens retail stores. Memoranda of Understanding were developed that set up specific protocols that service providers must follow when they refer qualified job seekers to *disabilityworks*.

In approaching disability provider agencies to be part of this pilot project, *disabilityworks* included organizations that work with people with different types of disabilities. Six organizations were involved in developing and finalizing the communication and referral plan from the provider side. On the Walgreens side, the store managers and assistant managers attended *disabilityworks*' two-hour disability sensitivity and awareness training before referrals began. Job analysis was conducted on five different positions that are available at the Walgreens retail stores.

During the summer of 2009, DCEO, *disabilityworks*, and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) were involved in a collaboration on a pilot project for college students. Funded by a School-to-Work grant through DCEO, TechWorks involved a pilot project between MOPD and *disabilityworks* to help students with disabilities secure internships in information technology and other technology fields during the summer of 2009. Eighteen students with disabilities in high schools, colleges, and universities in the Chicagoland area were placed in eight-week internships.

At Wheeling High School in suburban Chicago, funds from the Workforce Investment Act, Technical Education, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) support a pilot health science cluster project that includes special education students. The project is working with *disabilityworks* in several areas. Through its Web site and other means, *disabilityworks* is creating awareness of health careers and offering resources. *disabilityworks* has also advised about accessibility issues and spoken to teachers and administrators developing the pilot. Through DCEO funding, Jewish Vocational Services, a CPLN member, is providing reinforcement of students' academic skills through e-learning. The high schools will develop individual career plans for each student, which, for special education students, will incorporate their Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Karen McCulloh, who is a Registered Nurse (as well as then-Executive Director of *disabilityworks*), will do a presentation to human resource managers of Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council's 123 member hospitals and

health care organizations about best practices in bringing underrepresented populations into the workplace.

One of the most recent initiatives of *disabilityworks* is a series of Chamber of Commerce summits in locations throughout Illinois. Funded by the Illinois Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, administered by the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the goal of these summits is to educate businesses about hiring people with disabilities, and to provide resources and referral sources so that businesses may utilize the untapped resource of qualified workers who have disabilities. All resource materials are handed out on a flash drive so employers may access the materials electronically and send the information on to other employers and internally to their staff. Attendees are provided with *disabilityworks'* paper, *Business Case Bottom Line*, information on the 2008 ADA Amendments Act, and information on employers' frequently asked questions. Handout information is available at <http://www.disabilityworks.org>.

The summits are sponsored by the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, DCEO, and its statewide Small Business Development Centers, the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, and Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC) Great Lakes ADA Center. Local chambers throughout the state agreed to host summits where surrounding chambers partner to promote and attend the summits. All of the summits were held by the end of 2009. *disabilityworks* has also partnered with DBTAC Great Lakes ADA Center, which made presentations at each of the summits.

Conclusion

The collaborative projects initiated or supported by *disabilityworks* offer examples of market-sensitive partnerships for other cities, metropolitan areas, and states, and confirm the *Ready and Able* findings.

- **Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities**

The inclusion of disabilityworks within a large Chamber of Commerce sends a message that increasing employment of people with disabilities is being approached from a business perspective. Additionally, most of the businesses recruited to the Business Leadership Advisory Board of Directors and the CBLN have been accomplished through individualized communication. Networking skills have proven to be essential.

Corporate leaders from major national and global corporations serve on the *disabilityworks* board and support the organization. This validates the *disabilityworks* programs and initiatives as valued resource to employers. It also confirms *disabilityworks* as a partnership provider that gives valued assistance to corporations in their disability recruitment efforts.

Although “social responsibility” is a “buzz” word, *disabilityworks* demonstrates that businesses appear to respond better to the concepts of finding the best quality workforce, and serving customers who may have disabilities, as a business interest. They are also interested in accommodating existing employees who develop disabilities.

