

Employer-recommended strategies to increase opportunities for people with disabilities

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The employment rate among persons with disabilities is less than half the rate among persons without disabilities. Broad innovations are needed to reduce this disparity.

OBJECTIVE: We examined employers' perspective related to: a) challenges they face when hiring people with disabilities, b) advantages (i.e. the business case) to employing people with disabilities, and c) their recommendations for innovations in both the public disability employment services systems and their own hiring practices to increase employment of people with disabilities.

METHODS: We conducted four focus groups with a total of 74 participants. Participants were purposively sampled among Massachusetts private and public sector employers. Qualitative methods were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS: Employers identified stigma, uncertainties about applicant abilities, and the complexity of the public disability employment service system as hiring challenges, and increasing diversity, expanding talent and increasing brand loyalty as advantages to employing people with disabilities. Employers recommended establishing business-to-business networks and improving coordination across the disability employment service system to increase job opportunities for people with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS: Service system innovations and changes in employer hiring practices may increase employment among people with disabilities and have benefits to employers and companies, especially those looking to diversity their workforces.

Keywords: People with disabilities, employers, employment services, vocational rehabilitation

1. Introduction

Employers are increasingly recognizing that a diverse and inclusive workforce is critical to success in the 21st century global economy. More and more, private and public sector companies and employers are implementing diversity and inclusion efforts to attract talented workers, develop new products and services, expand their customer base and enhance customer services (Ali, 2010; Forbes Insight, 2011; Linkow, Barrington, Bruyere, Figueroa, & Wright, 2013;

U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). While past diversity efforts focused primarily on gender or race and ethnicity, contemporary approaches apply a broader definition of diversity to include dimensions such as age, religion, sexual orientation, veteran status and disability. These dimensions have not been equally addressed in companies' diversity and inclusion strategies. For example, in a recent survey of senior executives of large (>\$500 million in annual revenue) national and multi-national companies, over 80% described diversity efforts that included gender, and over 70% included ethnicity, age, and race; however, only 52% included disability as part of their efforts. Disability was most often identified by these executives as the area where improvements were needed in their diversity and inclusion efforts (Forbes Insight, 2011).

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The growing inclusion of disability in company diversity strategies is a positive development, and one that the disability employment service system could well take advantage of in attempting to reverse the consistently low employment rates among the 18 million working-age people with disabilities in the US. Data from the 2011 American Community Survey shows an employment rate of 33% for working-age people with disabilities, compared to 76% for those without disabilities (Erikson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2012). Moreover, the economic downturn that began in 2008 had a disproportionate negative impact on employment for people with disabilities (Fogg, Harrington, & McMahon, 2010; Kaye, 2010). These data notwithstanding, studies show that many people with disabilities want to work (Livermore, Goodman, & Wright, 2007). Innovations are needed on multiple fronts to increase employment for people with disabilities. As the US economy continues to recover from the recent recession, vocational rehabilitation (VR) and other disability employment service providers need to develop effective business partnerships to help employers recognize the contributions that people with disabilities can make to the workplace.

In this study, we describe findings from focus groups with employers in Massachusetts (MA) designed to identify the ongoing challenges they face when hiring people with disabilities and to explore the business case for hiring these workers. In addition, we sought to identify possible solutions to enhancing employment opportunities by asking two key questions – 1) what do employers need from the public disability employment services system, and 2) what can employers do for themselves?

1.1. Employer perspectives on hiring people with disabilities

Although people with disabilities face multiple employment barriers, one factor believed to contribute to their low employment rate is reluctance on the part of employers to hire from this pool of prospective workers. Employer attitudes towards and concerns about hiring people with disabilities have been well described in the VR literature. In a comprehensive review of the literature on employer attitudes toward people with disabilities, Unger found evidence suggesting that the type and severity of disability can impact employers' hiring decisions (Unger, 2002). Some studies suggest that employers have greater concerns about hiring individuals with invisible disabilities, such as mental

and emotional conditions, than they have about hiring people with physical disabilities, and that employers tend to have more positive views about employees with physical disabilities than those with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities (Unger, 2002). More recent studies suggest that employers may be concerned that employees with disabilities have lower productivity, higher absenteeism, lack the necessary skills or require greater supervision compared to those without disabilities (Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma, 2008; Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011).

