

# Bridges to a Better Workforce

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‘A BROAD RANGE of America’s leading companies view people with disabilities as a valuable resource in meeting their needs for reliable, skilled employees,” concludes a 2011 report to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Besides detailing the extensive research behind that conclusion, the report also surveys a roster of impressive public and nonprofit initiatives dedicated to forging a bond between companies hungry for talent and a ready pool of talented employees with disabilities. “Simply put,” the authors summarize, “the broad range of employers in this report want to recruit employees with disabilities, and the collaborations supporting these initiatives have provided a range of needed services and supports that make it easier for them to do so. There is a will and a way.”<sup>i</sup>

Yet if that is so, why is the rate of employment among people with disabilities still abysmally low? The ODEP study, like most analyses of the disability-workforce field, answers this question by citing the large number of companies that are not (yet) as alert to the benefits of employees with disabilities as are the corporations profiled in the report. The authors acknowledge that few service providers rise to the report’s standards of excellence. But the researchers place their greatest emphasis, accurately and convincingly, on the broken lines of communication — the lack of a common vocabulary, mutual understanding, personal connections, and even basic awareness — between most of the companies that need productive employees and most of the agencies that represent and serve the disability labor market.

In other words, the main problem is not a lack of talent or ability in the workforce, nor a lack of suitable jobs, nor even a scarcity of organizations offering valuable help to job-seekers (although the field could surely use more of the latter). The main problem is a lack of “partnerships and collaborations” linking the various players in a steady, open, effective working relationship. In short, a lack of bridges.

Many employers, facing this gulf between their needs and the available pool of applicants, have just given up. But with

- new regulations for federal contractors setting a 7 percent workforce goal for people with disabilities,
- a U.S. workforce that is shrinking and aging into disability, and
- consumer preferences that increasingly take into account corporate social responsibility, of which diversity hiring is a key component,

giving up is no longer an attractive option. More to the point, businesses that *have* taken material steps to recruit, hire, and welcome qualified job candidates with disabilities, testify to the strong business reasons for doing so.

The first and newest of these reasons for action dates back to August 2013. That’s when the Office of Federal Contractor Compliance Programs issued a regulation that set a hiring goal for every company doing business with the federal government: At least 7 percent of their employees should be people with disabilities. The percentage applies not only to the contractor’s total payroll, but

separately to each major job classification within it. Companies are required to track and document their compliance, and if they don't meet the goal, they need to be able to show, with data and concrete efforts, how they are moving toward it. Regulators will monitor their performance annually, and where the goal is not met, employers will be expected to “determine whether and where impediments to equal employment exist, and to develop a plan to address any deficiencies.”<sup>ii</sup>

Other reasons to make a renewed effort on disability hiring are less new but just as compelling. The aging of the baby boom generation means that an increasing percentage of the national workforce — people with not only skill and energy, but decades of experience — will be working with age-related disabilities. At the same time, the supply of younger workers is shrinking. More and more, the composition of the labor force will dictate a more ambitious and creative use of workers with disabilities, who will also make up an increasing percentage of the applicant pool.

Finally, increasing survey research shows that consumers prefer doing business with socially responsible companies, including companies with distinguished records in disability hiring.<sup>iii</sup> Corporate social responsibility is of particular value to younger customers, as well as growing numbers of investors.

And yet, despite all these motivations and a clear intent among employers to do better, actual hiring continues to lag far behind expectations. The reason is not a lack of will, but a breakdown in the system that should be delivering the right candidates to the right companies, and then following up to help employees excel on the job. What employers most want — a simple, stable, long-term partnership that can supply first-rate candidates year after year — is often the hardest thing for them to find. What should be a simple, satisfying effort to locate great employees can turn into a chain of frustrations, false starts, and wasted effort. And the hiring goal remains elusive.

### **Fixing a broken system**

A company's normal search for solutions to this problem logically starts by turning to the many service, training, and vocational rehabilitation agencies that work with people with disabilities. But to do this, employers generally find that they must deal separately with each agency, adjusting to different methods of interaction and varying levels and types of service, depending on the organization. Each of the provider agencies operates in its own way, complies with different requirements of particular funding sources, concentrates on only certain services or types of disability, and has very limited incentive (if any) to work with other organizations toward a common goal. However much these agencies may want to collaborate and provide a more seamless path to employment — and nearly all the best ones recognize these impediments and wish for a better system — the economics are against them. They are most often reimbursed only for their narrowly prescribed category of service, directed only at individuals they are contracted to serve, not to the broader needs of local employers or labor markets.

This means that most are paid for their work only when one of “their” clients is placed in a job. They are not paid for helping another agency place one of “its” clients. They also rarely receive any further payment for ensuring that a given placement actually succeeds over time. Within 90 days, most cases are closed and employees are on their own. This means, in effect, that the most logical arrangements — in which different programs would work together to serve a common cluster of companies and job-seekers over an extended period of time — would bring serious financial trouble to the participating organizations, most of which subsist on barely break-even budgets.

