

# Organizational Factors at Cascade Engineering that Facilitate Successful Job Retention



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**Authors:** Rochelle V. Habeck, Ph.D.  
and  
Colleen Head Rachel, Ph.D.

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace  
Supports and Job Retention



# Table of Contents

Characteristics of the Business .....	1
General Retention Strategies .....	1
Favorable Organizational Culture.....	1
Policies and Programs for Employee Retention .....	3
Maintaining Health and Productivity .....	9
Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Preventing Disease.....	9
Identifying and Preventing Job Related Health Risks .....	10
Early Identification and Intervention for Issues Impacting Productivity and Attendance .....	11
Managing Injuries, Health Impairments and Disability in the RTW Process.....	12
Accommodating Newly Hired Employees with Disabilities .....	13
Analysis of Factors Facilitating Successful Job Retention .....	14

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BUSINESS

Cascade Engineering is located in Grand Rapids, Michigan with partner operations in other states and internationally. The work-force currently numbers 465 at the main campus facilities, down from 900 in 2000. Cascade began as primarily a plastics molding operation serving the automotive industry, but has diversified into injection molding, nanocomposites and renewable energy. Cascade describes itself as a multi-business manufacturer and marketer, supporting multiple brands in various markets including automotive, truck, solid waste/recycling, industrial, furniture and renewable energy. Cascade headquarters is LEED EB Platinum certified and an impressive demonstration of commitment to sustainable work operations and environmentally friendly work environments. (See [www.cascadeng.com](http://www.cascadeng.com)).



## GENERAL RETENTION STRATEGIES

### Favorable Organizational Culture

Fred Keller, the CEO of Cascade, founded the organization in 1974 on the premise that it is possible to run a business that cares about people and still make money, and that people who are treated with dignity and respect are more productive.



“We believe that an effective organizational culture is one in which the employees know they are valued and respected as human beings and are invited to contribute their talents and skills in meaningful ways to the success of an organization, and that creating such a culture is the foundation of a sustainable future”.

The CEO, described as “having a heart for people”, does not operate by mandates, but through informal power and employee loyalty. When a problem is identified, the CEO will typically stimulate interest in finding a solution by saying, “I would like to see if we could...” Employees refer in good humor to these subtle challenges as BHAGS (big hairy audacious goals).



*"Sustainable enterprises are those which do business in a way that is conscious of resources and communities, and how shared support systems can create success for companies, society and individuals alike."*

*"Why would I retire? I'm having too much fun."*

*"To build a business that lasts over time – a truly sustainable business – you need to attract and retain the best people for your company."*

Fred Keller, Chairman and  
CEO of Cascade Engineering,  
2003

The company's goal is to achieve a sustainable "Triple Bottom Line" of financial, social and environmental outcomes, and achievements are measured in each area to chart progress toward becoming a sustainable business. Human capital is viewed as the basis for the company's ability to attain each of these outcomes. Cascade's organizational leaders believe social capital is created when the company and the community engage each other to find mutually beneficial solutions to common problems. Cascade believes that its efforts to help build strong communities – with employees who feel fulfilled and secure – will have a powerful, long-term impact on the company's growth. "Sustainable enterprises are those which do business in a way that is conscious of resources and communities, and how shared support systems can create success for companies, society and individuals alike."

The culture is consistently viewed to be open, to value people and diversity, to foster creativity and innovation, to tolerate mistakes and to value learning. "To foster creativity, you have to be willing to hear all points of view." They work to balance continuous improvement (incremental change) with creating something unique (breaking with current practice). "We have a 'try it' philosophy; and ask 'is there a different way'?" The elements of the culture are articulated in various documents and operationalized in the practices they use to develop ideas, solve problems and run the business. The culture is viewed to be pervasive throughout the campus facilities. The elements of the company culture and the programs and practices that sustain them are offered to the partner sites, but not mandated.