In addition to concerns related to job performance, studies show that some employers lack awareness of people with disabilities as a potential talent pool or have difficulty finding qualified candidates with disabilities (Taylor, Krane, & Orkis, 2010). A survey of employers conducted by the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) found that while larger companies were more likely to actively recruit people with disabilities, small and mid-sized companies often lacked the information needed to recruit these workers and were unfamiliar with resources that might support them to hire and accommodate workers with disabilities, such as One-Stop Career Centers, the Job Accommodation Network, or the Employer Assistance and Resource Network (Domzal et al., 2008). In a review of research on employers' views, Luecking suggests that this lack of knowledge among employers indicates that disability employment marketing efforts have fallen short of creating awareness of people with disabilities as a viable workforce (2008).

A lack of understanding and concerns about obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) can also deter employers from recruiting workers with disabilities. Employers have expressed concerns about potential liability and the prospect of facing disability-related litigation as well as the costs associated with providing accommodations to workers with disabilities, even though research shows that most accommodations can be provided at no or relatively low cost (Domzal et al., 2008; Hernandez et al., 2008; Job Accommodation Network, 2012; Luecking, 2008). A recent study by Chan et al. (2010) found that employers with greater knowledge of the ADA and job accommodations had more positive perspectives on hiring people with disabilities than those with lower levels of knowledge. Beyond ADA-related concerns, employers have also expressed concerns about the cost of workers compensation insurance and health care coverage for workers with disabilities.

To a lesser extent, employers have also expressed general concerns related to a lack of comfort or familiarity with disabilities as well as concerns regarding the attitudes of managers, co-workers and customers (Domzal et al., 2008; Unger, 2007). Despite concerns, studies have shown that employers with experience working with individuals with disabilities have more favorable attitudes toward employees with disabilities, and display greater willingness to hire other individuals with disabilities (Hernandez et al., 2008, Luecking, 2008; Unger, 2002, 2007). Surveys of employers who have hired people with disabilities found that employers perceive workers with disabilities as easy to supervise, to have productivity levels equal to or higher than employees without disabilities, and to have low absentee rates (Hernandez et al., 2008; Kaye et al., 2011).

Research points to decidedly mixed experiences with the publicly-funded disability employment service system among employers. Public system services include those provided by state VR agencies, state-funded Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) organizations, One Stop Career Centers, and others. Some studies show that employers find employment service providers and programs to offer critical assistance in identifying qualified applicants and providing supports to those hired, and to be a good source of information about disability (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003). However, studies also suggest that employers sometimes find the complexity of the public service system confusing, are frustrated by the lack of coordination among various providers soliciting job opportunities on behalf of people with disabilities, and perceive disability employment service providers as lacking the knowledge and skills to effectively operate in a business arena. In recent years there has been an increased recognition that the system needs to develop more business-focused, “demand-side” approaches that focus on understanding employer needs and carefully matching job seekers to the demands of the workplace (Fraser, 2008; Hernandez & MacDonald, 2007; Luecking, 2008).

1.2. The Massachusetts context

Soon after assuming office in 2007, the newly-elected MA Governor issued Executive Order 478 committing the Commonwealth to improvements in the recruitment and retention of under-represented groups of people in the state’s Executive Branch workforce, including people with disabilities. In May 2008, the MA Taskforce on Employment for People with Disabilities was convened

to develop a strategic plan for the Commonwealth to become a “model employer” of people with disabilities (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2009). At a Disability Employment Summit in October 2009, the Governor reaffirmed his commitment and asked representatives of the private sector to join him and to advise him on what state government can do to support businesses to become model employers of people with disabilities. In response to the Governor, the Executive Vice President (EVP) of a leading retail company headquartered in MA made a commitment to convene business leaders to develop a set of recommendations on what businesses and government can do to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for people with disabilities in the Commonwealth.

