

Introduction

Disabilities and Work: Solutions for Markets and People

We know the problem. It is complex, and defies bromides and sound bites.

The United States spends an estimated \$300 billion annually to support unemployed people with disabilities who could be, and are willing to be, employed.¹ A study conducted in 2000 by the National Organization on Disability/Harris Poll indicated that 67% of working-age people with disabilities would rather be working than be unemployed and nonproductive. Yet, the labor force participation rates for people with disabilities is less than half that of people without disabilities. In June 2010, the labor force participation rate for working-age men (ages 16 to 64) with disabilities was 36.7% compared to 83.8% for working-age men without disabilities. For women, the rates were 30.8% and 71.7%, respectively.² For those people with disabilities considered to be in the labor force, unemployment rates are significantly higher. In June 2010, the unemployment rates for men and women (ages 16 to 64) with a disability were 16.2% and 14.8%, respectively compared to 10.3% and 8.8% for men and women without a disability in that age group.³ People with disabilities represent a vast, underutilized labor pool.

Employment has important implications for the lives of people with disabilities. As was noted in the influential Chicago Mayoral Task Force Report on People with Disabilities,

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 programs and subsidies.⁴

In short, lack of employment for people with disabilities has profound personal and financial effects on their lives.

Additionally, given the growing body of evidence that workers with disabilities meet or exceed the job performances of co-workers without disabilities, the continuing high unemployment rate and low labor force participation rate of people with disabilities deprive the nation’s workforce of a valuable source of talent.⁵

Over the past decade, research on this problem has focused on negative attitudes and workplace culture that inhibit employers from hiring people with disabilities. This research has been valuable in understanding the obstacles to the employment of people with

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disabilities. The NTAR Leadership Center was aware, however, of successful employer and market-driven initiatives to recruit and hire people with disabilities, and decided to initiate an in-depth study of such initiatives to identify elements that made them successful.

In early 2009, the NTAR Leadership Center began new research by conducting a literature review of employer-initiated and market-driven approaches to recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities. The review noted that there was limited published literature and research on these employer-driven efforts and the factors that contributed to their success over the long run.⁶

The review of available literature on successful market-driven practices to recruit and retain employees with disabilities focused on four key areas:

1. Direct recruitment and hiring initiatives by private-sector businesses as well as the public sector;
2. Recruitment and hiring initiatives by staffing companies;
3. Partnerships that have been developed by employers with workforce intermediaries, such as workforce, vocational rehabilitation, disability-specific service providers, and other organizations specifically for the recruitment and training of employees with disabilities; and
4. Entrepreneurial efforts and other initiatives to support people with disabilities to be self-employed and/or own their own businesses.

The review found evidence of numerous innovative initiatives by some of the nation's leading companies to recruit, hire, and retain employees with disabilities. A common and significant element among these companies was that they *chose* to establish disability employment initiatives. In each case, the company determined that hiring people with disabilities would add value to the company's workforce and positively affect the company's bottom line. This affirmed to NTAR Leadership Center researchers the presence of an underlying and less well-understood business case for hiring people with disabilities. In the competitive environment of the business world, employers make decisions for reasons that improve their business conditions and operations. Had the factors contributing to those decisions been understood by policymakers and service providers and their leadership? Very little research had been performed on what made initiatives *work*, not fail, on what motivated *employers*, rather than *providers*. Previous reports had examined employer *culture*, not employer *behavior*.

Partnerships with workforce intermediaries are a key factor in successful employer-driven recruitment, hiring, and retention initiatives.

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Based on these findings, the research team concluded that a deeper understanding of the dynamics of business decisions around hiring people with disabilities might yield transformative insights into how agencies and providers serving people with disabilities could align their investments with labor market need and employer practice. The research team believed this alignment with the forces of demand could be a gateway to breakthrough results.

The literature review yielded glimpses into the motivation and experiences of employers that have established disability recruitment and hiring efforts. The review discovered a critical component of employer initiatives. Many, if not all, are built on and sustained by a partnership with an intermediary, generally with a single trusted entity that recruits individuals and either coordinates outreach, assessment, training, and support services from multiple agencies for prospective employees or provides all of the services itself. Examples included Walgreens, Lockheed Martin, and Manpower, all of which are profiled in this study.

The literature review arrived at a premise. Partnerships and collaborations with workforce intermediaries are a key element in employer-driven recruitment, hiring, and retention initiatives. The research team concluded that there was a need for in-depth research that would identify and describe the key factors in the success of business-driven initiatives and the partnerships that often appeared essential to their operation. This trend is one that has important implications for leaders and practitioners working in disability and workforce development systems who are looking to better engage employers to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The research team selected a case study methodology to explore common elements and unique aspects of diverse partnerships between employers and disability service organizations. Case study research is accepted as appropriate to explore phenomena and produce new theory. It is also consistent with models of learning and gaining expertise.⁷ The research team recognizes that only a few of the profiles in this study include data to document success. In each profile, however, there is testimony from stakeholders, most notably employers, regarding the successful elements of the partnership. As such, these profiles will lead to a better understanding of partnerships as a strategy to expand the employment of people with disabilities and can form the basis for further research.

