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Strategies to Support Employer-Driven Initiatives to Recruit and Retain Employees with Disabilities

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Introduction

A growing number of employers have established initiatives to increase the participation of employees with disabilities within their companies as a component of their workforce planning and diversity strategies. These employers typically establish partnerships with local workforce and disability service organizations to source for talent. Coordinated by a single agency (or small number of agencies), employers are provided assistance and support services for recruitment, training, and job retention for employees with disabilities.

The Kessler Foundation and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey share the belief that models for employer partnerships have the potential to significantly affect the historically high unemployment and low workforce participation rates for people with disabilities. Accordingly, the Kessler Foundation, the Heldrich Center, and the National Organization on Disability have collaborated on this brief, which presents four profiles that highlight innovative practices among employers operating warehouse distribution centers.

These strategies, however, can apply to other models and industry sectors. The case studies profiled show great promise for significantly expanding the number and quality of job opportunities for people with disabilities and add to the body of knowledge on this paradigm to support the continued expansion of employer partnerships. Text boxes with information on the expansion of employer partnerships and systemic opportunities for further growth are provided, along with conclusions and recommendations for practice implementation.

What is the Partnership Model?

The National Technical Assistance and Research Center to Promote Increasing the Employment and Economic Independence of Adults with Disabilities (NTAR Leadership Center), based at the Heldrich Center, released two national studies in 2011¹ that describe the development and operation of a broad range of local and national partnerships that support these types of employer initiatives. The partnerships, which may serve a single company or a group of employers, all share common elements that form a new paradigm for meeting employer workforce needs and expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The following eight elements are usually present in these partnerships:

1. **Cross Disability/Cross Industry:** All initiatives assist a broad range of job seekers with disabilities to meet employment openings at various types and sizes of employers.
2. **Disability is Diversity:** Employers develop diversity initiatives that meet the hiring needs of the business and build a business case acknowledging that people with disabilities are a valuable resource in meeting their employers' workforce goals and business objectives.
3. **Lead Sourcing Agency Partner:** Trusted community partners are coordinated by a lead agency (e.g., state vocational rehabilitation agencies, national organizations, or other local public or nonprofit service providers [such as the Anderson County Disability and Special Needs Board in South Carolina, and Blanchard Valley Industries in Ohio]) that provides job support to employees with disabilities customized to meet the needs of each participating employer. This includes coordinating funding for these supports from a complex array of disability and workforce programs.
4. **Relationship Management:** Partnerships are ongoing, beyond 90 days, and employ significant numbers of people with disabilities (in many cases hundreds of employees with disabilities at a large employer).
5. **Equal Jobs, Equal Pay:** Employment openings are for skilled, well-paying jobs with benefits that have the same job performance expectations for employees with and without disabilities. Many jobs in these initiatives are paying people with disabilities 40% above minimum wage or more.²
6. **Not the What but the How:** Training of employees with disabilities is tailored to specifications of each employer (the what), but remains flexible with regard to an employee's learning style and length of time required to learn job duties (the how). Employers often cannot be flexible on the **what** but are more than willing to be flexible on **how** a job gets done.
7. **Training:** Educating current employees on the company's priority to expand diversity efforts to include people with disabilities is an integral part of company efforts. Training may include disability awareness, dispelling myths, and understanding program expectations — equal job, equal pay, and equal performance standards for all employees.
8. **Ongoing Supports:** Partners provide assistance to employees with disabilities for job retention, if needed.

This paradigm has significant advantages for both employers and community agencies that provide employment job support and coaching for people with disabilities. Most importantly, employers are able to access a pool of quality, pre-screened employees with disabilities to meet their workforce needs without continually navigating the public and private social services and workforce systems for employee sourcing. Local agencies benefit by gaining access to ongoing, well-paying job opportunities for significant numbers of people they serve.