Business leaders in MA were invited to participate in a series of discussions (referred to as “business roundtables”) to identify ongoing challenges to hiring people with disabilities and to generate actionable recommendations, with a particular focus on identifying both the supports that businesses and employers need from government and the strategies that businesses can pursue on their own to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Efforts to convene the business leaders were supported by staff and financial resources from *Work Without Limits*, a statewide initiative promoting employment for youth and adults with disabilities, funded by the MA Medicaid Infrastructure and Comprehensive Employment Opportunities Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

2. Method

2.1. Participant recruitment and characteristics

We used a purposive sampling method to recruit roundtable participants from medium to large private and public sector employers representing a range of industries, including manufacturing, biotechnology, business services, information technology, wholesale and retail, engineering, health care, human services, education, arts and culture, and government. Potential employer participants were identified through professional and business networks, and through individual employers associated with *Work Without Limits*. On behalf of the retail company EVP, we sent invitations to participate in the roundtables to approximately 75 employers. At the request of the EVP, we also invited a select group of CRP employment staff, state disability-serving agency representatives and individuals with

disabilities who served in an advisory capacity to *Work Without Limits* to help ensure that these stakeholders' perspectives would be represented during the discussion.

Seventy-four individuals participated in the roundtable discussions, including 36 men and 38 women. Fifty-one participants (69%) were employers representing 30 different companies in MA. The majority of employers were in senior leadership positions in their organizations, including Executive and Regional Vice Presidents; the remainder held mid-level management positions, such as Directors or Managers of Human Resources (HR), Diversity, Disability and Accessibility, Staffing, Recruiting, Training and Development, and Employee Relations. Sixteen participants (22%) represented CRP or state agencies, and seven participants (9%) included individuals with disabilities.

2.2. Roundtable procedures

We used a modified focus group approach to conduct four business roundtables Eastern and Central MA in early 2010. The principal way in which the roundtables varied from a standard focus group approach is that we included larger numbers of participants (15 to 23) in the roundtables than is typically used in standard focus groups (6 to 10). This allowed us to accommodate all of the employers who accepted our invitation, which was a greater number than anticipated. To manage the discussion with these larger than normal groups, we developed a very focus set of questions to guide each discussion (Morgan, 1998).

Each roundtable was hosted by the retail company EVP. The discussions were facilitated by an organizational development expert with assistance from *Work Without Limits* staff. At the beginning of each session, the facilitator introduced the purpose of the roundtable, emphasizing the confidential nature of the discussion and the desire to hear from all participants. The facilitator used the following broad questions to guide the conversation:

- What challenges and obstacles exist to hiring people with disabilities?
- What is the business case for hiring people with disabilities?
- What can state government do to support businesses to hire people with disabilities?
- What can businesses do to hire more people with disabilities?

Throughout the discussion, the facilitator used non-assumptive probes and follow-up questions to encourage participants to elaborate and provide examples from their own experiences and experiences of others they knew. The facilitator recorded participants' comments on large flip charts to assist in keeping track of the issues discussed; two *Work Without Limits* staff took detailed field notes. Each session lasted approximately 2 ½ hours. Participants were provided with breakfast or lunch, but received no monetary compensation.

2.3. Data analysis

Immediately following each roundtable, the team (host, facilitator and staff) met in a debriefing session to identify major themes that surfaced during the discussion. Flip chart notes, detailed field notes and debrief discussion notes from each roundtable were transcribed as soon as possible after each session and checked for accuracy by the facilitator and staff. We conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed data, applying a constant-comparative method (Charmaz, 1990; Mathison, 2012), which is a common approach to analyzing focus group data (Krueger, 1998). After the first roundtable, the facilitator undertook a line-by-line open coding of all transcribed materials, generating an initial set of codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using these codes, the facilitator and participating staff each reviewed and coded all transcribed material from each subsequent roundtable, identifying new themes as they emerged and comparing codes/themes across coders. Because data analysis and coding began as soon as possible immediately after each roundtable, the facilitator was able to continuously confirm and refine emerging themes with participants in later groups. Themes were organized into categories, using the framework provided by the four broad questions. The final step in the data analysis was to determine if the findings provided a genuine reflection of participants' perspectives. To do this, we invited a subset of the participating business leaders to a final extended meeting. During this 6-hour "member checking" (Maxwell, 1996) session, we asked the 13 participants to review and critique our analysis and assist us with revising our findings and generating final recommendations for a report to the Governor. This effort helped confirm the credibility of the findings.