The NTAR Leadership Center research team chose 13 diverse examples from around the nation of partnerships that work with employers to recruit, hire, train, and retain employees with disabilities for in-depth study. The focus of these profiles was to uncover key lessons learned, critical practices, and essential organizational behaviors that are associated with successful partnerships and collaborations between employers and organizations looking to place individuals with disabilities in good jobs. Additionally, the study sought to understand and validate a business case for employers of hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. What recruitment practices make sense for employers? What is a sustainable policy that matches supply and demand over the long term? What makes for effective relationships between employers and community organizations? Why are these brokers critical to job seekers with disabilities and what makes them work?

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In this way, the study findings serve to both show the way for additional employers to establish such partnerships and collaborations, as well as to prepare workforce and disability employment service providers to develop more effective strategies and partnerships that respond to employer needs.

Over the course of six months, researchers interviewed and visited leaders and practitioners at the heart of these business-public collaborations. They carefully examined practices fostering economic independence and workforce access for people with disabilities through market-oriented approaches. They sifted through their findings, the established literature, and spoke with employers, to identify the core principles and the foundational practices that result in sustainable success. This research, without a doubt, shows that the most productive innovations grew from organizations and leadership committed both to the competitive and social logic of hiring people with disabilities. These partnerships required trust, collaboration, and a sense of market urgency.

This report's chapters are organized to highlight diverse partnership models:

- Chapter 1 comprises two profiles of *large national* companies that organized local partnerships with service agencies to support disability employment initiatives;
- Chapter 2 features one profile of an *intermediary that coordinated* disability services for multiple employers *in a specific sector*;
- Chapter 3 features two profiles of *staffing companies* that coordinated outreach and disability services in order to provide multiple employer customers with qualified employees with disabilities;
- Chapter 4 includes three profiles of *national organizations* that supported nationwide networks of employers to recruit *college graduates with disabilities*;
- Chapter 5 features three profiles of *local organizations that assisted multiple local employers* to recruit, hire, and retain employees with disabilities; and
- Chapter 6 presents two profiles of organizations that *fostered partnerships* between service providers and employers that want to employ people with disabilities.

One common element in these profiles is that intermediaries assist employers to recruit, hire, and retain employees with disabilities through coordinating services and supports from organizations that provide employment and disability services.

Findings

This study examined a diverse spectrum of private and public organizations, including many identified in the literature review for their potential leadership in disability employment initiatives.

In all, the 13 profiles in this report are based on over 100 interviews, and six months of fieldwork. In each profile, the documented outcomes of the initiatives are included, where available, and the implications for employers, policy leaders, and providers are discussed. The culmination of this analysis is a core set of findings that provide insight as to what makes for innovative and sustaining collaborations in workforce development.

In assessing the outcomes and implications of the case studies, the NTAR Leadership Center research team developed *four core findings* that serve as a common point of reference.

1. Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities. Identified in this research are three trends in how employers see workers meeting their business and workforce needs:

- Employees with disabilities who possess the skills needed for the job add value to the employer and positively affect the “bottom line.”
- Successful experiences with qualified employees with disabilities increase the employer’s willingness to expand employment opportunities, and
- Business-to-business marketing of the value of employing people with disabilities is most effective.

2. Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities. The report notes five aspects of this theme:

- Employers do not want to have to maintain relationships with many varied workforce-supplying organizations — they find it daunting to learn the intricacies of the workforce and disability service worlds on their own;
- Accordingly, they want a single point of contact to coordinate the assistance and supports they need to recruit and hire;
- Assistance and supports are based on an employer’s needs and standards;
- The collaborations organize and coordinate supports and provide technical assistance on workforce issues, including disability-specific issues; and
- Employers come to depend on the workforce-supplying organization.

3. **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive.** As will be seen in the report, effective projects feature:

- Internships and mentorships that encourage hands-on guidance and work experience;
- Employment based on labor market needs as defined by employers;
- Opportunity for workers to earn credentials and degrees for good jobs with benefits;
- Access to career ladders, workplace training, and skills;
- Training in soft skills; and
- Provision of needed supports and accommodations to assist employees to be successful once on the job.

4. **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership.** Leaders in the partnerships studied exemplified three principal traits:

- Willingness to develop, coordinate, nurture, and manage the collaboration;
- Ability to motivate, inspire, and connect employer leaders at all levels to continuously define workplace job needs and support the employment process; and
- Ability to act day in and day out as a champion to make things happen.

As this report illustrates, what are often seen as barriers and obstacles can become catalysts for innovation and gateways of access to sustained employment for people with disabilities through the presence of market-driven collaborations. This report points out a number of the most highly regarded innovations.

Finally, this report offers new, more in-depth insight into what makes progressive, successful market-driven partnerships and collaborations work. It includes detailed descriptions of numerous operations within these initiatives and draws salient conclusions about promising and effective practices. Some of the conclusions may be more familiar to readers of workforce analysis, and represent common-sense practices that will never fall out of favor but bear repeating. This report draws readers' attention to those practices that generate and reinforce trusted relationships among public and private partners that are essential to actual job creation — that, in fact, *spur job and economic activity*.