The company culture was operationalized in the late 90s, after a walk out to demonstrate that employees did not feel involved or informed in a management decision. Now, the culture is intentionally maintained as part of the job assignment of a senior leader, whose job is to create a culture people love to work in. As stated by a senior manager who will be eligible soon for retirement, "Why would I retire? I'm having too much fun."

The company culture is included in the extensive orientation that all employees receive, which begins with a catered lunch on the first day with a senior leader of the company. Managers and supervisors are trained extensively in the habits of effective and enlightened leaders and taught how to create a high level of trust and positive relationships. Managers can be held accountable for failing to uphold the culture, in part through feedback from employee surveys conducted every few years. These data are also analyzed by all types of employee groupings to see if the culture is negatively impacting certain

groups. Items that receive the three lowest ratings are discussed in focus groups and become goals with specific action steps and reassessment. For example, “Diversity Theatre” (described later in this document) was created out of the company’s response to such an item.

Innovation is highly valued and encouraged by making it acceptable to make mistakes. Cascade is described by its employees as a learning organization, using an innovative solutions model in its problem solving process that relies on an open culture, allows failure, involves participation with as much diversity as possible, and where the undiscussables are discussed. The emphasis on learning is evident in the extensive orientation, in the articulated pathways for career development in each job area that list the identified competencies for advancing to higher levels and the learning opportunities to acquire them, and in the commitment of management to talent development and organization development.



## **Policies and Programs for Employee Retention**

“To build a business that lasts over time – a truly sustainable business – you need to attract and retain the best people for your company.” (Fred Keller, chairman and CEO of Cascade Engineering, 2003).

Cascade has identified the following elements as part of its effort to be an employer of choice: people oriented culture, enlightened leadership, growth opportunities for employees, meaningful work, job security, competitive compensation and benefits, social responsibility (organizational pride), and policies and procedures that support continuity of the culture.

People are attracted to the company for its compensation and benefits and growth opportunities. Wages are set fairly and are competitive with the labor market, although less so with the industry for very experienced and skilled technical positions. Benefits are extensive, flexible, and equitable for all levels of employees. Employees are educated about the cost of benefits and health care as a component of the company’s financial status, and share 20% of the cost of their benefits (medical, dental, life).

*"The reason I've stayed here so long is that Fred truly believes in the work-family balance. There is a lot of flexibility that we offer employees – not just for those on salary, it's for everybody. If you work out a solution where someone can cover for you, we will consider it."*

*"Because we embrace diversity, we are more prepared to embrace the global challenge of different points of view, which will allow us to enjoy new and interesting perspectives that provide us with deeper levels of understanding and insight...."*

"The reason I've stayed here so long is that Fred truly believes in the work –family balance. There is a lot of flexibility that we offer employees – not just for those on salary, it's for everybody. If you work out a solution where someone can cover for you, we will consider it." When employees have performance or attendance problems, there are many avenues for addressing the needs and problems identified. When problems continue despite supports provided, the performance management process provides clear guidance. Employees who reach a certain level of performance problem are considered at a Job Decision and receive a mandatory referral to the EAP for assistance. "Sometimes we go too far (in trying to change behaviors), but we know the cost of replacement."

New production employees come into the organization through a contracted staffing agency and must complete at minimum a successful 90 day trial work period and a validated assessment before being considered for a permanent position. The company developed "Work Ramping Orientation (WRO)", a 20-hour educational experience for all new employees covering a variety of topics. The intent is to help employees learn about the factors that will make them successful at Cascade Engineering, including how to achieve cultural expectations, appreciate diversity and work safely. The orientation program extends for one week and addresses the company's culture, diversity awareness, generational poverty and the hidden rules of the middle class (see below), safety training, and Keys to Success, based on Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Successful People. The number of hours worked per day increases on a graduated basis (work ramping) to facilitate successful adjustment to work tolerance and productivity expectations.