3. Results

We summarized findings from the roundtables using the framework provided by the guiding questions.

While participants identified certain on-going challenges to hiring people with disabilities, business leaders also felt that there was a strong business case to be made for including people with disabilities in their workplaces. Participants identified several ways that government can support businesses to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities; business leaders also identified several things that they can do themselves.

3.1. Challenges to hiring people with disabilities

Participants agreed that the sometimes blatant, and at other times more subtle, stigma associated with disability creates obstacles to hiring workers with disabilities. Employers noted that some hiring managers have an immediate negative reaction to a person with a visible disability during interviews. When a manager is aware that a job candidate has a disability, the manager may focus on what the person cannot do, rather than what he or she can do. *“There’s an automatic assumption that someone’s disability is going to affect job performance, because people with disabilities have more glaring weaknesses – often their weaknesses are more apparent than other employees.”* Employers noted that job candidates themselves, as well as employment service providers working with candidates, also sometimes emphasize what the candidate cannot do. Particularly in job interviews, it is important that candidates emphasize their strengths and what they can contribute to an organization. Employers recognized that some individuals are reluctant to disclose disability for fear of facing stigma and discrimination. However, one HR director commented that *“... people with disabilities don’t want to be labeled, but sometimes they do themselves a disservice by not talking about it...”*, and, in general, employers felt that it was helpful to know if a candidate has a condition that may cause challenges or require accommodations. Employers acknowledged that subtle forms of stigma and discrimination can exist in the workplace. Coworkers may be uncomfortable with a colleague with a disability and may, consciously or unconsciously, act to undermine an individual’s success. Managers may fear saying the wrong thing and so may make missteps in providing guidance or supervision. Several employers commented that the term “disability” reinforces the expectation that someone will have challenges on the job, and expressed frustration with the assumptions created by the language of disability.

Employers also identified as barriers the perceptions that hiring a person with a disability may require more effort or that workers with disabilities may have more work-related performance difficulties than those without disabilities. Managers often face pressures to perform in the short-term, and when hiring need to find the right person who can *“hit the ground running.”* Employers noted that some managers may feel that the risk of taking action – to hire a person with a disability – is greater than the risk of doing nothing. As one employer remarked, *“There are a lot of misconceptions. Often managers feeling like hiring people with disabilities is harder, that they require more time, require more energy. Most managers feel strapped managing their current workload... this perceived added responsibility seems like too much.”* Additionally, some managers are concerned that they may face additional difficulties if an employee with a disability has performance problems. *“Some employers are afraid of the high cost of potential failure. If someone has a disability, legally they feel like it’s hard to move a person out. It’s also a painful process to move a person out.”*

Employers noted that, even when businesses want to be proactive in hiring people with disabilities, there is a lack of easy access to potential candidates. Information on recruiting potential workers with disabilities is not readily available to hiring managers, and several employers commented that they do not know where to find candidates. This is particularly true for professional level positions. *“There is a lack of resources to find professional people who are people with disabilities – they’re not coming in through employment websites and resources. Where are the people with disabilities who can be in professional positions?”* Moreover, employers spoke of wanting to learn from other businesses that have successfully pursued efforts to recruit and hire people with disabilities, but easy access to information on effective strategies is not readily available. *“We’re seeing some of these programs work in a lot of different companies. It’s doable and scalable, but for some reason there are still a lot of businesses that are not immediately considering hiring people with disabilities.”* Access to this kind of information would be particularly helpful to small businesses without substantial HR capacity. Employers acknowledged that, in many businesses, existing diversity programs often do not include disability. As one employer commented, *“many diversity programs have a narrow lens, are not all inclusive... and are not reaching out to people with disabilities.”*

It is noteworthy that while several employers had experience with disability employment services through relationship with state VR agencies or CRP organizations, most did not feel that this made recruiting qualified candidates any easier. Many employers described the service system as fragmented. Employers experienced with the system described being confused and somewhat frustrated by the plethora of, and lack of coordination among, job developers approaching them on behalf of various candidates with disabilities. One employment service provider participating in the focus groups acknowledged, “*One of the problems is the number of intermediaries between people who need jobs and their employers.*”

