

Getting corporations ready to recruit workers with disabilities

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Wells Fargo shares their strategies for the hiring, advancing, and retaining people with disabilities in the workplace. Vital to their company model is the belief that companies that have diverse customers needs a diverse workforce to serve them. A corporate culture that promotes continuous learning and develops hiring procedures that yields good employee/job matches have been the keys to success.

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1. Introduction

There are many important and valid business reasons for companies to hire people with disabilities. This is the tightest labor market in the history of our country and hiring people with disabilities increases the pool of potential workers. People with disabilities have demonstrated that they are as loyal and skilled as employees without disabilities and with appropriate training, and in some cases workplace supports, can perform the same range of jobs and work responsibilities as anyone else in the corporation. Companies that have diverse customers need a diverse workforce to serve them. Nearly one in three people will live with a disability sometime in their lifetime. Therefore, a disability will effect the vast majority of the United States population.

The fact is, it often takes more than a solid business case to convince managers that hiring people with disabilities is good for the bottom line. The power of a few success stories weaving their way through company publications and water cooler conversations can go a long ways in achieving a positive hiring climate. Yet, in order to create these successes up front, the mindsets of all parties must be shifted.

One barrier to employment for people with disabilities involves the myth regarding the prohibitive costs associated with making the workplace accessible. Even though accessibility is extremely important, surprisingly, this issue is the easiest barrier to overcome. Most workplaces can accommodate people with disabilities with minor modifications. Often times, accommodations such as: exchanging computer keyboard for another that has Braille letters, stationing someone in an office or cubicle closer to an exit, or adding a screen to a telephone will be the only modifications that are necessary. Some of the more expensive assistive technology devices will require funding, training, and support assistance. However, even in these cases, the cost of this equipment can easily be recouped when highly talented and loyal employees are retained and promoted within the corporation. Retaining talented employees will ultimately reduce the amount of money that the company has to spend on expensive recruitment programs. These funds can then be redirect to retaining and advancing a qualified workforce.

A much harder barrier to overcome is the prejudice that results from stereotypes. There are three areas that need to be taken into account when a company is preparing to address this situation. These key areas of focus are continuous learning, communication, and effective hiring practices. All three of these components are necessary to prepare managers for successfully adding an employee with a disability to an existing team.

2. Continuous learning

Continuous learning opportunities must go beyond awareness and should be a major part of any management and leadership development program. This type of training generally requires a time commitment sufficient to include case studies, group activities, and individual role playing that will allow managers to see how their own prejudices may influence their decisions.

Another area of continuous learning involves appropriate guidance in the area of etiquette when working

with employees and customers with disabilities. Answering common questions in an open and honest manner will help managers feel confident and comfortable with their skills in dealing with people with disabilities. While this is not a long-term solution for managers, it can yield many short-term benefits when managers have a forum to openly discuss common concerns. Typical questions that are commonly asked by managers and employees have included:

1. Is it OK to use the word “see” when speaking to a blind person?
2. Is leaning on an employee’s wheelchair appropriate?
3. Do I always need to sit when talking with a person in a wheelchair?

Generally, having a team member with a disability responsible for conducting these training sessions will prove to be a powerful strategy and will produce the greatest impact. In these cases the employee with a disability is the team expert and group members have an opportunity to learn in a trusted environment. An employee group exclusively for people with disabilities is not recommended because the intimate teaching opportunity that team work offers would be missed and thereby produce an unnatural addition to the existing employee group structure of a company. Additional ways to create an inclusive environment would be an agenda item for all team members to discuss and plan for within the training sessions.

Once the framework of general diversity awareness and some basics of etiquette as it relates to people with disabilities are covered, managers who have asked to recruit from a pool of workers with disabilities should get additional training. Vocational rehabilitation, local community colleges, and state Business Leadership Networks are great partners that can provide in-depth training and exposure to many employment issues. Some of the learning opportunities they offer include:

- Working with employees with disabilities to create training sessions that are real and involve simulations and discussions with current team members with disabilities and their managers.
- Learning first-hand what obstacles there are to overcome and what helps a team member with a disability and his or her manager be successful helps set the stage and develop a deeper understanding from real life case studies.
- Collaborating with the community agencies to set up mentoring relationships for the new employees.

- Creating internship opportunities that provide the prospective employee and manager a three-month training and trial-work period.
- Partnering the managers with community and human resources support throughout the pre-employment and employment period.
- Training the employees with disabilities in job skills such as computer programs and systems, company policies, and customer service as well as teaming with the community college to train in a variety of workplace readiness skills.
- Developing meeting modules for managers to take back to their teams to ready the workgroup to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for their new team member with a disability.