Cascade provides an organized system for learning, talent development and growth. The core competencies (including the culture, vision, values and mission, how employees are selected, developed, assessed and rewarded) comprise the foundation of learning and advancement at Cascade, with expectations for mastery of self, relationships, performance and vision delineated for all employees and at each level of leadership. Assessment tools and development programs are specified for advancement of competencies at each level. The Talent Management group provides learning opportunities that are strategic elements in a structured, planned series to learn and then apply new skills, creating value through increased competence of the individual and the organization. Using a development system that is based on "Pay for Contribution", production employees are provided access to a variety of educational resources and opportunities, but advancement to higher levels of employment is based on skill audits and performance rather than simply attending educational activities. A visible "line of

sight” career path has been identified for advancement from every job and is open to every employee.

Much training is provided to develop the interpersonal and managerial skills of front line supervisors and managers. This includes monthly leadership forums, “you make the call” discussions of how to handle critical incidents, harassment training, and how to recognize employee problems and handle them appropriately, and topical trainings provided by the Employee Assistance Center.

The goals of the company are made clear in multiple communications and formats to all employees. The performance management process is based on the general and specific competencies and assessments delineated for each job. Employees are very well informed about the expectations for their work. Standard work processes exist for all areas and jobs, but there is an open process for change that is driven by employees. For example, in one manufacturing unit, a board is mounted to collect ideas from employees for innovations and improvements. Over 1500 ideas were implemented last year. “Employees are not afraid to speak or use their minds.” In addition to the employee survey, opportunities for feedback are provided on the work floor and access to upper management is provided when requested. Although communication is open, some job insecurity and lower morale are reported currently due to recent downsizing.



As a result of the recognition Cascade has received for its successful culture and best-practice techniques, they receive more requests for sharing their strategies as a preferred employer than they can accommodate in their regular work. QUEST was formed as a separate business unit to take highly successful elements of Cascade’s programs that have supported employees to be successful in work and in the community and help other organizations enhance their performance in these areas (corporate culture, leadership, diversity management, safety, and environmental management). “We have always had great social capital programs that helped the community; now we are trying to make them work for the company. We do what’s right and make it good business.”

**DIVERSITY.** “...[D]iversity is truly a business opportunity that can provide our company with a competitive advantage and a full spectrum of innovative thinking. It can also help us thrive in an increasingly global market, where we are confronted with people



*"Cascade has been the recipient of numerous awards in recognition of its accomplishments in diversity. The company's diversity mission is for every employee to know they are respected and valued as a person."*

*"Cascade is not a leader; it is the leader."*

and customs with which we may not be familiar. Because we embrace diversity, we are more prepared to embrace the global challenge of different points of view, which will allow us to enjoy new and interesting perspectives that provide us with deeper levels of understanding and insight....We have a great group of people at Cascade Engineering, and it is our diversity of ideas and experiences that distinguishes us in technology, creativity, innovation, waste reduction and countless other areas. We will continue to embrace and celebrate the differences that energize our people and help us succeed as a company. Many minds working together as one company are a recipe for unlimited potential".  
(Fred Keller, CEO)

Cascade has been the recipient of numerous awards in recognition of its accomplishments in diversity. The company's diversity mission is for every employee to know they are respected and valued as a person. Cascade has a senior management position dedicated to workforce diversity and to managing partnerships with community organizations that can provide no-cost services to support and address barriers to success that some associates face. Diversity training is part of every new employee's orientation. (See <http://www.questsustainable-solutions.com/lit/docs/DiversityCulture.pdf>)

Diversity Theatre originated in 1999 when Cascade partnered with Alice Kennedy to create a method of bringing awareness exercises to the work environment to help employees exercise respect and sensitivity in everyday situations. Since then, the program has expanded its reach beyond the work environment to non profits, schools and public events to impact many adults and youths throughout Michigan. (See <http://www.diversitytheatre.com>)

Currently within Cascade, the program is provided as a 3-hour diversity theatre entitled Beyond Culture and Gender, and "is intended to help employees understand the behaviors and language that could be offensive or disrespectful to co-workers and thereby causing conflict, dissension, loss of productivity and turnover. Using actors and actresses to illustrate real life scenarios in the workplace, participants engage with the actors to identify what was seen or heard that may be considered disrespectful or offensive by others. The theatre also presents an opportunity for participants to review how to get conflicts in the workplace resolved." (Disability is not currently covered in these scenarios.)