While some companies are still assessing the success of these paradigms, anecdotal reports from employers have been overwhelmingly positive. This has caused employers to expand their current initiatives to additional work sites and other employers to replicate these programs to be competitive. The expansion of initiatives to new sites means more state and local workforce and social service systems are being presented the challenges and opportunities of partnering with an employer seeking to hire people with disabilities. Therefore, it is essential that a state have strategies in place to foster, develop, and support these partnerships, along with providing their local service systems with information on ways to meet employer needs.

As the two NTAR Leadership Center studies cited above note, partnership models are an evolving paradigm. Therefore, it is critical that new practices and resources be highlighted as promising practice options for state and local practitioners to support employer partnerships.

Walgreens Distribution Centers: A Leading Example

An early example of a successful disability employment initiative was developed and implemented by Walgreens in 2007. The company established a goal that 30% of the approximately 800 workers at its high-tech distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina be employees with disabilities. To achieve this goal, the company established a partnership with local disability service agencies and developed an adapted training curriculum to teach people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the skills they needed for jobs at the center. The partnership successfully tailored job supports to the newly hired employees with disabilities to meet the company's training needs, and coordinated the efforts of staff from multiple agencies into a single instructional and support operation. Once the center was fully operational, Walgreens exceeded its 30% disability hiring goal and found that the Anderson center was operating 20% more efficiently than other centers in its system.³ The business success of the Walgreens initiative at Anderson and other distribution centers in its system prompted other companies such as Lowe's, Proctor and Gamble, Best Buy, and Toys R Us to explore and replicate this type of model in their distribution centers.

National Organization on Disability: Bridges to Business

Over the past six years, the Kessler Foundation's "Transition to Work" grants program has invested \$25 million toward fostering new approaches to the persistently high rates of unemployment for people with disabilities. Funding has included grants for projects that focus on talent acquisition and exploring new ways service provider agencies can effectively work with business to fill talent gaps with qualified candidates in New Jersey and nationally. In 2009, with grant funding from the Kessler Foundation, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) developed and implemented a new program entitled "Bridges to Business".

Walgreens Update⁴

- In January 2012, Walgreens had over 1,000 employees with disabilities working at its 17 distribution centers in the United States and Puerto Rico, achieving a corporate goal set in 2007.
- Over 40% of the employees at Walgreens' high-tech distribution centers in Anderson, South Carolina and Windsor, Connecticut are people with disabilities, exceeding the company's initial goal of 30% for these centers.
- When the Anderson distribution center promoted its first set of "functional leads," 22% of those promoted were employees with disabilities.
- Based on the success of the pilot disability employment initiative in its retail stores, Walgreens plans to roll out its Retail Employees with Disabilities program to its retail stores nationwide by the end of 2013.

Bridges to Business was developed after a three-month market analysis by NOD into the hiring practices of approximately 50 employers and service provider organizations in the disability employment field. NOD also spoke to vocational rehabilitation researchers to understand the historical successes and emerging trends in disability employment. Findings confirmed the struggle of businesses to navigate the complex array of programs offered by public and nonprofit workforce development and social service organizations when looking to hire employees with disabilities. The study also highlighted a lack of understanding by these same agencies of employer workforce planning and operations. In almost every conversation with employers or service providers, NOD was told, "We (employers and nonprofit agencies) don't speak the same language" and "Our measures of success are very different." Clearly, there was a need for an "intermediary model" or "bridge" that would connect employers and service provider agencies to work more effectively together. This model, emphasizing an expertise in human capital strategies and knowledge of the vocational rehabilitation system, would teach business and social service and workforce development providers the skills necessary to work collaboratively to meet the needs of employers while improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

In short, the Bridges to Business program (Bridges) is about creating better connections by providing direct project management and program oversight. Through an experienced knowledge of business and the intricacies of the provider community systems, NOD develops customized approaches for employers and service providers to meet corporate employment goals. Bridges begins with an employer assessment that reviews policies, programs, and procedures to understand recruiting, on-boarding and retention strategies at the company, as well as to gain knowledge on how best to integrate individuals with disabilities into their workforce. NOD then works with each employer to align disability employment initiatives with existing diversity efforts, while learning about job requirements, work tasks, and organizational culture. This intermediary business model shifts the focus to the business priorities driving employment and on-boarding versus other commonly used practices by nonprofit providers and many state agencies that may look to fit a job to the specific needs and skills of an individual with a disability. This integrated approach, frequently absent in disability employment programs, has led to significant strides toward employers recruiting people with disabilities as a talented part of their workforce. NOD believes the unemployment rate of people with disabilities will not improve unless disability initiatives focus on what employers require to make their business successful and profitable.