3. Communications

An open and ongoing communications program is critical. Managers and employees need to feel comfortable in asking questions and getting direct and honest answers. Mentoring programs that match a person with disabilities with someone else who has a similar job have proven to be very beneficial for all parties involved.

In addition to improving communications between all parties directly involved with recruiting talented employees with disabilities, equally important is the communication between senior management, other team members and departments heads throughout the broader organization. To this end, quarterly meetings with a senior manager like the CEO and the director of human resources will provide an opportunity to explain the details of the program and to gain support and approval to keep going back to the drawing board when necessary, and to celebrate successes that will ultimately keep these programs visible and supported.

Utilizing internal communication channels such as newsletters and intranet web site to showcase the opportunities and successes of the program help create an ongoing need and understanding of the work being done. Ultimately, this holistic approach ends up greasing the entire wheel for success. Without any one of these pieces, it would be hard for the programs to remain successful.

4. Hiring

Choosing the right person for the job sounds like a simple premise, but it’s not easy to achieve. Hiring tal-

Table 1
Organizational steps for the successfully hiring of employees with disabilities

Step 1	Institutionalize and make regular a recruiting process that searches for talent from the disability community (i.e. not only in tight labor market conditions).
Step 2	Build long-term relationships with community organizations committed to the employment of people with disabilities and having these relationships be seeded at all levels and in all areas within the organization (not only within the human resources function).
Step 3	Gain the continued visible and monetary support from a variety of senior managers so that if the organization's power-base shifts or re-organizes the champions and resources of the program will not be lost.
Step 4	Retain, advance and highlight successful employees within the so that new employees and managers beginning the process can have evidence that it can work in the organization.
Step 5	Continuously reinforce learning about disability issues at all levels in the organization. Training is often a one-shot deal, continuous learning is not.
Step 6	Keep communication and success stories ongoing and have the resources and structures in place to do so.
Step 7	Have a few dedicated resources, both internally and externally, to the recruiting, hiring and retaining of diverse employees to include employees with disabilities. This is a challenge for organizations that run very lean, particularly in the human resources and recruiting functions.
Step 8	Maintain and foster a work environment where it is encouraged to take risks, think outside of the box, and try new things.

ented team members is a major challenge for all managers. Initial attempts at hiring talent from the disability community may prove frustrating an unproductive. Managers must develop skills in effective interviewing techniques while remaining mindful of their own biases in order for the hiring process to be successful.

Knowing where to look for talent in the disability community is key to getting the right people in the right jobs. Often, managers do not have established networks or relationships within the community and it is through their personal networks that they often look to first when trying to fill any given position. That is why it's important to partner with community organizations that specialize in placing people with disabilities in the workplace. Local organizations such as state departments of vocational rehabilitation, community colleges, and chambers of commerce can provide invaluable support and expertise that companies can learn from and use to increase the likelihood of success. Further, by connecting managers with these organizations, the network from where they initiate their future talent searches will begin to expand.

Offering managers training in hiring and interviewing techniques and procedures that specifically include agenda items such as legal and illegal interview questions, pitfalls to avoid in the hiring/interviewing process, and ADA awareness will be important in getting the corporation ready to recruit workers with disabilities and ultimately achieve success. Yet, effective training, communications, and hiring practices are not enough. Organizations face ongoing challenges to hiring people with disabilities and by taking the additional

steps presented in the following table long lasting success will be achieved.

The first steps are often the most difficult when attempting any new venture. However, with some planning and thoughtful preparation corporations can ultimately increase the diversity of the workplace, as well as their customer-base. Critical to success will be following the steps regrading internal and external communication. Once a well designed program for recruiting and advancing employees with disabilities is in place within a corporation on-going training and continuous learning will be important at all levels of the organization.

5. Summary

Organizations willing to take on the challenges and put forth the energy and commitment to recruiting, hiring and advancing valuable employees with and without disabilities will find themselves in a position of being the employer of choice, whatever the labor market conditions. Customers are likely to respond favorably as well and that can only help shareholders and the organization's profitability. Making initiatives such as the ones outlined here successful is not only the right thing to do, it's just good business. Working long and hard to become the employer of choice in the disability community, as well as the many other facets of the community continues to be an exciting and rewarding challenge for Wells Fargo.