

Tapping New Talent for Business Success

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Employing People with Disabilities

The lack of labor-force participation of people with disabilities costs our nation's economy \$200 billion annually, representing more than the gross national product of 85% of the world's countries.

People with disabilities represent \$1 trillion in consolidated buying power.

Ads that include employees with disabilities using technology help companies to recruit a diverse workforce and encourage other employers to reach out.

Think Ability & Employment Through Telecommuting

Business has learned that well designed diversity programs can aid corporate America in recruiting and retaining workers from minority status. People with disabilities represent one of our nation's largest minorities and have the highest unemployment rate. Yet, they are typically not recognized in traditional diversity programs.

The 2/3rd rate of unemployment among people with disabilities remains constant despite survey reports from Fortune 500 CEOs indicating that 73% of the top industries across the United States are hiring people with disabilities. Of all companies with 200 or more employees, 87% have hired people with disabilities. More must be done!!

This newsletter is a joint publication of Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research & Training Center on Workplace Supports and:



FINDING LINKAGES TO EMPLOYMENT

Employment can be a great equalizer. Attitudinal issues and misinformation continue to challenge large numbers of people with disabilities and impede their entry into the labor force. SunTrust Bank, Mid Atlantic (formerly Crestar Bank) is one corporation that is breaking down these barriers. They lead by example in aggressively recruiting, training, and promoting people with disabilities. We Magazine recognized SunTrust as one of the top 10 companies in the United States employing people with disabilities.

IT'S JOBS, JOBS, JOBS

ITAC's President, John Edwards, is forecasting 2000 as the year that "telework advances from being regarded as a fringe program with too much time on its hand to becoming a mainstream management strategy." This is good news for people with disabilities because with the availability of new technologies, the people you work with, not where you or they are located, is more important in determining career paths. Movement of information rather than people will be most important in the new work environment.

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Transitioning from the Industrial Age...

The terms telecommuting and telework can be used somewhat interchangeably. Telecommuting, the earlier term, focused almost exclusively on the commuting aspect. Telework embraces a progressive trend across a variety of positions to include: telemedicine, distant learning, and e-commerce. The focus with telework is how work is done in today's high-tech atmospheres.

Work is transitioning from the Industrial Age mentality of "How many widgets did you produce?" to focusing on the quality of information exchanged. In many jobs, employees do not have to be in direct sight of supervisors to produce effectively. Employees in telework situations involving writing, reporting, and analyzing information may not be as productive in a corporate cubical as they are in a home office setting, with less distractions and interruptions.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND TELEWORK

The range of disabilities represented among telecommuters is varied. Multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, respiratory and heart conditions, and other disabilities that limit mobility are common among home-based workers. Other disabilities that may make home-based employment a necessity include asthma and allergies, as well as temporary and permanent medical conditions that are changing or progressive in nature.

While new high-tech positions are being created, many transitional job tasks are also well suited for off-site work. Typically, these tasks involve personal computers and/or phone usage. Examples of off-site work include word processing, customer service, programming, accounting, billing, claims processing, data entry, dispatching, editing, filling orders, researching, report writing, and scheduling.



A Minneapolis project with United Way provides an excellent illustration of how traditional on-site jobs are being converted into telework opportunities. The project began with employees with disabilities providing after-hours and weekend phone coverage for a Minneapolis crisis and information referral line called First Call for Help. Seven employees were provided with a computer and a phone line, and all worked from their homes during different shifts. Adding a telecommuting option to this job provided the program administration with an increased number of qualified applicants who otherwise would not have been interested or able to commute into the city late at night. Any business that provides customer service information may be receptive to implementing telecommuting to better serve their customers.

Pat Jamison, Information Referral Specialist, FirstCall for Help

Pat has worked in this position for 2.5 years, 30 hours per week

BENEFITS OF TELEWORK IN A CORPORATE DIVERSITY PROGRAM

The Washington Post reported that telework and flexible work hours were ranked as the top two benefits among information workers (1999). Large companies such as TRW and Merrill Lynch fully advertise the fact that they espouse telework in order to recruit talent. Two Minnesota hospitals report that they recruit over 50% of potential employees because they offer telework. Workers with and without disabilities are seeing an increased need to decrease commute time and balance their work and home lives. This need is being addressed by employers as they develop either part or full time telework options for recruiting and retaining employees.