Through this intermediary model, NOD helps local service providers create stronger community networks to meet the workforce needs of employers. For example, NOD may instruct partner agencies on more inclusive processes for candidate review and referral, or develop training content that goes beyond disability awareness to demonstrating the benefits for hiring people with disabilities (e.g., reduced turnover) within a corporate diversity initiative.⁵ In early 2010, the Bridges to Business intermediary model was a concept that needed to be field tested. NOD identified Lowe's as an employer interested in expanding its hiring efforts for people with disabilities in three regional distribution centers. Lowe's has had a longstanding commitment to diversity and to people with disabilities. Its disability employment initiative began after key senior staff visited the Walgreens distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina and saw its success in hiring people with disabilities. A core component of the Walgreens model was that people with disabilities are receiving equal pay and benefits for equal work, working side by side with people without disabilities. All shifts and work crews were inclusive, open to all those that qualified. More importantly, all workers were expected to maintain the same rigorous performance standards. Walgreens was proving that hiring people with disabilities could be productive for business, when previously it was seen as a charitable act, often fueled by the perception that people with disabilities could not perform at the same standards as employees without disabilities. The success of the Walgreens program confirmed the social service sector's claim that people with disabilities can perform, and in many cases outperform, their non-disabled colleagues.⁶ Furthermore, Randy Lewis, Walgreens' Senior

Vice President for Supply Chain and Logistics, challenged managers at a national supply chain and logistics conference to hire individuals with disabilities at all distribution centers throughout the United States. Lowe's eagerly accepted the challenge.

Lowe's disability hiring initiative began in its Pittston, Pennsylvania distribution center through a community partnership with the local Arc. Lowe's philosophy was the same as Walgreens — equal pay, equal jobs, and an inclusive work environment. Based on the initial success in the recruitment and performance of qualified employees with disabilities at the Pittston distribution center, Steve Szilagyi, Senior Vice President of Distribution at Lowe's, formulated a plan to expand the program throughout the company's 14 distribution centers. It began with NOD's Bridges program working at three Lowe's distribution centers (Statesville, North Carolina, Findlay, Ohio, and Rockford, Illinois) that needed assistance in establishing disability employment program sites and forming local partnerships. The Kessler grant enabled NOD to implement the pilot with the overall goal of helping Lowe's expand its disability employment program, and creating a pipeline of workers with disabilities to meet Lowe's hiring needs in the three distribution centers. "NOD is proud to have had Lowe's as a partner in testing our Bridges to Business concept," said Carol Glazer, President of NOD. "Our work with Lowe's helped them expand their disability hiring efforts, and helped us fine tune our Bridges program. We believe the Bridges model, which starts with employers' labor force needs and then moves into finding the right sourcing partner, can increase employment prospects for people with disabilities while improving employers' bottom line. It's a win, win."