Through its Quest business unit offerings, Diversity Management is marketed as a course to help employers and their employees see diversity as an asset that "can help your organization become an Employer of Choice by creating a positive work environment in which all employees feel valued. This has implications for recruitment, reten-

tion, job satisfaction, commitment and morale.” Cascade believes that more powerful and effective teams result from increasing and using the differences among its members - in backgrounds, experiences, educations, ideas, and beliefs; and that diversity can enrich your life and your business and create solutions that are more original, effective, and longer lasting ([www.quest-sustainablesolutions.com](http://www.quest-sustainablesolutions.com)).



“They do diversity with a small “d” here – it is very broadly defined here. If anyone can keep it going in hard business times, Cascade will.” “We go overboard. We focus on personal characteristics more than qualifications. But if we didn’t, we wouldn’t get all the ideas we do. Because of our reputation, when we do post a position, we get many more diverse applicants because people know we are open.” “Cascade is not a leader; it is the leader.”

**WELFARE TO CAREER (W2C).** This very innovative and nationally recognized program was started at Cascade in 1998. At that time, Cascade needed workers and the CEO was interested in responding to initiatives to employ people on welfare. After attending training in 1996 that addressed healing structural racism, he was compelled to do more to increase diversity and create a culture of inclusion within Cascade. He approached the Department of Human Resources and offered to provide employment opportunities.

Initially, most people who were hired from welfare into Cascade failed to meet expectations (especially attendance) and were gone within the first two weeks. After that, management and supervisors were trained about generational poverty and barriers that interfere with retaining employment (A Framework for Understanding Poverty, Ruby K. Payne). They also developed training about the hidden rules of the middle class as part of new employee orientation.

A partnership was developed with the Department of Human Services to provide an on-site case worker as a Retention Specialist to provide immediate help with personal and life needs that would otherwise jeopardize attendance (e.g., informal arrangements for child care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, and domestic violence). The cost of the position was shared 50-50 between DHS and Cascade, with the rationale for Cascade of reducing replacement costs from turnover and improving productivity, and for DHS of serving a number of cases efficiently on location while achieving the policy goal of transitioning to self-sufficiency. The services of the retention specialist are also available to other Cascade employees. As the number of employees coming in through

*"Over the years, Cascade Engineering has continued to develop a culture of inclusion and as a result of this effort we are able to have one of the most successful Welfare to Career programs in the nation."*

*"At other companies [we serve], only one or two people may have the vision. But Cascade sees the whole person and has a shared vision and culture."*

DHS has decreased due to downsizing, the retention specialist is providing these services to clients employed by other employers who participate in the SOURCE (see below).

From its inception, the CEO insisted that the program be called Welfare to Career (W2C), to connote that career development from entry level positions is a necessary part of successful employment. Thus, Cascade provides the opportunities, resources, and support to achieve advancement and success. For example, any employee who requests a second personal loan (which the company provides as a benefit) is required to take a course on money management (offered internally after being trained through MSU Extension Service). If a W2C employee is late or absent, electronic notice is sent to the retention specialist who makes a warm call to identify and solve problems as needed.

"Over the years, Cascade Engineering has continued to develop a culture of inclusion and as a result of this effort we are able to have one of the most successful Welfare to Career programs in the nation." They currently have over 40 clients working in the company with a monthly retention rate of 97%. This is higher than the national turnover average for middle class employees. Cascade has found it can handle as much as 25% of its employees from the W2C population and successfully sustain the organizational culture. At one point, the client number reached just over 100.