While telework may be seen as a workplace option that primarily serves employees' needs, nearly all telecommuting programs are established to fill employer's needs. Benefits to employers interested in recruiting people with disabilities would include:

BENEFITS OF TELEWORK

1. Retain valuable employees who become disabled, thereby lowering employee recruitment and training costs.
2. Respond to a particular employee's medical situations without losing productivity; keep morale high and retain employee loyalty.
3. Fill positions with qualified applicants with disabilities who have trouble accessing reliable transportation in positions that have been hard to fill due to hours or corporate locations.
4. Provide new employment opportunities in rural settings where rates of unemployment are high for people with disabilities, resulting in economic growth.
5. Expand corporate diversity programs.

QUALITY TELEWORK PROGRAMS

Perhaps the most important issue related to telework and the inclusion of people with disabilities is the concern about isolation. All telecommuters may suffer from isolation, but for employees with disabilities, the problem may be more acute if they experience limited community interaction. Employers should adopt specific policies and procedures that prevent the employee from feeling disconnected from the firm's organizational culture.

Over 80% of telecommuting starts on a part-time basis, 1 to 3 times per week. The employee is not isolated because they go to the office the other days of the work week. Even if employees telecommute full-time, they are expected to be present at staff meetings and to interact frequently with coworkers or members of their team. In a project initiated by the Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education, four employees with chronic disabilities worked as telecommuting customer service representatives (CSRs) with Dataserv. These employees dispatched maintenance requests to technical engineers throughout the United States. They were required to come to the corporate site for retraining and regular team meetings. These individuals proved to be valuable in providing backup and expanded customer coverage for the company.

CHRONIC OR CHANGING DISABILITIES

For people who experience chronic or changing disabilities, telecommuting may be an excellent way to assist them to both find employment and remain employed. As disability symptoms fluctuate, individuals can preserve their stamina, thus remaining a healthier and more reliable employee. By eliminating daily commutes and reducing fatigue issues, telecommuting is a strategy to assist employers maintain productivity, while also serving as a long-term job retention support.

COMPANY EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

Precision Tune hired individuals to perform customer service follow-up calls for several locations in the Twin Cities. Employees with disabilities worked out of their homes 20 to 30 hours per week. This small company wanted to implement a customer follow-up service and found an innovative way to accomplish this business goal.

SERVICE 800 has over 100 customer service representatives who all work from their homes. Many have chronic or changing disabilities. These telecommuters conduct customer satisfaction calls for contracts the company has with large technology service vendors. One such employee experiences daily chronic pain. Telecommuting has helped her incorporate appropriate breaks to maintain her health. All employees are connected via modem to receive customer follow-up lists and are assigned projects on a weekly or monthly basis. Customer response feedback forms are sent back to the company regularly, allowing supervisors to monitor quality and productivity.



Judy Johnson, Secretary, RESOURCE, Inc.

Judy has been with RESOURCE, Inc. for nine years.

Resource, Inc. -- Secretary -- Judy Johnson works for this nonprofit organization as a home-based secretary. She splits her time between two programs with responsibilities for database management, mailings, and handling customer calls and orders. Judy experiences a disability related to fatigue and pain. Working from home enables her to manage and maintain her health. If Judy worked at the corporate office, her two-hour commute would exclude her from this employment opportunity. Communication is maintained by attending regular staff meetings and daily contact via e-mail and voice mail. The company provides office equipment and pays for a dedicated phone line and voice mail.

EMPLOYER CONCERNS

When implementing telecommuting arrangements, employers often experience a wide range of concerns. Typical concerns include maintaining communications, measuring performance, and safety issues. The following table presents some of these important issues with corresponding solutions for success.

CONCERNS

Maintaining Communication with Supervisors and Coworkers -

Telework forces a work group to improve the quality of communications

Managing Telecommuting Employees - Managing by sight doesn't necessarily work better than managing from afar.