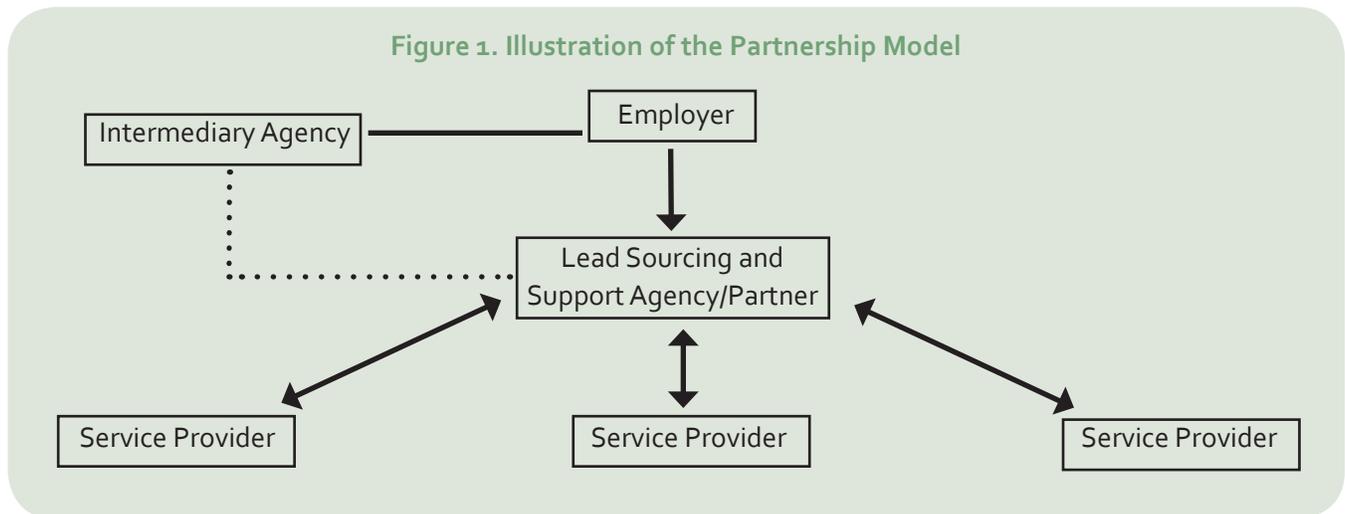
NOD's main role was to serve as an intermediary or service broker between the local service providers, consumers, and Lowe's, thereby helping the company effectively recruit, hire, retain, and support workers with disabilities. A key component of the Bridges model is that the intermediary, in this case NOD, serves as a neutral convener with dual expertise in human capital management (e.g., human resource practices, recruiting, diversity programs, and policy and program implementation) and vocational rehabilitation (e.g., job coaching, job delivery, employment networks, etc.). This model enables NOD to help employers with their program infrastructure and choose a community-based partner to source and support employees, a local partner that fits their organizational culture and hiring needs.

In each of the three distribution center locations, NOD identified and evaluated at least five potential partner agencies in an effort to establish a lead agency to be the primary partner to interface directly with Lowe's and work within that community with other vocational rehabilitation agencies to ensure a consistent pipeline of individuals with a wide variety of disabilities to Lowe's. These assessments included on-site visits and interviews with social service and workforce development agency directors, employer partners, and people with disabilities who were served by the agency, and included a critical appraisal of each agency's business relationship management strategy. Upon completion of the agency assessments, NOD provided Lowe's with an overview of each organization, its strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for the lead agency. Lowe's selected its community partner based on its hiring needs and input from the NOD assessment. It is important to note that identifying a local agency partner is often the major obstacle that prevents a company from launching a disability employment initiative. Lowe's indicated that having a community partner familiar with its business needs, as well as, disability employment and vocational rehabilitation practices, saved time and contributed to project success.

Documenting all roles and responsibilities in a memorandum of understanding once partners are identified is key to ensuring all parties understand one another's function, expectations, and accountability for the disability hiring initiative. In the case of Lowe's, service providers had the day-to-day contact with Lowe's supervisors and employees with disabilities, while NOD provided project management and oversight, working directly with Lowe's senior management and service provider agencies to ensure all project objectives were being met.

During the 18 months that NOD worked with Lowe's, over 120 people with disabilities were hired and 375 managers were trained. At each location, NOD helped launch new disability hiring programs, identifying local partners and establishing a network of service providers that worked together as a team for Lowe's. NOD also assisted Lowe's with program launch and implementation, helping with training, on-boarding new employees with disabilities, and establishing processes for addressing any issues or concerns.

It is important to note that each Lowe's location operated slightly differently based on its hiring needs and community partners. However, all of the distribution centers operated with a primary (lead) business sourcing and support partner, a single agency that led the initiative and coordinated all other service provider agencies. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the partnership arrangement. The willingness of Lowe's management team to expand its diversity initiatives was integral to the positive outcomes seen at each distribution center. A database specially developed for this project tracked program success and provided timely information on employees' progress, number of hires to the employer, and the service partners.