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Company leaders attribute the success of the program to (1) a collaboration and partnership with the State of Michigan, and (2) the education of key leaders in the company on the principles of overcoming generational poverty. These two key elements resulted in several program changes that led to the design of their nationally recognized, successful program that has moved people off welfare and kept them working:

- A caseworker was placed on site;
  - A new assessment was created that identified barriers to employment;
  - Barriers to employment were eliminated;
  - Early intervention insured workers were held accountable for behavior changes;
  - New orientation program was designed to clarify expectations; and
  - Policies were developed and implemented to support employee success.
- 

They identify the benefits to the company and to the public as including an understanding and ability to utilize this untapped labor pool; more open positions filled; a high retention rate of employees in the

program; a positive reputation and relationship with the community and employee pride; economic self-sufficiency for program participants; and money saved by the State of Michigan. See [http://www.cascadeng.com/pdf/quest/Quest\\_W2C.pdf](http://www.cascadeng.com/pdf/quest/Quest_W2C.pdf)

Hearing of this success, other area employers approached Cascade to adopt this model. The SOURCE was formed in Grand Rapids as a not-for-profit support organization to help employees sustain employment, receive training to enhance their employment, and help employees advance in jobs within and across participating companies. This is achieved in a collaborative effort involving private industry, government agencies, and area non-profit organizations. The SOURCE leverages resources for the community and its employees, utilizes all available employee supports to sustain employment in all segments of the community, and assists under- and unemployed residents in maintaining employment and moving to economic self-sufficiency. The SOURCE offers on-site DHS case workers who are available to employees and families of member companies to solve employment and home-related problems, provides satellite office space for other community providers, and training space for work and community-based classes to resolve employee and family issues. See [www.grsource.org](http://www.grsource.org)

Currently, the DOL has funded the West Michigan Strategic Alliance for \$15 million to implement 12 innovations for the regional workforce as part of the WIRED initiative – Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development. WIRED is intended to encourage regional communities to partner together and leverage their private and public resources to develop a more highly skilled workforce to attract new economic development and employers. Expanding the SOURCE from a community to a regional resource is one of these innovations.



## **MAINTAINING HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY**

### **Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Preventing Disease**

Cascade uses an external contracted provider (ProPerWell) for wellness services that are delivered at the work site. The contracted staff function is part of Cascade's Working for Wellness program (WOW). They see wellness at Cascade not so much as a program but as part of its culture, embodying Cascade's commitment to its employees. "At other companies [we serve], only one or two people



may have the vision. But Cascade sees the whole person and has a shared vision and culture.”

The multidisciplinary consultant staff comes regularly to the work floor on all shifts to develop relationships with employees and encourage their involvement. They see themselves as focused at the grass roots level of behavior and view that as compatible with Cascade’s philosophy. They focus on cardiac disease risk reduction, preventative job coaching to reduce musculoskeletal injuries, and fun activities to get more employees participating and interested in wellness. The program is not evaluated in quantitative terms. They view themselves as part of the company’s efforts to achieve its overall goals.

The provider adapts the program goals for the W2C employees who are focused on getting their basic needs stabilized. Where typical wellness programs are geared toward self-actualizing, here they work toward pre-awareness as the goal. They may focus on walking and assist the employees in maintaining a personal activity log.

### **Identifying and Preventing Job Related Health Risks**

Cascade has an award winning safety program and accident record achieved though a monumental turnaround over the last decade. In the late 1990s, their incident rate was 50%, roughly 4 times the rate of similar companies. By 2004, the incident and lost/restricted workday rates for Cascade were 5.7 and 2.5 respectively, representing a 25 and 40 percent reduction from year-end 2003 rates. To ensure that its safety commitment extends to the company’s contractors, Cascade qualifies contractors on the basis of safety and requires them to participate in a training program.

After hiring safety staff 10 years ago to improve their safety performance, one of their first actions was to invite in the SET (Safety, Education and Training) Consultant from MIOSHA to provide recommendations and technical assistance (despite the misgivings of some about inviting in a governmental compliance agency for help). Staff began by implementing safety teams, a hazard communication system, evacuation drills and other basics that were not present. “Quality improvement addresses prevention, surveillance, rework and scrap. Applying quality standards to employee management, we had too little invested in prevention and too much in later stages.” Now, engineering considers safety implications at the very earliest stages of product design.

