

Employing People with Disabilities: Small Business Concerns and Recommendations

by Oce Harrison, Ed.D.

Introduction

According to the Massachusetts Department of Employment, Massachusetts will add 350,000 new jobs to the economy, by the year 2005, a 12 percent expansion (Job Trends, Your Guide to Job Prospects in Massachusetts, 1997). Over half of the new jobs will be in highly skilled professional, technical, and managerial occupations. However, workers at all levels of training and education will be needed. Furthermore, small businesses are expected to generate the bulk of the new jobs. Of the 175,000 employers in Massachusetts, 97% employ less than 100 workers (Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training, 1996).

In May 1998, the average annual rate of unemployment in Massachusetts was 3.6% and the national unemployment rate stood at 4.3%. In such an economy, employers are hard pressed to find qualified workers. The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (1998) found that little more than half of working age Americans with disabilities are unemployed, and that only one-quarter of individuals with severe disabilities hold a job. Persons with disabilities represent a rich pool of qualified workers that can competently advance the development of our changing marketplace.

Because businesses with under 100 employees are expected to generate the bulk of new jobs, and, small employers may not have the resources (human personnel or time) to deal with issues involving hiring people with disabilities- the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council (MDDC) has identified outreach to small employers as a priority. The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at Children's Hospital, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Employment of People with Disabilities has received a grant from MDDC to identify the concerns that small business employers have regarding hiring and employing people with disabilities. This project will also determine marketing, educational, and technical assistance strategies for small business employers that will promote the hiring of people with disabilities.

Methodology

Two hundred surveys were faxed to small business employers, yielding a 30.5% response rate (N=61). The names of employers were randomly selected from a mail order business list of employers in eastern Massachusetts. In addition, MDDC contracted VisionTech to distribute the same survey tool in the western part of the State. The criteria for selecting employers were businesses that:

- employed between 4-100 employees
- did not have human resource staff

The survey was conducted for the purposes of:

- Identifying recruitment and hiring practices of small businesses.
- Understanding what qualities are most valued for employers in their company.
- Identifying concerns that small business employers have about hiring people with disabilities.
- Developing strategies to effectively address employers concerns.
- Eliciting the most effective way to communicate with small business employers about the hiring of people with disabilities.

Of the Businesses who Participated:

- 92% employed 4-50 workers
- 97% were for profit businesses
- 69% did not have a human resource department or personnel
- 69% of those responding were owners
- There was a variety of industries represented in the sample selected including wholesale (10%), retail (8%), manufacturing (8%), printing (5%), advertising (3%), restaurant (3%), health (3%), hospitality (3%), development (2%), computers (2%), communication (2%), finance (2%), education (2%), & consulting (2%).

Experience Employing Individuals with Disabilities

- 66% have not employed individuals with disabilities
- 26% have employed 1 or 2 individuals with disabilities
- 8% have employed more than 3 individuals with disabilities

Findings

Recruitment Practices

Generally, employers rely heavily on person-to-person referrals employee referrals (40%), and family or friend referrals (24%) to recruit and hire new employees. Over one half (52%) of employers used newspaper advertisements to seek out new workers.

Qualities Employers look for in Employees

The qualities that employers valued the most in an employee were: a strong work ethic (47%), followed by experience and skills for the job (36%), and communication skills (10%).

Major Concerns about Employing People with Disabilities

The major concerns reported by employers about employing people with disabilities were: matching skills and job needs (79%), supervision and training (52%), costs associated with safety and medical insurance premiums (48%), legal liabilities (47%), and making the workplace accessible/job accommodations (40%).

Best Ways to Address Employers Concerns

Employers reported the best ways to address their concerns were to help them understand the benefits of hiring people with disabilities (45%), hear success stories from other small business employers (37%), and people with disabilities (29%), and educate and train employers (34%).

Most Effective Ways to Communicate with Small Employers

When employers were asked, "What are the most effective ways to communicate with small business employers about hiring people with disabilities, most employers agreed that the best way is to have small business employers educating each other. Many employers reported that talking with other employers employing individuals with disabilities would be most effective (46%). Several employers reported that education and training through local and regional business organizations would be effective (39%), and providing information to employers via world wide web (21%) would also be beneficial.

Implications and Recommendations

Employers want to know from other employers about their successes with hiring individuals with disabilities. Human service workers need to develop a network of employers who have successfully hired workers with disabilities who are willing to become a resource for other employers.

Employer to Employer Network

- Identify employers who have successfully employed individuals with disabilities and ask them if they would be willing to 'tell their story' to other employers via electronic communications or business association meetings. These employers would be available to respond to employers' questions about hiring and employing individuals with disabilities and convey the benefits of hiring qualified individuals with disabilities.
- Develop a public relations campaign identifying those companies that have taken a leadership role in the community. Designate a spokesperson from each company to highlight the positive contributions of employees with disabilities.
- Provide opportunities for successful employees with disabilities to communicate with small businesses about their employment experiences.

Matching the Individual With Job Needs

In the planning process with individuals with disabilities, human service workers need to understand worker needs as well as employer needs. Identification of specific capacities, interests and work environment needs will enhance an individual's successful work experience. On the other hand, human service workers need to have a clear profile of employer needs on both a practical level as well as identify the qualities an employer values most in an employee. It is critical to find the match between employer and employee needs. Also, providing employers with resources and information through the internet (e. g. matching workers to jobs) may create a more efficient process.