3.2. *The business case for hiring people with disabilities*

Despite the challenges, business leaders participating in the roundtables felt that a strong business case exists for hiring people with disabilities. The employers agreed that efforts to recruit people with disabilities help to expand their pool of available talent. One biotechnology employer stated, “*We’re facing a shortage of potential employees, and this shortage could be made up by expanding the talent pool to include people with disabilities.*” Employers also noted that a diverse workforce, including people with disabilities, helps to bring varied perspectives into a workplace, which can lead to innovation. A diverse workforce also provides a business the opportunity to differentiate itself from other companies, which can provide a competitive advantage in the global economy. As one participant noted, “*... companies believe that difference is an asset.*”

Roundtable participants agreed that inclusive and accommodating workplaces can help to strengthen a company’s overall workforce. Employers noted that, in addition to those identified as having a disability, many employees need some type of support or assistance to perform their work optimally, and so universal accessibility has universal benefits. These workers may include older workers, immigrants or non-native English speakers, and “virtual” or telecommuting workers. One commented, “*More and more businesses are moving towards a virtual workplace. Accommodations are starting to become less of a concern in this type of environment.*” Another executive noted that managers can benefit from the experience of supervising workers with disabilities. “*It’s a leadership lesson ... people connect with their own sense of humanity.*”

Approaches to hiring that include people with disabilities can foster good public relations and can help to strengthen a company’s brand, both internally and externally. Several roundtable participants observed that companies with inclusive hiring policies can experience a recruiting advantage, particularly with younger generation employees who value corporate social responsibility and have been raised with public school inclusion. As one HR professional remarked, “*Gen Y grew up with the notion of corporate responsibility. They take courses devoted to social corporate responsibility. When it comes time to decline or accept an offer, this makes a difference.*” Employers also recognized that people with disabilities represent an important customer base, and that there is the opportunity for companies to win brand loyalty among a broad market of customers who value inclusion. “*Inclusion is the most powerful message a business culture can give. Customers want to be associated with a company with an inclusive culture.*” Finally, employers acknowledged that efforts to hire workers with disabilities are critical to ensuring that companies are compliant with the requirements for federal contractors. The director of diversity from one company commented, “*In terms of requirements from the federal government, one of the things they have made clear is that you are supposed to advertise to organizations that specifically target certain groups – two key initiatives are people with disabilities and veterans.*”

3.3. *What state government can do to support businesses to hire people with disabilities*

Roundtable participants identified several ways that state government could help businesses offer increased access to employment opportunities to people with disabilities. Chief among these was the suggestion that providers representing the public disability employment service system become more streamlined and coordinated in their efforts to engage employers. “*There are so many agencies who are dealing with people with disabilities, all trying to accomplish the same thing. There’s too much fragmentation. Can government have one place for employers to go instead of shopping around for agencies?*” In the same vein, one HR professional commented, “*We want to work with job placement people who understand our needs. It’s helpful if there’s a point person from the placement agency who can speak on behalf of their clients.*” Another HR professional suggested, “*You have to make it easier to*

reach out to this population . . . make it less time consuming for hiring people."

Employers also noted the important role that training and internship opportunities play in worker preparation, and suggested that state government could do more to encourage businesses to offer these opportunities to people with disabilities. Moreover, employers with existing training/internship opportunities for people with disabilities felt they could expand these efforts if there was an entity that would coordinate the placement of graduating interns and trainees with other employers with hiring needs. For example, one executive noted that his company offers an internship program for people with disabilities, but they are reluctant to expand it because of the difficulty finding permanent employment for interns once they complete the internship. *"How do we get more businesses involved in the [internship program]? It's almost worse when you provide someone with a taste of employment, but can't even get them an interview."*

Employers discussed the important role of government in promoting incentives for employers to hire people with disabilities, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. In addition, business leaders suggested that an "ability challenge," perhaps modeled on the Governor's clean energy challenge that recognizes businesses that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2008), could create an incentive by publicly recognizing businesses that commit to and achieve hiring targets. As one employer noted, *"Government needs to recognize employers who are making it work. [Businesses] should get recognition, support and marketing by government."* Along with this type of effort, government can promote positive employment images of persons with disabilities through public awareness campaigns that encourage inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. Finally, employers noted that government can best encourage businesses to offer opportunities to people with disabilities by "leading by example" and promoting and sharing successful strategies implemented by the Commonwealth's model employer initiative.