Cascade is now a multi-award winning company in its safety performance. Cascade is currently working to meet the highest designation possible from MIOSHA (Rising Star and then MVPP) and to maintain

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it. Best practice safety-related policies and practices were mentioned in the interviews of employees from all levels of the company as being part of Cascade's approach: e.g., leaders review safety performance in department meetings and convey importance and support of safety, open communication, culture that values people, staff given authority for safety action, training provided before new duties assumed, membership on safety teams rotated biannually, safety performance as part of bonus determination, accountability and incentives lined up at all levels to accomplish outcomes.

Preventing injuries with new employees is addressed in Cascade's innovative approach to employee orientation. Work Ramping began with requested components from safety staff before new employees start work. Analysis of their safety incident experience had shown that many new employees were not physically ready to assume full duty. They developed a work hardening approach with their new hires, by increasing hours in stages, and allowing no overtime at first.



Cascade's environmental focus includes maintaining a safe and secure work environment for its employees and requiring its contractors to meet these safety standards. Cascade also improves safety by identifying and reducing risks through the biomechanical and ergonomic assessments conducted by its wellness providers at the work site, including individualized adjustments and exercises as needed.

### **Early Identification and Intervention for Issues Impacting Productivity and Attendance**

Cascade's employee assistance program, referred to as the Cascade Assistance Program (CAP), provides customized services to employees through an external provider (EAC, Employee Assistance Center), with whom it has partnered since 1984. Cascade is vigilant in its proactive utilization of the CAP to intervene early for indicators of behavioral health needs and performance concerns. Most referrals to CAP are confidential self-referrals that are addressed with assessment and consultation. About 20% are referred on for additional services outside the CAP. The CAP is also used frequently when employees receive a job jeopardy rating. In these cases, a required referral is made to the CAP and a report comes back to the workplace. Employees who request an emergency company loan for the second or third time are referred to CAP for counseling and must attend the "Dollar Sense" class.

*"They hire people with obstacles that others wouldn't, people with multiple barriers. This requires awareness in managers and HR that increased support and resources will be needed. Employee assistance services are one tool they draw on – other firms only have this tool – but they draw on more. Their mindset is to 'retain them if we hire them.'"*

*"Cascade partners with Goodwill to provide an off-site work hardening program with alternative and progressive work in order to transition successfully back to Cascade."*

In addition to the trainings developed for supervisors mentioned above, EAC also develops and provides on and off-site employee-oriented training for commonly occurring issues that can impact health and productivity, including dealing with difficult people, winter blues, smoking cessation, and supervisor training in performance management. EAC also offers a web page, provides a newsletter with educational information for all Cascade employees, and distributes articles to supervisors that target their needs. There is higher than average (3%) utilization of the CAP by employees at all levels, many of whom have used CAP multiple times to provide consultation during developmental and transition stages in their lives.

*"They hire people with obstacles that others wouldn't, people with multiple barriers. This requires awareness in managers and HR that increased support and resources will be needed. Employee assistance services are one tool they draw on – other firms only have this tool – but they draw on more. Their mindset is to 'retain them if we hire them'."*

## **MANAGING INJURIES, HEALTH IMPAIRMENTS AND DISABILITY IN THE RTW PROCESS**

For non-occupational cases, Cascade partners with a third party administrator (Morningstar Health) to administer short term disability benefits and coordinate case management and disease management services. In work-related cases, Cascade partners with an occupational medicine practice (MedOne Occupational Services) as its dedicated provider for coordinated medical care and with its wellness provider (ProPerWell) to assist in return to work. Some treating physicians in the practice have spent time within the company learning the production lines and the restrictions they are able to accommodate. The wellness provider works on site with injured workers to address biomechanical issues and to provide job coaching. Cascade has achieved a world class lost work day rate of 2.78 in workers compensation, with an incident rate of 4.91, and also does well in managing costs of non-occupational cases at .5% of payroll.

