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# Securing a Role for People with Disabilities in the Work Force

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The business community is facing a challenge that extends well beyond that presented by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In the words of Darryl Hartley-Leonard, the president of Hyatt Hotel Corporation, "It's time for the business community to help bring people with disabilities into the mainstream and do all it can to help them lead fulfilling and productive lives." Not all in the business community would be as forthcoming with this agenda, of course, but the fact remains that, increasingly, managers are appreciating the need to employ a diverse work force. This commitment to diversity is being tested, first by the challenge to hire people with disabilities who have rarely been seen in the workplace (such as those with chronic mental illness or multiple disabilities) and second by the uncertainty of the support systems that are intended to make this employment "win-win" for both the employee and employer.

Let me use Oregon as an example. Since 1986, hundreds of Oregonians with developmental and other disabilities have benefited from "supported" employment—employment for which publicly funded support is available to accommodate employers and employees with disabilities. This employment has offered employees with disabilities and participating companies publicly funded support in the form of job coaches, who typically provide services such as job analysis, training, and social support. However, a recent taxpayer initiative promises to decrease state revenues, making the elimination of long-term funding and services

increasingly likely for many already in the work force (Toews, 1992). There appears to be no possibility of new funding to support long-term services for those people on waiting lists. Fiscal restraints in other states, although possibly not as severe, are commonly reported in the press.

## AN AGENDA FOR BUSINESS

The challenge, then, is this: With diminishing public resources, how can people with disabilities receive the support they need to become productive workers and economically self-sufficient taxpayers in their own right? Can business be expected to fill any void created by insufficiently funded public services? Many may think so, but the primary focus of U.S. industry today is universally seen as taking action to regain economic competitiveness. This means that solutions to social problems such as chronic unemployment of people who have disabilities are most likely to be addressed when employers are not adding to their own problems, but are embracing a solution that also benefits their company.

Consider these facts:

- Vocational services for many Oregonians with developmental disabilities will be eliminated in 1993 to achieve the required cuts mandated in the governor's budget. This includes the possible loss of support for >1,000 people working in Oregon businesses and receiving supported employment services who may lose their jobs unless employers assume the support currently provided by publicly funded programs.
- Employers are facing an increasingly diverse

work force, not only because of the labor trends laid out in the well-known *Workforce 2000* report (Johnston and Packer, 1987) and the subsequent Hudson report (Hudson Institute, 1987), both commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, but also because of the mandates embedded in the ADA.

- The changing demographics accompany a disturbing trend in the level of skills and preparedness of people leaving schools and joining the work force (e.g., Kolberg and Smith, 1992), making employee training an ever higher priority for business. My personal experiences in several companies over the past 12 years has confirmed that the training technology developed for employees with severe developmental disabilities has demonstrable effectiveness not only for that population, but for nondisabled employees as well. Similarly, experience suggests that job accommodations developed with nondisabled employees in mind can often be equally effective for employees with disabilities.

These three points illustrate the need for both employers and those providing employment services to focus on improving the way that employers do business. Specifically, when employers develop skills, knowledge, training ability, and teamwork, the workplace can easily include employees with disabilities and so strengthen the business. Some companies have taken these issues to heart and are leading the way in developing systems for supporting a diverse work force. Businesses throughout the country are expanding their employee support functions, as evidenced by the rise in employee assistance programs, wellness programs, education and training programs, corporate child care services, and flex time. A survey of 40 businesses conducted by the University of Oregon in 1990 found that most (60%) of those surveyed occasionally made changes in their physical plant based on worker needs. Thirty employers (75%) had restructured job duties for individual needs and 31 (78%) had provided flex time, job sharing, or some other form of rescheduled work hours to accommodate individuals (Task Force on Business Participation in Supported Employment, 1990). This survey primarily indicates

the degree to which many companies are already exhibiting the flexibility and types of actions that may be required in hiring people who have been underrepresented in the work force to this point. All of these strategies, along with others such as eliciting the support of other workers in the plant, can be effective in supporting those whose disabilities require extra accommodation.