3.4. What businesses can do for themselves

Notably, roundtable participants agreed that employers should approach the problem of unemployment for people with disabilities as a business problem needing a business solution. As one business leader noted, *"In business, we have a vision, we look at the current state of things compared to our vision, and we identify*

the gaps. With a culture that is open enough to ask the hard questions . . . we come up with the answers and a plan to tackle the problem." Employers conceded that businesses can and should take responsibility for implementing certain actions to address the problem of unemployment among people with disabilities. Employers argued that their responsibility is not to guarantee employment for people with disabilities but to work to ensure full access to competitive employment opportunities. A critical first step is to have strong CEO level support to ensure that internal HR and diversity policies and practices are inclusive of people with disabilities. *"It should roll from the top down. The CEO should have stated goals to adopt [inclusive] practices. Senior management needs to hold hiring managers accountable for promoting diversity and an accepting culture. If that's not happening, there is nothing HR can do."* An HR professional echoed the importance of high level commitment, *"we're successful at [my company] with this because the senior people are engaged. It trickles throughout the organization."* CEO level commitment coupled with inclusive policies and practices and targeted training and support of hiring managers and supervisors can foster a culture change, which may not only bring new employees with disabilities into a company but may also create a more supportive workplace for all employees.

Beyond inclusive HR and diversity policies and practices, roundtable participants suggested other actions that companies can pursue. Several suggested that companies should offer and/or expand mentorships, job shadowing and externships, internships and other training opportunities to people with disabilities. Such opportunities are particularly important for young people with disabilities. One provider participant commented, *"One of the most important things is helping young people connect to the world of work. Youth with disabilities don't have easy access to these types of opportunities. Kids need to understand what they need to do to get competitive employment."* Business leaders also emphasized that technological solutions that can be used by all workers in an organization can help businesses expand opportunities to people with disabilities. As one employer observed, *"Technology is a good enabler – it can equalize the playing field. When employers look at costs, right now the view is that it's a 'one-off'. They think they have to accommodate that one person. But if the technology infrastructure benefits everyone, cost is a non-issue."*

Finally, business leaders stressed that changes often comes about when companies learn what their peers

are doing. Several employers commented that they would value opportunities to network, share resources, and learn from other employers pursuing efforts to offer more opportunities to people with disabilities. One senior executive remarked, *“It’s best when businesses talk to each other . . . the fear starts to diminish.”* Other employers endorsed this notion. As one stated, *“Employers should . . . provide information to each other about hiring practices; provide new eyes and new perspectives to each other. One of the things we can do is [create] a peer coaching model, where employers come to the table with a common goal and bring that conversation back to their own organizations.”*

4. Discussion and recommendations

The challenges to hiring people with disabilities that were identified by employers and other roundtable participants are ones that have been consistently cited in the VR literature, particularly the challenges created by the stigma associated with disability, employer concerns about the abilities of people with disabilities, and the complexities of the disability employment service system (Domzal et al., 2008; Hernandez & MacDonald, 2007; Luecking, 2008; Unger, 2002). These findings point to the persistent nature of some of these challenges as well as the need for innovative efforts to address these enduring barriers. The present study sought to go beyond a restatement of known and ongoing challenges to hiring people with disabilities. Rather, we sought to understand how employers articulate the business case for hiring people with disabilities, and most importantly, to elicit from employers their ideas for solutions to these challenges.

Roundtables participants articulated a strong business case for recruiting, hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities. Participants agreed that focused efforts to recruit and hire people with disabilities can serve to diversify company workplaces, bring in new perspectives and talent, increase brand loyalty, and potentially expand a company’s customer base. Company efforts to diversify with disability may be particularly salient for younger workers and customers who increasingly expect companies to demonstrate good corporate citizenship. Employers also recognized that, with an aging workforce, many of their current employers have or may acquire disabling conditions. Retaining skilled workers by making the workplace more accommodating through technology and other strategies makes good business sense. Employers noted

that companies may need to become more knowledgeable about disability in order to retain these workers. The recommendations offered by employers and other roundtable participants point to strategies that could be implemented by: 1) job developers and other disability employment service providers; 2) VR and other state agencies that provide and/or purchase employment services for people with disabilities, along with other government efforts; and 3) employers and businesses.