The return to work process at Cascade is a well coordinated and organized team effort that addresses both work related and non-occupational causes. The process is initiated by a central Benefits case manager, and a plant-level HR representative and frontline leader are then responsible for working through any restrictions with input from the employee, utilizing their occupational medicine and ergonomic providers and case management from the TPA for assistance when

necessary. Cascade achieved a high level of return to work, and most individuals can be brought and accommodated within the expected duration.

For those cases who are not able to be accommodated at their current level of recovery with work available at the plant, Cascade partners with Goodwill to provide an off-site work hardening program with alternative and progressive work in order to transition successfully back to Cascade. Case Management continues during this process. Several people are placed in this program each year for short-term transitional work placements and assistance in returning to the workplace, which is the goal of this intervention.

Current challenges involve achieving comparable outcomes in their joint venture operations, especially in very different cultural and policy environments; and changing employee expectations about returning to modified work during recovery in short term disability. It is challenging to get employees with extended nonoccupational absences who have not been able to return to work to think it is a good thing when they are called by the TPA to go to Goodwill for modified transitional duty. As they point out, having the program is not so hard; it is achieving favorable employee attitudes about the program that is the challenge. They see the need to improve their ability to help employees adjust to new limitations when they “are thrown a curve” from an illness or injury and cannot be as they were before. They have less concern about the attendance and adjustment of people who come in with a disability, as they have already faced their challenges and are aware of them.

## **ACCOMMODATING NEWLY HIRED EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES**

Although there is no specific focus on disability in their diversity program, Cascade was awarded Employer of the Year Award in 2002 by Goodwill, Inc. When they were hiring, Cascade partnered with community rehabilitation organizations to hire several employees with disabilities including post polio, post TBI, and others. (In addition, Goodwill operated the employee cafeteria at Cascade as a training site, until recent downsizing made this too costly.) These past hires were initiated by these organizations in part because of the company’s reputation for openness to diversity in general and its positive employment conditions. Since the downturn in the company’s business volume and hiring activity, no recent hires of people with known disabilities has occurred.



*"The vision of the CEO for the company, the positive managerial style and work climate, valuing employees in the company's expressed philosophy and policies, and its practices of involvement and communication are tangible aspects in Cascade's operation."*

*"Their practice of offering a lot of flexibility for employees at all levels to negotiate mutually satisfactory schedule changes to accommodate personal needs makes flexible work arrangements part of the backdrop that facilitates successful disability management."*

After an employee with a disability is hired, HR representatives at the plant level are empowered to obtain job coaching services or other supports from these agencies or family members to help work out issues when new needs or problems arise, and to meet annually with case managers. Due to these ongoing efforts, retention has not been a concern with this population. Although Cascade does not currently conduct any disability related outreach efforts, there are a number of employees who were hired with disabilities in the past and have remained actively and gainfully employed at Cascade for many years. As a result, little concern was expressed about hiring employees with disabilities when openings exist in terms of their attendance and performance. But they expect this to become harder to do as work becomes more physically and/or mentally challenging.

## ANALYSIS OF FACTORS FACILITATING SUCCESSFUL JOB RETENTION

The organizational culture at Cascade, the hallmark feature of this employer organization, depicts virtually all the key components identified in our model of a favorable organizational culture for retention (i.e., a "retention-oriented culture"). The vision of the CEO for the company, the positive managerial style and work climate, valuing employees in the company's expressed philosophy and policies, and its practices of involvement and communication are tangible aspects in Cascade's operation.

As an outgrowth of the organization's culture and values, Cascade has implemented and practiced specific policies and programs that have been associated with successful employee retention (i.e., the "Preferred Employer"). Opportunities for employee development and career advancement that apply at every job level, documented expectations for every job level with criteria and a system for performance management and advancement, flexibility in making work arrangements to accommodate and support employees, mechanisms to elicit and incorporate employee feedback and ideas, and compensation that is attractive relative to the area labor market are all present and operating. Only one element in our employee retention model, informal rewards and incentives, was not clearly identified as a practice. Praise and reinforcement have been associated with job satisfaction as an element in retention. In the subsequent employee case studies, two employees did not feel appreciated or recognized for their contribution and were among the group of employees who accepted a recent buy-out option.