Demonstrations certainly exist to provide models both for people that provide rehabilitation services and companies alike. Some clearly indicate that people with disabilities can work productively with reduced public funding (see, for example, Bloom, in this issue). For successes like this to happen, most companies must develop skills, knowledge, and confidence in their capacity to employ people who have various disabilities. Many employers are not aware of the support available from programs that provide research and training in this area. Three areas of technical assistance that my company has taken advantage of are business analysis, employee training, and accommodation.

**Business analysis.** Job analyses identify the features of specific jobs in the workplace. A business analysis should not only examine jobs, but also the work culture. Specifically, the business analysis should look at the nature of existing support and cooperation among employees. It also should give employees an opportunity to provide input regarding the employment of people with disabilities. The outcome of our business analysis was a feasibility study produced by a voluntary team of employees regarding support of an employee with disabilities.

**Employee training.** Despite the willingness of employees to work alongside coworkers with disabilities and lend them support, most companies still benefit from training aimed at increasing employees' awareness about the nature of disabilities. Such training give employees the confidence and understanding needed to work with employees with disabilities. Skill training that teaches effective training techniques is valuable to everyone in the company, particularly employees and supervisors who will be working directly with employees who need more than routine assistance in learning a task.

**Accommodations.** Despite popular beliefs that accommodations are expensive to make, Congressional reports indicate consistently that at least half of the required accommodations specified in the ADA could be implemented at no cost to the employer; only a fraction of the changes cost >\$500. For instance, simple job restructuring or flexible scheduling can go a long way toward enabling a person with disabilities to work successfully.

## A NEW SUPPORT AGENDA FOR REHABILITATION

It is important that people who provide services within the rehabilitation profession understand the extent to which businesses are beginning to adapt to changing demographics within the work force, the need for ongoing training, and ways to accommodate people without losing competitiveness. It is important because it underscores the commonality of objectives that I believe exist between business and rehabilitation—the development of a competent work force that represents all the people of the community. Unfortunately, and despite the many high-quality examples of companies that successfully hire people with disabilities, many companies are dragging their feet. According to a survey conducted for the Hudson Institute's 1990 follow up to the *Workforce 2000* report, only one fourth of the 645 respondents were rehiring retirees or recruiting other nontraditional employees (Fuchsberg, 1990). Many of the companies stated that their corporate cultures were not "open to diversity." This is in striking contrast to the 1991 Harris survey on public attitudes toward people with disabilities, which found that Americans, particularly those who already had coworkers with disabilities, are comfortable with the increasing number of employees with disabilities in the workplace.

## A WIN-WIN PROPOSITION

Employing people with disabilities has many potential benefits for businesses, including access

to a new labor pool, enhanced community image, and an increased customer base (as a company removes barriers to the employment of people with disabilities, it also increases access by customers with disabilities). Businesses covered under the ADA can view the employment of people with disabilities in terms of compliance, or they can adopt the attitude that the mandates of the ADA represent an opportunity for quality improvement. According to columnist James Kilpatrick in a February 1992 column, "the success or failure of the act will depend upon three factors: the attitude of business, the attitude of the disabled, and the common sense of courts. If these are positively applied, the benefits will be substantial." This point was further underscored by former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh at a *Business Week* symposium when he stated, "those who early seize the employment opportunities offered by the ADA will find they have enhanced their competitiveness domestically and increased their markets globally."

When pursuing quality improvement in this area, businesses should consider several steps:

- Develop working relationships with people with disabilities and their advocates.
- Develop a strategy for convincing employees that a change is desirable and feasible.
- Determine which barriers pose the biggest obstacles to employment of people with disabilities.
- Determine how to obtain the required knowledge and skills to institute change.
- Take action to institute the changes by addressing the most important barriers first.

By taking these steps, businesses will be responding proactively to the spirit of the ADA. When requested, rehabilitation services can and should be available to help companies obtain the knowledge and skill required to make necessary changes.

Companies are demonstrating that employment of people who need support can be accomplished through the involvement of employers and other employees in ways that strengthen the company. The decisions being made by employers today regarding retooling their businesses and de-

veloping a competitive work force are critical to the economic well-being of people with disabilities. The case must be made that promoting a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities is critical to the economic well-being of industry in this country.

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