- **Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities**

The founders established two separate networks, one for businesses and another for providers. This enabled businesses to have their own organization where they could discuss their concerns, and likewise, the providers have their own set of issues and can discuss these in a friendly environment.

disabilityworks and its network organizations relentlessly focus on the message that people with disabilities want to work and are qualified to work. The group is repeatedly referred to as “an untapped resource of qualified workers for employers.” Ms. McCulloh noted that many of the key stakeholders are leaders who have disabilities or have a personal connection to disability.

disabilityworks is action oriented. In one quarter, *disabilityworks* staff conducted 45 presentations to approximately 1,000 people across the state on various topics where all presentations, no matter the topic, were directed by the mission. All 12 staff, including the Executive Director, Managing Directors, and dRCs offer educational presentations about hiring people with disabilities.

- **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive**

The Walgreens pilot project, TechWorks, and health cluster initiatives all incorporate training and coaching curricula.

- **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership**

The disabilityworks initiative recognizes that successful partnerships exist at multiple levels within the same organization. Within large companies, people at the top level must set priorities, take action, and devote resources to the effort. Without full organizational commitment, partnerships are sometimes difficult to maintain because of staff turnover.

Making the Business Case: The Business Leadership Network in Oregon

Introduction

The Oregon Business Leadership Network (OBLN) was organized in June 2004 as an employer-led organization to provide Oregon businesses with networking opportunities, education, and resources to effectively increase understanding and awareness of disability issues in the workplace. The research for this profile was done in 2009. OBLN ceased operations in April 2010.

During the time it operated, the OBLN developed materials and made important contributions to fostering partnerships with the business community to increase employment for people with disabilities. OBLN was statewide in scope, with activities and chapters in Portland and Salem. It was particularly effective in its communication strategies, especially with business, and carried the message that people with disabilities want to work. The approach of the OBLN was not to “reinvent the wheel,” but to build on initiatives that work. It was free to business members, who were called “associates.” Several large corporations that made larger contributions to the organization were called “sponsors.”

The OBLN held its first meeting on June 29, 2004. The Board of Directors included major employers, such as Intel Corporation, Portland General Electric, Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU), and Fred Meyer Stores (Kroger Company). The Executive Director of OBLN, Lucy Baker, believes that actions taken early on set the foundation for the entire enterprise.

The Business Case for Inclusion: A Guiding Principle

At its first meeting, the OBLN Board of Directors decided that OBLN would:

- Incorporate as a standalone statewide 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation with local chapters;
- Establish a digital presence, with its own URL, that would help it serve as a clearinghouse and source of information on a wide range of disability issues;
- Assist member companies in a friendly atmosphere;
- Recognize people with disabilities as workers and as customers;
- See disability as part of diversity, and work to enable all OBLN members to be well-versed and welcoming of disability;

- Have the expertise to assist employers to improve their practices on inclusion, including universal design and “cultural readiness” assessments;
- Have connections with nonprofit organizations with which employers could work; and
- Reach out to people within corporations in multiple roles, such as those who deal with equal employment opportunity, diversity contracting, recruiting, accommodation, managers and line supervisors, retention, as well as those who handle Workers’ Compensation.

OBLN’s first major project was the crafting of a business case for inclusion of people with disabilities in the competitive workplace and consumer base. The *method* for development of its business case was very important. Within eight weeks of its first meeting, the OBLN hosted a CEO forum. Suggestions for invitees came from the Oregon Business Council (OBC), the Oregon Business Association, and Oregon Workforce Investment Boards. The two honorary co-chairs of the OBLN for this event — Oregon State Representative Brad Avakian and Peter O. Kohler, M.D, President of OHSU — extended the invitations and hosted the meeting. The meeting was attended by 15 representatives of corporations across key sectors, representing 100,000 workers, or about 6% of the Oregon workforce. Leaders of state organizations attended in helping roles. The output of this effort was the OBLN business case,⁹⁸ which recognizes the demographic realities of the future workforce, and the importance of people with disabilities as both consumers and talented members of the workforce. The development of this business case in a peer-to-peer setting led to stronger buy-in on the part of businesses.