Safety & Liability Risks - The employer is ultimately responsible for providing a safe and ergonomically sound workplace for teleworkers.

SOLUTIONS

- ◆ Face-to-face meetings are planned with an agenda.
- ◆ Action items are defined.
- ◆ Social interactions are initiated and planned.
- ◆ Voice and e-mail checks are needed and can be used as a communication vehicle for project based work and administration.
- ◆ Business rationale for doing tasks a specific way is conveyed because it is important for teleworkers to see and understand the "big picture".
- ◆ Managing performance requires defining the deliverable and their effect on customer satisfaction.
- ◆ Response time, quality of correspondence, and deadlines are measures that must be clearly defined.
- ◆ Productivity is the accurate exchange and understanding of information.
- ◆ Combine project-based measures with task-based measures of performance to allow greater flexibility in meeting customer needs.
- ◆ Employers may establish guidelines for a remote office setup that are in compliance with company policies.
- ◆ An agreement between the company and teleworker can state that the employer is not responsible for third party injuries that occur in the home office.
- ◆ The agreement may indicate the employer's property is not to be used by other household members and is designated for business use only.
- ◆ Workers compensation injuries that occur during the course of work should be covered by the company.
- ◆ Comprehensive telework policies that include parameters for dependent care, employee and company safety responsibilities, office setup, security, and work schedule will help to minimize risk for the company.

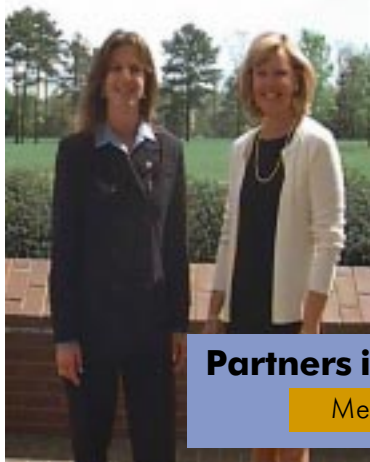
SunTrust Bank, Mid Atlantic (formerly Crestar Bank)

QUALIFIED APPLICANTS NEED ONLY TO APPLY

One of SunTrust, Mid Atlantic's most satisfying programs involves telecommuters. In partnership with the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) who provides assistance in analyzing job requirements and finding qualified applicants, the bank has hired over four dozen people with disabilities in the past year.

When SunTrust finds a qualified candidate -- with or without a disability -- who can't easily get to a workplace location, the bank's innovative telecommuting program comes into play. People are hired, trained and allowed to work from their homes, communicating with their supervisors, colleagues, and with customers by telephone, fax, and e-mail. The bank's customer service call center represents the company's largest telecommuting program.

Telecommuting employees are provided with appropriate training, and equipment including: a personal computer with modem, a remote digital extender, a telephone headset adapter, dedicated phone lines to support equipment, and other necessary office supplies. Home-based telecommuting offices must meet ergonomic standards such as good lighting, suitable work surface, adequate connections for telephones, etc., and low traffic areas to avoid distractions, and background noises.



Meg O'Connell, former Assistant Vice President of Disability Services with SunTrust in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the individuals behind this successful program. Ms. O'Connell credits this success to her close working relationship with Virginia's state rehabilitation service agency. This partnership has allowed SunTrust to make advances in the use of technology to attract customers, recruit, train, and accommodate employees. She explains: "The investment is paying off. In years to come, I know that it will come back to us many times over."

Partners in Employment

Meg O'Connell, formerly with Crestar & Dana Rosanelli, Va. DRS



Chris Harmon works for SunTrust as a banking specialist. It is Chris' responsibility when account holders call in to an 800 number to give them information regarding their bank accounts, fix small problems, or connect the customer with the appropriate individual.