In principle, it would not be hard to imagine a better system. But achieving it would entail combining and reprogramming resources from programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Medicaid, which are run by different federal departments, governed by separate bodies of law and regulation, and not even overseen by the same congressional committees. It would mean tying the reimbursement of participating organizations not to the individual placements mandated in law, but to community-wide (or industry-wide) improvements in employment for people who have many kinds of disability and need different kinds and degrees of support. This might be accomplished, in theory, by channeling funds through a central coordinating agency in each locality, which employers could turn to as a single source of service. The coordinators would then be accountable to the federal government for producing measurable increases in disability employment. But that kind of top-to-bottom overhaul would be a feat of legal and policy reform that typically takes years to accomplish. And given current environmental and regulatory imperatives, employers must act now.

It *is* possible, however, to create a complete, coordinating mechanism tailored to the needs of a specific employer or industry. In that case, the coordinating organization would need to forge relationships with each of the local providers and programs, design a means by which their different methods and processes could be adapted to the needs of the employer, and create a method of accounting for success and failure in real time, so that the system can be continually adapted and improved. That is, in brief, what the National Organization on Disability has created with Bridges to Business.

### **A link between supply and demand**

Bridges was established in 2010 to test the theory that an organization like NOD, with roots planted securely in both the business and nonprofit sectors, could serve as a connection between employers and the service partners who screen, prepare, and refer the job candidates they need. Between 2010 and 2014, NOD has helped more than a dozen Fortune 1000 companies hire hundreds of new workers.

The value of Bridges to employers is encapsulated in its seven essential components:

- **Organizational Support for Employers** to ensure that their policies, procedures, training, performance tracking, and other company practices are conducive to a significant increase in the number of employees with disabilities and to those employees' full success on the job;
- **Recruitment and Support of Service Partners**, to help employers find the employee-sourcing agencies that can deliver the most for them — consistently, reliably, over the long term — and to provide both employers and providers with a complete, market-wise assessment of the their local disability-employment field, including its needs, gaps, and unfulfilled opportunities;
- **Disability Employment Success Metrics**, to ensure that every employer knows what the initiative is delivering, how that compares with leading practices in the industry, and how it can be improved or reinforced for continuing success;
- **Training for Managers and Co-workers** that helps to establish disability employment as an important element of the corporate culture and establishes a standard of excellence in creating a successful, productive environment for employees with disabilities;
- **Support for Service Providers**, to help them understand what businesses need and want, and to help them meet those needs with additional resources where needed, with training for their

frontline and job development staff, and with help in moving away from isolated “sheltered workshops,” which pay below-minimum wage, toward competitive jobs in the real market;

- **Continuing Support After Each Hire**, to help employers retain their new workers, help employees remain on the job, work through any obstacles, and gradually make sure that the relationship can continue successfully without further outside assistance; and finally,
- A newer and more specialized product, **Bridges to Veterans**, which is now under development. This will blend the expertise of Bridges with all that NOD has learned through our Wounded Warriors Careers program, to help companies recruit and employ veterans with disabilities.

### **Conclusion: More than a service — a solution**

In the years since it began, Bridges to Business has proven its value to corporate clients with consistently superior results in both employment and retention. And in 2012, those results were independently verified by a team of researchers from Rutgers University’s Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, which was retained by the Kessler Foundation to conduct a thorough, two-year-long evaluation.

“Of all the programs designed to place people with disabilities in employment that [we have] evaluated to date,” the Rutgers team concluded, “**Bridges demonstrated the greatest success in job placement.**” They added that NOD’s “demand-driven strategies that start with and strive to meet the employers’ existing hiring needs can be seen as providing **a service to the employer**, especially to an employer that values diversity” [emphasis added].<sup>iv</sup>

The fissures and complexities in America’s system for training and employing people with disabilities are neither necessary nor irreparable. Mending that system, with more flexible and results-oriented public policy, would provide the broadest and best solution for both employers and job-seekers. In the meantime, however, there is no reason why companies have to cope, on their own, with all the system’s imperfections. And given new regulations and mounting market incentives, they have every reason to find a better approach. Until an overall reform solves the problem more fundamentally, Bridges to Business offers an approach that works.

Bridges is not merely a set of services. It is an integrated, complete, and practical answer to the difficulties employers face in recruiting and retaining talented employees — people with all kinds of abilities, adept at meeting challenges and solving problems, and ready to serve in every kind of market and workplace.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Nicholas, Ronnie Kauder, Kathy Krepcio, and Daniel Baker, “Ready and Able: Addressing Labor Market Needs and Building Productive Careers for People with Disabilities through Collaborative Approaches,” National Technical Assistance and Research Center to Promote Leadership for Increasing Employment and Economic Independence of Adults with Disabilities, Rutgers University, April 2011. See particularly pp. 121-123.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Federal Contractor Compliance Programs, “Talking Points on Final Rules for VEVRAA and Section 503,” August 27, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Siperstein, G. N., Romano, N., Mohler, A., & Parker, R. “A national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities,” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 2006, 24(1), pp. 3-9.

<sup>iv</sup> William F. Mabe, Jr., Maria Heidkamp, and Charyl Staci Yarbrough, “Evaluation of the Bridges to Business Program: Final Report,” John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University, February 2012, pp. 1-2 and 17.