4.1. Job developers and employment service providers

Job developers and other employment service providers must make it their business to learn about the mission, goals and hiring needs of local employers. Efforts to establish relationships with employers should include seeking informational interviews and tours with companies with the goal of learning about the business. Job developers adopting a “demand side” approach (Luecking, 2008) must ask themselves *“how can the services that I provide and the people that I represent help this business to achieve its goals?”* Job developers must be able to frame their services to employers in ways that resonate with employers, making the case for why including individuals with disabilities in their workplaces makes good business sense, particularly from the perspective of creating a diverse workforce. Importantly, job developers and employment service providers must emphasize talents and abilities over disabilities, and must prepare their job seekers to confidently present their abilities to prospective employers.

Additionally, job developers and employment service providers should make efforts to network effectively with other job developers in their areas. Employers participating in the roundtables emphasized that they would like to see greater coordination in outreach to employers among the providers serving diverse groups of job seekers with disabilities. Greater efforts at collaboration and coordination among job developers within a defined region could serve two important needs identified by employers – to decrease the overall number of job developers approaching employers and to potentially provide employers with an expanded pool of job candidates. Most job developers have had the experience of not being able to offer a qualified candidate to an employer with an open position. Collaborating with other job developers could increase the likelihood of matching a qualified candidate with right opportunity, resulting in both a satisfied job seeker and a satisfied employer. This type of collaboration might

be a challenge if job developers do not receive the support they need from the agencies for which they work. However, leaders from state disability-serving and CRP agencies could jointly develop strategies to promote collaboration among these providers on the local level.

4.2. State disability-serving agencies and other government efforts

State disability-serving agencies, such as state VR agencies, Departments of Mental Health and Developmental Services and others that either directly provide or purchase employment services through CRP agencies should support and incentivize job developers within a region to work together to engage employers. One coordinated approach could be what is referred to in business as an “account management” model (Marque & Chebboub, 2011; Workman Jr., Homburg, & Jensen, 2003). Account managers are liaisons between their organization and its clients to determine the clients’ needs and make sure their organization develops products or services to meet those needs. An account manager model streamlines the initial and follow-up communication with employers, creates consistency, and engages employers with a familiar business approach. Account managers working on behalf of a job developer network or collaborative serve as the liaison to employers, identifying job opportunities on behalf of, and communicating employer needs to, all network members. In addition, job developers bring to other network members the job opening that they cannot fill themselves, providing job developers with access to many more employers and a broader range of opportunities than they can generate on their own. Models for collaboration among job developers have been described in the literature (e.g. Gilbride, Coughlin, Mitus, & Scott, 2007). In order for this type of model to succeed, disability-serving agencies must identify policies, practices, and regulations that inhibit collaboration across job developers and develop funding mechanisms to support and incentivize job developers to work together.

In addition, a number of employers expressed interest in offering internship opportunities to people with disabilities, but also some reluctance to do so because of the difficulty of placing interns in jobs after the internship experience ends. State disability-serving and CRP agencies could work together in coordination with employers interested and willing to provide internship and other training opportunities for people with

disabilities, providing supports to assist interns to secure post-internship job placements. Employers currently providing internship and training opportunities conveyed a willingness to customize internship/training programs based on the specific hiring needs of fellow employers, if possible.

Roundtable participants noted that government is in the unique position of being able to lead by example and encourage the private sector to act. Participants were particularly interested in learning about state government efforts to employ people with disabilities, such as MA model employer effort and similar efforts within other states (Barnett & Krepicio, 2011). They suggested that state government could provide regular updates on the efforts made and progress achieved by state efforts, and then challenge businesses to do the same, such as issuing a governor’s challenge modeled on the clean energy challenge (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2008). Business leaders noted that government also has the resources for public awareness campaigns to increase visibility of this issue. State efforts could be modeled on the ODEP national “What Can YOU Do?” campaign (www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org).