Program components associated with maintaining health and productivity as part of job retention are also in evidence and noteworthy at Cascade. The innovative, contractual wellness program, the turn-around safety program that is now award winning in its performance, and the well-integrated, contractual employee assistance program that is used by employees at all levels and as a resource for early intervention for many types of risks, are high quality programs that are valued and well utilized by the organization.

Similarly, program components associated with effective disability management are also present and in successful operation including early contact, timely intervention from qualified providers, coordination and communication with all the parties, case monitoring and management, consistent process for RTW, and inclusion of both occupational and nonoccupational causes of injury and illness in a single system. Accommodations are routinely made to facilitate RTW at the earliest appropriate time. The accommodation process is fairly informal, and no evidence of periodic training or technical assistance to supervisors was evident. Their practice of offering a lot of flexibility for employees at all levels to negotiate mutually satisfactory schedule changes to accommodate personal needs makes flexible work arrangements part of the backdrop that facilitates successful disability management.

In a companion project, our findings suggest that employer investments to retain employees may have implications for retaining workers who develop potentially disabling conditions. There appears to be a linkage between retention-oriented practices and disability-related outcomes, which seems to be substantiated in Cascade's successful management and retention of employees who develop disability and return to work as well as employees who are hired with an existing disability.

Those findings also indicate that hiring people with disabilities was related to including disability in diversity efforts and perceiving people with disabilities as a viable labor source for the organization. Although not focused on disability per se, the extensive commitment to diversity in all aspects of Cascade's culture and operation, including its hiring practices and support for retention, seems to provide a larger framework of actions and attitudes that results in the inclusion and retention of people with disabilities.

*“Cascade’s belief in and lived commitment to diversity as a fundamental component of their innovation and success as a company should not be underestimated as a central factor in their successful job retention of people with barriers to employment, including disability.”*

*“The CEO developed the company for the purpose of simultaneously serving economic and social ends. This social experiment is still unfolding, as the economic challenges make this delicate balance more difficult to sustain.”*

### ***Highlights to Remember from Cascade***

1. The culture of Cascade is the essential foundation upon which all of these initiatives and outcomes rest. Without these values and their intentional cultivation in the organization, it is unlikely that any specific element could be adopted and expected to accomplish its objectives effectively.
2. The story of Cascade’s Welfare to Career (W2C) program – why they did it, how it failed initially, what made it succeed ultimately, the rationale and financing of the retention specialist as a public/private partnership, retention data and outcomes achieved, the specific details about the role, functions, location and competencies of the retention specialist, and its replication among area employers (The Source) and regional economic development efforts (WIRED) merit closer consideration for their application to Vocational Rehabilitation.
3. Cascade’s belief in and lived commitment to diversity as a fundamental component of their innovation and success as a company should not be underestimated as a central factor in their successful job retention of people with barriers to employment, including disability. Studying the depths to which valuing diversity has been cultivated in all aspects of the company’s operation is necessary for anyone who wishes to implement diversity as an intervention or measure it as an explanatory variable.
4. The importance of top management as “champion” in regard to disability initiatives has often been discussed. In Cascade’s case, the CEO developed the company for the purpose of simultaneously serving economic and social ends. This social experiment is still unfolding, as the economic challenges make this delicate balance more difficult to sustain. It is important to know how this kind of leadership commitment and positive employer practices can be supported - through the provision of shared funding for costs, incentives for hiring and/or retaining employees at risk of public dependence, shifting more resources for prevention of job loss, and so forth – and sustained in the face of inevitable changes in leadership.



Cascade engineering is a unique organization with a visionary leader and extensive operational competence. Their willingness to participate in this research to facilitate learning and advance best practice is of great value and greatly appreciated.