Within its first year of operation, OBLN had created a web presence (<http://www.obln.org>) that served as a comprehensive resource for employers regarding disability in the workplace and marketplace; developed flexAbility, a guide for employers, in partnership with the Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services (OVRs) and area disability experts; established a monthly e-magazine featuring interviews with Oregon leaders and showcasing successful models, viewpoints, and messages around disability; conducted quarterly roundtables on subjects of interest to business members; and influenced the OBC to include “accommodating Oregonians with disabilities into the workplace” as part of the Oregon Business Plan, a statewide initiative of Oregon’s business community to shape a long-term vision and strategy for creating more quality jobs in Oregon. In October 2005, the U.S. Business Leadership Network presented OBLN with an Exceptional Leadership Award, and named it Chapter of the Year (along with Miami Dade Business Leadership Network).

Economic Development Approach to Hiring People with Disabilities

Lucy Baker describes the OBLN as having an “economic development” as opposed to a “human service” approach, using “pull” rather than “push” strategies. This approach recognizes the value of inclusion to employers and both promotes and addresses business interests in people with disabilities. OBLN offered:

- Education for employers on accessibility, disability etiquette, Windmills® attitudinal training, disability awareness, and trainer resources;
- Customized leadership development training on diversity, disability, and the “bottom line”;
- Assistance in finding talented workers with disabilities; and
- Capacity building, including “cultural audits” for inclusion, accessibility assessments, and “reasonable accommodations” consultations.

OBLN was particularly talented with its communication approaches, including *Look at My Ability* (<http://www.obln.org/LAMA.htm>), a two-minute video from the OBLN in partnership with the Oregon Business Plan (Oregon Medicaid Infrastructure Grant).⁹⁹ The video focuses on the largely untapped skilled labor pool of Oregonians with disabilities and addresses the work ethic and skills represented in this group. The video was produced with a grant from the Oregon Department of Human Services by Morgali Films.

While OBLN benefited from a start-up grant through OVRs, and several project-based contracts through the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), its quest to establish natural, ongoing funding for its activities continued in its fourth fiscal year. Promising beginnings in this direction came from an increase in corporate contributions, including those providing repeat sponsorships in its third fiscal year, and new fee-for-service contracts with OVRs (for internships) and the Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center.

Notable challenges remained. The OBLN applied for a number of foundation and other grants, with limited success. Foundations are not accustomed to receiving appeals from a business-led organization and were also unable, during the recession, to fund many new organizations. The recession imposed other challenges. Many businesses are under financial pressure and may be constrained in their ability to make corporate contributions. The OBLN Board voted in November 2009 to continue the OBLN through June 2010 on the strength of actual and pending contacts and collaboration with the U.S. Business Leadership Network on proposals to the Office of Disability Employment Policy and AmeriCorps. In April 2010, the Board voted to cease operations.

At the time this research was conducted, OBLN had one staff person, the Executive Director, and a part-time webmaster. An early investment by OVRs in OBLN’s capacity building in Fiscal Year 2008-2009 provided a part-time program coordinator and full-time development director, and while they helped move the OBLN further along its path in building funding, partnerships, and services, it was not possible to support the positions beyond the grant period.