Legal Liabilities and Law Suits

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) has resulted in a surprisingly small number of lawsuits-only about 650 nationwide in five years. That is low compared with six million businesses that have to comply (President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 1996). The ADA also encourages alternate forms of dispute resolution (e. g. negotiation and mediation). In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Association of Mediation Programs and Practitioners (MAMPP) ADA Mediation Project offers pro bono mediation services for disability related disputes (See Resources: Massachusetts Association of Mediation Programs and Practitioners).

Cost of Job Accommodations

Once human service providers have identified employers who have successfully employed individuals with disabilities, employers can attest first hand that accommodations and access do not have to be costly propositions. In addition, employers can explain that there are a range of disabilities that do not require accommodations.

For the past 10 years, the President's Committee's Job Accommodation Networks (JAN) has been assessing employers, people with disabilities and others to determine needed job accommodations for employees with disabilities. As a result of handling over 100,000 cases, JAN has learned that the average cost of a job accommodation for a person with a disability is \$200. (The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 1997). For every dollar an employer spends for a disability related job accommodation, the company saves \$34 (e. g. workers' compensation, training of new employees, increased productivity). It is important to be creative in the job accommodation planning process. There may be low and no cost alternatives available. The Job Accommodation Network will provide assistance (See Resources: Job Accommodation Network).

Medical Insurance Premiums

Employees with disabilities must be accorded equal access to whatever health insurance an employer provides to people without disabilities. An employer cannot deny insurance to an individual or subject an individual with a disability to different terms or conditions of insurance based on disability alone, if the disability does not pose increased insurance risk. (For more details on health insurance and other employee benefits see Resources: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Safety

Human service providers need to understand concerns of both the worker as well as employer needs for a safe work environment. Identification of specific safety concerns should be drawn out with the employer. On the other hand, human service providers need to communicate that they would not place an individual in an unsafe situation. Human service workers can also cite their own experiences with successful placements that have been safe and accident free.

Summary

A common recommendation from employers is for employers to educate other employers. Employers who successfully employ individuals with disabilities can address issues and concerns as well as dispel myths and fears that other employers might have about hiring individuals with disabilities. The most effective ways for employers to communicate with each other is through face to face meetings and the world wide web. Human service workers can utilize existing local and regional business networks to establish disability-related employer networks, as well as publicizing the new website for small businesses in Massachusetts <www.detma.org>.

References

- Department of Employment and Training, Boston, Massachusetts. [Job trends: Your guide to job prospects in Massachusetts](#) (1996). Boston, MA.
- The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (1996). 1331 F Street, N.W. Washington, D. C. 2004-1107.
- The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (1997). 1331 F Street, N.W. Washington, D. C. 2004-1107.

Resources

- Americans With Disabilities Act Information, 1-800-ADA-WORK or (800) 232-9675 (Voice/TTY).
- [Americans With Disabilities Act Regulations for Title I- Equal Opportunity for Individuals with Disabilities](#) contact: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1801 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20507. (800) 669-3362 (Voice), (800) 800-3302 (TTY).
- Employment Project for People With HIV, Institute for Community Inclusion, Children's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115. (617) 355-6714. Steven Procopio, Project Coordinator (617) 355-8167 (voice), (617) 355-7940 (Fax), procopio_s@a1.tch.harvard.edu
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1997). [Nondiscrimination in other employment practices: Technical Assistance Manual on the Employment Provisions \(Title I\) of the Americans with Disabilities Act.](#) Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Title VII. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (800) 669-4000 (Voice), (800) 669-6820 (TTY)

Governor's Commission on Employment of People With Disabilities' Small Business Employment Project. <www.detma.org>

Institute for Community Inclusion, Children's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115. (617) 355-6714 (Voice), (617) 355-6956 (TTY) (617) 355-7940 (Fax), <www.childrenshospital.org/ici>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN): (800) 526-7234 (V/TTY). <www.jan.wvu.edu/english/homeus.htm>

Massachusetts Architectural Access Board, One Ashburton Place, Room 1310 Boston, MA 02108. (800) 828-7222 (Voice/TTY).

Massachusetts Association of Mediation Programs and Practitioners (MAMPP) ADA Mediation Project, 133 Federal Street, Boston, MA (617) 451-2093.

Massachusetts Office on Disability, One Ashburton Place, Room 1305 Boston, MA 02108. (800) 322-2020 (Voice/TTY) or (617) 727-7440.

New England Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACS), Adaptive Environments, Inc. 374 Congress Street, Suite 301, Boston, MA 02210 (800) 949-4232 (Voice/TTY), (617) 695-1225 (Voice/TTY)

The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. 1331 F Street, N. W. Washington, D. C.20004-1107. (202) 376-6200 (Voice), (202) 376-6205 (TTY), (202) 806-8148 (Fax), <www.pcpd.gov>

The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities' Promoting Small Business and Self-Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Project 1331 F Street, N. W. Washington, D. C.20004-1107. (202) 376-6200 (Voice), (202) 376-6205 (TTY), info@pcepd.gov

Tax incentives are available to eligible small businesses to hire individuals with disabilities and removing architectural barriers. Internal Revenue Service 800-829-4059 (Voice). <www.eeoc.gov/smallbus.html>

Small Business Development Centers. Provide technical assistance to new business start-ups and expansion of existing businesses. <www.sba.gov>

Workforce Recruitment Program, President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities Job Accommodation Network (800) 232-9675.

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