In addition, roundtable participants noted that research findings that point to the benefits of hiring workers with disabilities can help strengthen the business case. For example, a cost benefit survey of 13 large companies conducted by Hernandez and McDonald (2007) compared employees with and without disabilities on several dimensions and found that workers with disabilities were just as dependable and productive as those without disabilities, with nearly identical job performance ratings. Moreover, very few employers reported needing to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities, with most provided at low or no cost. Participants suggested that government is in a position to make this kind of information broadly accessible to employers.

Finally, participants suggested that publicly recognizing employers with demonstrated success in hiring persons with disabilities can help to incentivize business leadership and help to promote best practices among employers.

4.3. Employers and businesses

Employers emphasized that companies wishing to be leaders in this area need “C-level” support for including disability in diversity strategies. HR and diversity directors can bring this issue to the attention of and obtain buy-in from their CEOs and COOs. Employers

suggested that the competition that drives business innovation could also play a part in encouraging businesses to compete with each other on issues related to diversity and inclusion. Employers also recommended that a “business-to-business” (B2B) network could provide an effective forum for HR and diversity directors and hiring managers to share ideas and resources and seek guidance from colleagues at other companies. B2B networks can provide a comfortable learning opportunity for managers, where they can discuss effective practices and new strategies for hiring workers with disabilities as well as the challenges they encounter. Such a network might be particularly helpful for small and mid-sized employers with limited experience hiring people with disabilities, allowing them to learn from colleagues in larger companies that have made specific efforts to build disability into their diversity strategies. These B2B networks can also provide employers a venue for sharing potential job candidates among their peers.

Beyond networking with peers, businesses can work to promote changes within their workplaces to communicate the company’s commitment to hiring workers with disabilities. For example, some companies have developed Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), also referred to as networking or affinity groups. These company-sponsored employee groups can represent any area of diversity – race, age, gender, religion, military service, sexual orientation or disability – and serve to address the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce. Once serving as a means of giving employees an opportunity to share experiences with co-workers, recently the aim of ERGs has become more strategic; ERGs can function to raise awareness of diversity, promote talent, and leverage diversity for innovation and marketability for the company. Leading companies recognize the value of the unique perspectives offered by various groups and utilize ERGs as a way to promote their missions, goals and business plans.

Business leaders participating in the roundtables also suggested that even when companies are not actively hiring, companies can create opportunities that offer a variety of work exposure experiences to job seekers including company tours, informational interviews, job shadowing, internships and other training opportunities. In particular, if company internship and training programs are developed in partnership with disability employment services providers, with the partners working together to identify training candidates and to place trainees in permanent employment, it can be a “win-win-win” for all involved.

5. Limitations and conclusion

One potential limitation of this study is our inclusion of a larger number of participants in the roundtables than is typically included in standard focus group methods. Unexpectedly, fully 68% of the employers who were invited accepted the invitation to participate. We modified our approach to include the larger number of participants because the EVP host could only accommodate four roundtables in his schedule and because we were reluctant to turn down employers willing to participate. In addition, we also included a small number of state agency representatives, CRP staff and individuals with disabilities in the discussion at the specific request of the EVP, who wanted to ensure that their perspectives were included in the discussion. While there is the potential that inclusion of these individuals may have inhibited or otherwise altered the discussion, these participants were intentionally invited because of their role as advisors to *Work Without Limits* and their knowledge of the specific goals of the roundtables.

Innovations in the public disability employment service system and in company practices related to hiring people with disabilities are needed to reduce the disparity in employment rates between persons with and without disabilities. Employers that participated in this study identified substantial but not insurmountable challenges to hiring people with disabilities. To overcome these challenges, employers identified a need for improved coordination in the disability employment service system and a need to improve the exchange of information about the hiring and employment of people with disabilities across businesses and within businesses. We described specific innovations, for example the “account management” model to improve coordination of public employment services and “business-to-business” networks to improve information sharing across businesses. These innovations may help to both increase employment of people with disabilities and benefit employers. We recommend that state-level public disability employment service agencies and employers work together to implement these innovations.

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