

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 disabilities¹ 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.

¹The *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.

VR counselors also have long-standing relationships with a wide variety of employers in your area. Some of the country's most successful businesses, such as SunTrust Bank, Starbucks and Manpower, Inc., to name a few, have thriving relationships with VR programs and counselors in their states that help them actively recruit, hire, support and retain qualified workers with disabilities.

The findings of a recent longitudinal study, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education of 8,500 applicants and recipients of RSA's VR services, show that people with disabilities who

Vocational Rehabilitation Puts Dreams Within Reach

VR gave Kevin the help he needed for a promising future in medical technology. Through assistance from the Arkansas Rehabilitation Services, Kevin graduated with honors from the Oregon Institute of Technology with a degree in radiologic science-nuclear medicine technology. He passed the related national boards examination and is now licensed in nuclear medicine technology. He has a new job that pays \$37 an hour.

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Jeff was injured on his plumbing job several years before he contacted the state vocational rehabilitation agency. With VR's assistance, Jeff enrolled in accounting courses at his local community college. VR also provided adapted equipment that he would need for his new job as a teller and loan officer. Jeff has since been promoted and is now an assistant vice president of a bank in his hometown.

(Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2005)

have achieved competitive employment through existing business and VR partnerships have a nearly 85 percent job-retention rate after one year (2003). These findings concur with those of companies such as DuPont and Sears who have measured retention rates of their employees.

State vocational rehabilitation agencies help employ individuals with disabilities. To that end, VR agencies (with the support of their federal partners) stand ready to provide employers with qualified job candidates with disabilities to meet the workforce needs of American businesses. To connect to the single point of contact in a given state whose job it is to build and maintain employer relationships, visit the State Employment Specialists in Vocational Education's Web site at www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/vrpractices/busdev.html. In addition, you can find examples of how some state VR agencies approach their relationships with businesses.

The VR program in my area is:

Contact Name:	_____
Address:	_____ _____
Phone:	_____
E-Mail:	_____

Centers for Independent Living (CILs)

CILs are cross-disability, nonprofit organizations that are designed and operated within a local community by individuals with disabilities. CILs provide an array of independent living services to people with disabilities and can assist your business with finding resources for employees with disabilities, such as accessible transportation and housing. CILs disseminate information about job postings and career fairs throughout the local disability community. By providing these services, CILs can be a source for identifying qualified people with disabilities who are eager to assume competitive, meaningful and integrated employment. CILs help individuals with disabilities get to work and obtain other supports they need to be successful in the workplace.

Your business can benefit from partnering with disability organizations like the CILs. By raising awareness that your company is a disability-friendly business, you will attract job candidates and new customers. Customers, potential employees, investors and local communities are increasingly paying attention to diversity as part of a company's overall corporate social responsibility. Public recognition through lists such as Fortune's "Best Companies for Minorities" and DiversityInc's "Top 50 Companies for Diversity," as well as more specific ratings like the Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index and the NAACP's report cards and consumer guides, allow potential employees, customers and investors to incorporate a company's diversity reputation into their decisions on whether to interact with the company. (Business for Social Responsibility, 2005). You can find the local CIL in your area by visiting www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm.

The CIL program in my area is:

Contact Name:	_____
Address:	_____ _____
Phone:	_____
E-Mail:	_____

By actively recruiting, hiring and promoting workers with disabilities companywide, and building strategic alliances with the disability community, businesses send a powerful message that results in a stronger workforce and increased numbers of customers. By weaving an accessible welcome mat for employees and customers with disabilities, and activating a disability-inclusive diversity policy, companies can sharpen their competitive edge and build brand loyalty by tapping this emerging \$1 trillion market segment.

—Tari Susan Hartman
EIN SOF Communications

Lesson One: Strategies

Strategy 1:

Contact your state or local VR agency to post job vacancies to reach people with disabilities who are ready to work. Let VR counselors know the kinds of highly qualified workers you are seeking so they can adapt training programs in your area to better meet your needs. To locate the VR agency in your area, visit the State Employment Specialists in Vocational Education's Web site at www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/vrpractices/busdev.html.

Strategy 2:

Help VR counselors understand your employment needs by inviting them to tour your business.

Strategy 3:

Engage VR counselors in business association meetings and events.

Strategy 4:

Develop relationships with local disability-related organizations to post jobs and communicate your interest in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities. Contact a CIL in your community and ask them to recruit people with disabilities, post job openings and help locate training opportunities. You can find the local CIL at www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm.

Strategy 5:

Volunteer to serve on advisory boards or participate in events sponsored by local disability-related organizations. CILs have contacts with other local disability organizations.

Strategy 6:

Educate your partners from disability organizations about business by inviting them to serve on employer-led committees of your business organizations.

Effective Partnerships Between Local Chambers and Vocational Rehabilitation

Local chambers and VR agencies are working together to help connect people with disabilities to employment. The Wiregrass-area Chamber of Commerce in Alabama has a strategic partnership with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) that helps connect the business community to people with disabilities in the Wiregrass area. Through the Alabama DRS's Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (chaired by the chamber's liaison to the committee), businesses are readily linked to the VR agency and its community partners.

Businesses receive a multitude of services including assistance with recruitment, retention of workers with disabilities, staff in-service training and job coach supports.