OBLN Initiatives

OBLN facilitated the “economic development” approach through the following activities and partnerships, all directed toward assisting employers to find talented individuals with disabilities for their workforces:

- **Internship Center.** OBLN operated a summer internship center in partnership with Incight, an Oregon-based nonprofit organization that connects talented university and college students with disabilities to industry. In operating this program, OBLN and Incight connected with other organizations that establish internships for college students, such as the Emerging Leaders Program of the National Business and Disability Council (run by Abilities, Inc.); the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy’s EARN program; the Oregon Department of Human Services’ Oregon Transition Program; the Oregon Commission for the Blind’s Summer Work Experience Program; and the Business Education Compact, which connects Oregon businesses with schools in “hands-on, innovative experiences.” Working with Incight, OBLN reached out to member businesses to host interns. The internship center was the first OBLN effort to attract foundation funds (from the Juan Young Trust) and was focused on opening the doors of corporations because it is advantageous for their businesses. It is part of OBLN’s “economic development” model. At the same time, the OBLN functioned as a “team player” by working with other organizations involved in similar efforts.
- **“Tapping Fresh Talent” Career Expo.** Beginning in 2007, in partnership with OVRS, OBLN hosted an annual job fair for approximately 200 youth in transition with disabilities, veterans and adults with disabilities, and employers. The 2009 expo included a post-expo business reception, during which “new tools for inclusion” were presented by two consultants who partnered with OBLN. In past years, employers were impressed with the quality of the candidates who attend the expo.
- **“flexAbility” Toolkit for Employers.** In partnership with and under contract to OVRS, OBLN issued and subsequently updated the “flexAbility” toolkit¹⁰⁰ for employers. The toolkit is a 200-page free guide for employers that explains disability-related employment resources in an easy-to-understand way. For example, the section on “reasonable accommodations” explains that they are “workplace adjustments or modifications that enable individuals with disabilities to do their jobs. As such, they are on par with the desks, chairs, phones and computers that an employer provides all employees as the means for getting their job done.”¹⁰¹
- **Live Résumé.** As described in the OBLN newsletter, “Live Résumé provides employers with the opportunity to meet a small group of polished, motivated, skilled, and dependable job seekers with disabilities and hear their ‘live résumés.’ This event gave employers the opportunity to tap into the talent they need as well as help them meet their workforce diversity goals and strategies.” OBLN held Live Résumé events every three or four months, in different locations throughout the state. OBLN recruited the employers. The business liaison for OVRS was the single point of contact or “funnel” for providers.

An OVRS liaison met with each job seeker before the Live Résumé event and determined if the job seeker was ready. Also, OVRS prepared candidates for Live Résumé by reviewing résumés and conducting workshops, especially on informational interviewing. There was also some involvement by the Commission for the Blind and the U.S. Department of Education-funded Projects with Industry grantee, Easter Seals, based in Portland.

- **Project SEARCH Replication.** OBLN was involved in facilitating a health careers project modeled on Cincinnati Children’s Hospital’s Project SEARCH. The partners were Incight and OHSU. After some initial meetings, the project was on hold due to workforce reductions brought on by the recession but was looking to place its first workers in 2010.

Conclusion

OBLN demonstrated the *Ready and Able* findings in the following ways:

- **Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities**

In concert with its employer members, OBLN developed “The Business Case for Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Competitive Workplace and Consumer Base.”¹⁰² OBLN promoted the importance of workplace skills and experience and consumer participation of people with disabilities to be fully competitive or successful.

- **Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities**

Through OBLN’s internship center, career expos, and support of Project SEARCH and related initiatives, the organization encouraged, facilitated, and supported innovative approaches and collaboration among workforce and social service agencies. It promoted Oregon’s best practice and leadership models that are successful in improving employment for people with disabilities.

- **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive**

The attempted Project SEARCH replication and internship center are examples of how this collaboration was concerned with training people with disabilities to be qualified and productive for jobs in demand.

- **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership**

OBLN cultivated and promoted leadership through education, training, and awareness, working with leading employers, nonprofit leadership, and elected officials. It educated employers that people with disabilities are an important part of workplace and leadership diversity, that accommodation is a key business strategy for competitiveness, and that a culture of inclusion is a leadership strategy recognized at the top and practiced at all levels.

Considering its modest size, the OBLN accomplished a great deal and developed products and approaches that can be utilized by other organizations that are similarly trying to foster a market-driven, or economic development, approach to increasing employment for people with disabilities.