

Top 10: Employer Perspectives on Hiring People with Disabilities (Understanding the Business Case)

or

“Hiring and retaining workers with disabilities is not “social program”-VR needs to understand and promote the business case”

By: Katherine McCary, Vice President, Human Resources, SunTrust Bank: Chair, The Virginia Business Leadership Network (VA BLN) and Chair, The US Business Leadership Network

1. Need for a diverse workforce

A diverse workforce is vital to business success. Employing a workforce that reflects the diversity of the marketplace is a key for successful employers. Recognizing “disability” as a diversity initiative is critical to this diversity effort.

2. Marketing opportunities

By employing people with disabilities, an employer can more effectively position itself to develop products and services that are more likely to sell to a diverse customer base, resulting in significant increases in long term profits. Statistics indicate that people with disabilities have an annual aggregate spending of \$1 trillion with \$220 billion in discretionary spending.

3. Impending labor shortage

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the US is facing a 10 million-worker shortage by 2010. Yet there are more than 14 million Americans with disabilities who are under employed or unemployed. Tapping into this talent pool will help to alleviate this worker shortage and reduce the need to send jobs overseas.

4. A productive workforce

A recent study by the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports (VCU RRTC) of interviews with 50 HR managers and 200 first line supervisors across the US who have hired individuals with disabilities reports that employees with disabilities are as capable and productive as non-disabled workers (timeliness, punctuality, task consistency and work speed). In addition, employers reported that the cost of employing a worker was not a significant issue. Anecdotally, employers report an increase in morale and a decrease in turnover when including people with disabilities in their workforce.

5. Employers as customers

Too many Vocational Rehabilitative Agencies and others serving people with disabilities focus their efforts strictly on the client being served. When dealing with job placement, it is essential that VR view employers as their customers as well. Employers are not simply the “closure” result; the success of hiring people with disabilities occurs when long term strategic partnerships with business are part of the VR agenda. Asking questions and learning the business language are

critical to the success of these partnerships. The Business Leadership Networks can provide employer access and partnership opportunities as well.

6. CEO support

Work with the Human Resources departments and hiring supervisors to promote their experiences and connect this to the organization's bottom line.

Understanding the Return on Investment (ROI) will help to gain buy in from the CEO. Promote employer to employer best practices.

"The focus on hiring qualified employees with disabilities is, in fact, good for business. The Return on Investment to SunTrust can be measured in several ways: One, it helps in our diversity initiatives, building a strong workforce; two, it helps us to develop products and services, expanding our customer base and third, it enables us to reach out to our entire community. Its good for our shareholders and its good for business."

C.T. Hill, Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer, SunTrust Mid-Atlantic, Lead Company of the Virginia BLN.

7.Public-Private sector alliances-best practices

The solution to the high unemployment of people with disabilities will come from alliances between the public and private sector. At SunTrust, we have committed to building these alliances in order to increase employment of people with disabilities in our workforce. Employers need the public sector's knowledge and access to candidates; the public sector needs to understand the employer perspective. Hiring people with disabilities must have a positive effect on the bottom line or business will view this simply as a social feel good program. The Vocational Rehabilitation's Employment Partners Team in the Southeast has developed a unique partnership crossing state borders to assist employers with easy one stop access and support. (For more information, contact Peggy Anderson, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services panderson@rehab.state.al.us)

8.Staffing industry partnerships

Supplemental staffing organizations offer additional employment access for people with disabilities. These firms are often the gatekeepers to business's hiring process. Employers rely on staffing firms to recruit, assess, train and assign workers to their company. Many in the staffing industry now understand the value of employing people with disabilities and assigning them to their client companies. In addition, organizations like ((APSE) The Association for Persons in Supported Employment link publicly funded employment agencies with better understanding of staffing companies practices raising the bar on business expectations and quality customer service.

"Our success as a disability friendly business is directly tied to our strategic long term relationships developed with the VA Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) and Manpower, Inc. Both these organizations share our commitment to

increasing our talent pool by including individuals with disabilities. Their strong connection to this talent streamlines our ability to recruit and hire"

Katherine McCary, Vice President, Human Resources, SunTrust Bank .

"In Virginia, SunTrust Bank and Manpower are ramping up their recruitment of people with disabilities... These local, grassroots initiatives are putting into action the President's call to leave no one behind in the 21st century workforce. "

Elaine L. Chao, Secretary, US Department of Labor, at US Chamber of Commerce, US BLN Summit, November, 2002

9. Chambers of Commerce and SHRM

While developing business partnerships one at a time is a best practice strategy, it is also essential to go where business goes to get the message out about hiring this talented labor force. The majority of jobs that will be created in the coming years will be in the small and medium sized businesses. Most of these employers belong to the local chamber of commerce.

If an organization has a human resource department or person with that function, the local SHRM chapter is an ideal forum to connect with the individuals responsible for recruiting. Often these chapters have a diversity committee that would be eager to learn how to impact their Employers diversity initiatives by including people with disabilities in the workforce.

Membership in either or both organizations is an opportunity to be seized.

10.The Business Leadership Network

51 Business Leadership Networks exist in 37 states across the US today. These employer organizations differ in organizational structure but have the same basic mission: increasing the employment of individuals with disabilities. As a business-led resource, a BLN can offer access to employers who are eager to tap into a population of individuals with disabilities. If there is no BLN in your region, work with a few employers who have realized the value of hiring individuals with disabilities and discuss forming a BLN. www.usbln.com