By streamlining the steps and connections between employers and local service providers, Bridges creates sustainable employment programs for people with disabilities. The final strength of the Bridges model is that by design, it eliminates NOD's intermediary role once the program is fully operational and sustainable. Subsequently, in January 2012, Lowe's hired a recognized disability expert to join its diversity team. "NOD has been a valued resource for Lowe's and we commend them for the work they are doing in Bridges to Business," said Steve Szilagyi, Senior Vice President, Distribution, at Lowe's.

Connecticut Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program

States are often challenged to create structures to support replications of successful employer-driven initiatives to hire and retain employees with disabilities. The Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services' Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program is an outstanding example of one state's strategy to foster employer-driven initiatives and community partnerships. According to Mark Henry, Manager of the Employment Division for the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the program was established based on the success of the Walgreens Distribution Center initiative in Windsor, Connecticut. The Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services was the lead organization that developed the community partnership to help Walgreens meet its disability employment goals. The Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services was so pleased with the Walgreens partnership and the employment opportunities created for the people it served, that it has led to the expansion of the Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program to other employers.

Diversity of Abilities: A Partnership Between Proctor & Gamble and the State of Maine⁷

Inspired by the initiative in the Walgreens distribution centers, Proctor & Gamble has created new employment opportunities for people with disabilities through its “Diversity of Abilities” initiative at its new packaging facility in Auburn, Maine. In partnership with the state’s Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and Department of Health and Human Services, this facility will offer employment opportunities for people with physical and/or developmental challenges and veterans with disabilities. The goal of the initiative is to have 30% of the employees at the facility be people with disabilities.

A Proctor & Gamble site leader said the initiative is “an example of business collaborating with State Government and private agencies to deliver an incredible opportunity for an amazing group of people.” The company said in a statement that “employing people with physical and developmental challenges is not only the right thing to do, but it also makes good business sense and has benefits which will reverberate across the company and community.” For more information about Proctor & Gamble and its diversity efforts, visit: <http://www.facebook.com/DiversityPG>.

Under the Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program, the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services offers grants to Community Rehabilitation Provider agencies to partner with a major employer on a disability employment initiative. Grant funding comes from Connecticut’s allocation of federal Title 1 vocational rehabilitation funds. The grants are for two years and the amount of each grant is based on the projected number of people employed. During the first year, local agencies receive a lump sum payment each quarter to cover start-up costs. For the second year, these local agencies are reimbursed based on the people supported to work. The partnerships are expected to continue after the end of the grant period through Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services service funding.

Job seekers with disabilities who are interested in working at a specific employer must be referred to the grantee service agency by the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. This includes people who are jointly served by the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services or the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

As of December 2011, the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services had awarded five grants under the Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program, which, in total, sought to place 408 people in jobs at partner employers.⁸ Table 1 shows the grantees, the employers that they support, and the projected number of people to be placed in jobs at a respective employer:

Table 1. Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program Grants (December 2011)

Agency	Employer	Projected Hires
The Arc of Quinebaug Valley	Lowe’s Distribution Center	100
Community Enterprises	HomeGoods	58
Community Enterprises	Mohegan Sun Casino	109
Kennedy Center	CVS Retail Stores	35
Community Enterprises	Walgreens Retail Stores	106

Source: Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, 2011.

The Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program is considered an important workforce development initiative of Connecticut state government. In a June 2011 press release, Governor Daniel Malloy stated, "These business leaders will be working with non-profit service providers and my administration to create economic success stories on several levels. First and foremost, we are creating quality opportunities for highly motivated residents who have a disabling condition but who are able to work competitively with the right combination of training and cooperative placement. Second, we are developing the job skills and personnel that our businesses need..."⁹ Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services official Mark Henry is excited by the new job opportunities being provided by the grants that have been awarded and he expects that the number of future projects will continue to grow based on the success of these grants.

