

Lesson One: Finding Qualified Workers with Disabilities

Employer surveys indicate that employers are often unaware of how to tap into the talent pool of people with disabilities (Campbell, Green, Unger, & Wehman, 2002). 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 80 years ago, was the first federally authorized program specifically created to serve the employment needs of people with disabilities. Today, on average, approximately 230,000 people with disabilities find employment each year with the help of the VR program in their states (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

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.

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, Western Wireless-

Cellular One and CVS/pharmacy, 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 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.

Vocational Rehabilitation Puts Dreams Within Reach

The Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) helped to prepare Debra for a career in information technology. Debra participated in an office technology-training program where she learned the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. She learned computer skills in various office software products, and DORS also arranged for Debra to obtain additional job training at Prince George's Community College. Eventually Debra accepted an administrative assistant position at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. Through DORS, Debra gained the skills she needed to live independently, work and provide for herself and her children.

You can find your VR program by visiting RSA's Web site, www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/rsa.

The VR program in my area is:

Contact Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

E-Mail: _____

Centers for Independent Living

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 people with disabilities who are eager to assume competitive, meaningful and integrated employment in businesses like yours that are seeking to hire qualified and productive workers. CILs can 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. Marketing studies of the Atlanta Paralympics revealed that even households with no disability connection felt goodwill towards companies that included people with disabilities in advertising and were more likely to buy their products (Solutions Marketing Group, 2003). 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: _____

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 RSA's Web site at www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/rsa.

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. Again, contact your local CIL by visiting www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm.

Strategy 6:

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

Building Effective Partnerships Between Local Chambers and Service Providers

The Greater Irving-Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce in Texas is an excellent example of how local chambers are used as resources to help connect people with disabilities to employment. The Greater Irving-Las Colinas Chamber has a strategic partnership with Career Design and Development Services (CDDS) that helps connect people with disabilities to the business community in the Greater Dallas-Las Colinas area. CDDS is a service provider that specializes in job training and placement for people with disabilities in the Dallas metropolitan area.

People who use CDDS' services receive career counseling, job preparation and job placement. Contact is made with employers in the community through the Greater Irving-Las Colinas Chamber, and CDDS uses the chamber's membership as a resource for networking and promotion of its services and clients.