It took Chris seven years to get his life together after an accident which resulted in a spinal cord injury. He remembers the day that his doctor told him he could go "up or down" and he needed to

Chris Harmon, Banking Specialist

Chris has been with SunTrust for two years.

make that choice -- Chris decided to go "up." He said that talk with his physician gave him the motivation to pursue employment and a career. He has now been employed by SunTrust for two years. Chris says that his life has changed dramatically since he began working. He has more confidence and is proud of his accomplishments. When telecommuting became an option for his department, Chris jumped at the opportunity. Today, Chris telecommutes three days per week and goes into the office the remaining two days.

Manager's Corner....

If a manager has never hired or worked with a person with a disability, questions may come to mind. These unanswered questions can create hesitation in hiring applicants with disabilities. This column will be a regular feature in this newsletter and is intended to answer questions, present facts, and share strategies for recruiting and retaining employees with disabilities. Frequently asked questions about people with disabilities telecommuting are presented below.

Question & Answers

QUESTION #1

Q Do the requirements for a telecommuting program change when employees with disabilities join the program?

A Essentially, the requirements will remain the same. Successful telecommuting programs begin by addressing five major areas of concern. First, the job task must be able to be performed off-site and without significant face-to-face interaction with other employees. Second, the supervisor must be willing to monitor results rather than directly observe an employee. Third, there must be an establishment of work standards and measurement of worker productivity. Fourth, the issue of equipment and the ability to maintain company security while transferring data electronically from a remote location. Finally, attention must be paid to the worksite to determine if the site and the equipment (devices, hardware, and software) are conducive to completing work assignments.

QUESTION #2

Q Are there procedures or policies that employers should consider prior to employees with disabilities joining a company's telecommuting program?

A Yes, usually additional issues may need to be addressed. Isolation represents one of the most important issues. All telecommuters may experience some form of isolation, but for employees with disabilities, this issue may be more acute. Employers may want to adopt specific policies that require frequent communication and periodic company visits, thereby assisting the employees in maintaining a strong connection with the company while the employer ensures that the organizational work culture extends to off-site locations.

QUESTION #3

Q Could you share examples of specific procedures or actions that employers could impose to ensure that all telework employees, including employees with disabilities feel connected with the company?

A Yes, here are a few examples:

- ◆ Mandatory participation in on-site staff meetings and training sessions.
- ◆ Limit telecommuting to a specific number of days/week/month.
- ◆ Require teleworkers to communicate via e-mail or telephone a minimum number of times per day/week.
- ◆ Develop employment support networks among teleworkers.
- ◆ Create accessible telecenters for groups of teleworkers with and without disabilities.

QUESTION #4



What if an employee with a disability cannot come to the central work site on a regular basis?



For individuals with significant disabilities who also experience transportation barriers, work might need to be taken to their home-site. One organization sends a courier daily to six different home-based telecommuters to deliver new work assignments and to pick-up completed ones. All six telecommuters live within a 25-mile radius of the central office site.

QUESTION #5



What if an injury occurs at the remote work site?



Injuries are covered by workers' compensation laws just as if the injury occurred at the central office location. Telecommuters are responsible for maintaining safe working conditions. Some employers ask employees interested in telecommuting to provide a photograph of their intended worksite as part of the application for telecommuting. If an injury occurs during the course of work at home, employers may insist that supervisors have the right to make on-site inspections at mutually agreed upon times. Most employers exclude injuries to a telecommuter if they occur outside the designated work area at a telecommuter's residence or outside the agreed upon work hours. Only 10% of employers reported that insurance, liability, or legal issues are limiting telecommuting within their organization.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Jane Anderson is the Executive Director of the Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education, Minneapolis, a consultant group that provides managers with information and strategies for successful implementation of telework. She can be contacted at:

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or

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ITAC (The International Telework Association & Council) ITAC's mission is to serve as the primary resource of information, education, standards, and advocacy on telecommuting and telework. This organization can be contacted at:

(202) 547-6157 VOICE -- (202) 546-3289 FAX,

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This newsletter, "Tapping New Talent for Business Success" has been bundled in groups of 25 and can be purchased for \$9.95. If you are interested in receiving additional newsletters please send your request to the editor:

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 - *SunTrust Bank, Mid Atlantic (formerly Crestar Bank)*
 - *Managers Corner....Ask the HR Expert*
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