

## Introduction

Employers face workforce challenges daily, and the forecast of labor market shortages is not getting any brighter. The 2005 survey report, *Cost and Effectiveness of Accommodations in the Workplace: Preliminary Results of a Nationwide Study*, conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), reveals that workforce development and retention of workers at all skill levels are two of the major issues facing small and large businesses today. Moreover, a 2003 Aspen Institute report projects a critical shortage of workers over the next 20 years, particularly in jobs requiring higher education and training. The report confirms what businesses already know—there are too few qualified workers to meet projected needs.

However, there is good news. Employers now can meet their workforce shortages by tapping into non-traditional sources of labor. Imagine finding workers who are self-motivated, have solid critical thinking skills and solve problems every day. Now, imagine that these workers, who have achieved competitive employment, have consistently proven to have nearly 85 percent one-year employment retention rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). As an employer, you need to know that people with disabilities are eager and ready to join your workforce.

### Filling the Worker Shortage

Greater demand for skilled labor has increased awareness that many employable people are seeking employment who traditionally have not been considered as potential sources of skilled labor. People with disabilities represent the single largest minority group seeking employment in today's market. Both large and small companies have benefited by recruiting people with disabilities for many years. Many leading companies attribute much of their success to employing a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities.

### Quick Facts

- ✓ A fall 2005 survey of employers and individuals with disabilities found that the median cost of accommodations was only \$600.
- ✓ Seventy-two percent of individuals with disabilities reported that their accommodation was made at no cost.
- ✓ Employers who had made accommodations for employees with disabilities reported multiple benefits as a result, including that the accommodation: allowed the company to retain a qualified employee; eliminated the costs of training a new employee; and increased the worker's productivity

(Hendricks, Batiste and Hirsh, 2005)

## The 21st-Century Workforce

A steady pipeline of qualified workers is available to help your business achieve its competitive advantage. Companies that are strategic in their recruiting efforts understand that, as the consumer market becomes increasingly global and diverse, they must ensure that their workforces and their marketing strategies are able to meet these changing demands. Many companies have found that by concentrating on diversity and inclusion they are better able to reach out to a wide variety of markets. One of the U.K.'s largest banks, Lloyds TSB, has made a significant effort and investment in ensuring that its banking locations reflect the demographics of its customers. Lloyds' objective was to eliminate any discrimination faced by disabled employees or customers. Its disability programs have resulted in better retention of disabled employees, more accessible buildings and increased business from disabled customers. (Business for Social Responsibility, 2005). Businesses also recognize that they can no longer meet staffing needs through traditional means. Companies can benefit financially by recruiting through government and nonprofit sources. Contacts with rehabilitation agencies, welfare offices and other social programs are designed to assist companies in identifying new sources of qualified workers and an array of workplace supports. Visit the State Employment Specialists in Vocational Education's Web site at [www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/vrpractices/busdev.html](http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/vrpractices/busdev.html) to connect to the single point of contact in your state whose job it is to build and maintain employer relationships.

## Business Incentives

There are compelling reasons to hire people with disabilities.

- ✓ People with disabilities possess valuable problem-solving skills because they are experts in finding creative ways to perform tasks others may take for granted.
- ✓ Employees with disabilities have proved to be dependable, dedicated, hardworking and productive employees.
- ✓ Many businesses report that the experience of working with people with disabilities increases every employee's morale and productivity.
- ✓ After acquiring a disability, employees who return to work after being rehabilitated help reduce a company's training and hiring costs and lower insurance premiums. Employers who

have return-to-work programs establish a culture that regards employees as valuable—not disposable.

- ✓ Employees with disabilities reflect the customer base and can help craft effective marketing strategies to reach this lucrative market for companies that hire them.

*People with disabilities make up part of the diverse workforce necessary for your business to succeed.*

*By raising awareness that your company is a disability-friendly business, you will attract job candidates and new customers. A recent study from the University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Social Development & Education (2006) reports, "overwhelmingly positive attitudes among consumers toward socially responsible companies, and in particular toward those that hire individuals with disabilities. Specifically, 92 percent of consumers surveyed felt more favorable toward companies that hire individuals with disabilities, and 87 percent said they would prefer to give their business to such companies. Among those surveyed, hiring people with disabilities ranked third behind offering health insurance to all employees and protecting the environment as an indicator of a company's commitment to social justice."*

Your business has an important partner in the effort to enhance its success through diversity. President George W. Bush pledged to improve employment for people with disabilities in his landmark New Freedom Initiative—a comprehensive, innovative plan to promote full participation of people with disabilities in all parts of American society. OSERS has an important role in working to achieve the president's objective by helping your business identify strategies to recruit, hire and retain people with disabilities. By releasing this initiative in his first two weeks of office, President Bush signaled his commitment to improving the quality of life for Americans with disabilities. For more information, visit [www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/newfreedom](http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/newfreedom).

To help you prepare to employ people with disabilities, OSERS has designed this employment planning guide.

## What This Employment Planning Guide Offers

- ✓ Lessons and strategies to help you continue to plan and design a program for employing people with disabilities:
  - Lesson One** — Finding Qualified Workers With Disabilities
  - Lesson Two** — Cultivating the Next Generation of Qualified Workers
  - Lesson Three** — Learning From Other Businesses
  - Lesson Four** — Putting Research Into Practice in the Workplace
  
- ✓ Contact information for programs and resources in your state or locality dedicated to helping you in your effort to recruit and hire people with disabilities.
  
- ✓ Fact sheets and a checklist.

*The most important thing for Starbucks is a relationship. That's what vocational rehabilitation (VR) has built with us. It was a new opportunity for us to bring in individuals with challenges, both physically and cognitively, and we were unsure as to how to proceed. That's where the relationship with VR helped.*

*— Debra Russell  
Starbucks  
(Council of State Administrators  
of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2005)*

*We have budget restraints ... and bottom lines to talk about ... and when you're in business it's all about the bottom line.  
The free services and resources ... that VR provides to us are...valuable to our company in achieving this bottom line."*

*— Beth Butler  
SouthTrust-Wachovia Bank  
(Council of State Administrators  
of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2005)*

# Lesson One: Finding Qualified Workers With Disabilities

Employer case studies indicate that a diverse workforce is a key factor for improving productivity and guaranteeing success for a business, but that too often people with disabilities have been overlooked as part of this initiative. (Brooke, Fraser, Green, Habeck, McMahon and Wehman, 2004). The following resources are available in your community and can connect you with qualified workers with disabilities. These programs, administered by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), include the state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program and the Centers for Independent Living (CILs).

## Vocational Rehabilitation

The VR program is a strong state-federal partnership that promotes the employment and independence of people with disabilities. The VR program, which began more than 85 years ago, was the first federally authorized program specifically created to serve the employment needs of people with physical disabilities<sup>1</sup> not injured as a result of military service. Today, on average, more than 200,000 people with disabilities find employment each year with the help of the VR programs in their states (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

VR counselors have extensive specialized training, making them uniquely qualified to work with your business to:

- ✓ identify qualified people with disabilities ready for employment;
- ✓ develop productive partnerships between your business and training organizations that support a person's career development while meeting your need for qualified applicants and skilled workers;
- ✓ provide access to cutting-edge assistive technologies that can improve the overall work performance of people with disabilities; and
- ✓ provide information regarding the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)* and the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, as amended.

<sup>1</sup>The *Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act*, passed by Congress in 1920, defined vocational rehabilitation (VR) as a program for persons with physical disabilities. Mental disabilities were not part of the VR program until 1943.