As noted above, one of the Industry-Specific Training Program grants has supported the development of a partnership between the Arc of Quinebaug Valley and Lowe's distribution center in Plainfield, Connecticut. The Arc of Quinebaug Valley serves people with a broad range of disabilities in the northeast corner of the state. It has service contracts with the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and the Department of Developmental Services, and is a Ticket to Work Employment Network. Megan Byers, Administrator of Employment Services at the Arc of Quinebaug Valley, noted that Lowe's initially reached out to the Arc in search of a partner to support the company's disability employment goals at Plainfield. Subsequently, she accompanied the general manager of the Plainfield center on a visit to see the Lowe's distribution center in Pittston, Pennsylvania. Inspired by the success of the disability employment initiative there, they agreed to move forward with their collaboration. Ms. Byers, who had provided community input on the development of the Industry-Specific Training and Placement Program, was subsequently awarded a grant to develop the collaboration with Lowe's. This grant has a goal of placing 100 people with disabilities in jobs at the distribution center, which employs approximately 500 individuals.

During the first year of the grant, the Arc of Quinebaug Valley assisted Lowe's in the development of a warehouse worker's training program to teach people with disabilities the skills required for jobs at the distribution center. The training starts with a four-week, unpaid, orientation period. Individuals interested in employment at Lowe's after the orientation period enroll in a 45-day training period during which they are paid \$10 per hour by the Arc of Quinebaug Valley. After completing training, participants are hired by Lowe's at a starting salary of \$12.50 per hour if the candidate meets production standards.

The Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services refers eligible job seekers with disabilities interested in employment at the Lowe's distribution center to the Arc of Quinebaug Valley. Fourteen people begin this orientation process every four months, according to Ms. Byers. As of December 2011, there were 14 employees with disabilities at the Lowe's distribution center in Plainfield who were placed in jobs through the partnership and five additional people in the training phase for jobs. All of these employees are in full-time jobs; however Lowe's has now agreed to hire some part-time employees with disabilities as well. Ms. Byers believes that this will create opportunities for people with developmental disabilities who may not be able to work full time.

According to Ms. Byers, she is excited by the Arc's partnership with Lowe's. "I wouldn't do it if it wasn't an extraordinary opportunity for the people we serve," said Ms. Byers. "It has meant a great deal to the people employed there." She also noted that the success of the Lowe's partnership has led to discussions with a local Rite-Aid distribution center about a possible initiative.¹⁰

A Growing Number of Employers are Including People with Disabilities in their Diversity Efforts

In a survey released in April 2012 by the Society for Human Resource Management,¹¹ nearly two-thirds (61%) of organizations include people with disabilities in their diversity and inclusion plans. Nearly one-half (45%) of organizations found that training human resource staff and supervisors on interviewing people with disabilities was effective toward increasing hiring initiatives. For more information, visit: <http://bit.ly/PoBbPz>.

A Kessler/NOD employment survey conducted in fall 2010 had similar findings; broadly, companies are thinking about diversity and incorporating aspects of diversity hiring into their corporate policies.¹² However, despite the continued interest in the business community toward hiring, employment for individuals with disabilities has remained stagnant or decreased over the past two years. These data indicate broad opportunities for companies to meet their disability employment objectives through partnerships with state and local service agencies. For more information, see: <http://www.2010DisabilitySurveys.org>.

As illustrated by the partnership between the Lowe's distribution center and the Arc of Quinebaug Valley, Connecticut's Industry Specific Training and Placement Program provided a structure to foster and support collaborations between community provider agencies and employers to meet their workforce needs by hiring individuals with disabilities.

Reddwerks Software System

The success of the Walgreens disability employment initiatives and the subsequent proliferation of disability employment programs at other corporations has started to fuel innovation in the vendors and suppliers that work in supply chain logistics. Reddwerks is such a company. Founded in 2003, Reddwerks is a software company based in Austin, Texas that provides distribution management systems software, which includes warehouse management systems, warehouse controls systems, and conveyor control systems software to many of the big box retailers such as Best Buy, Walmart, and Williams-Sonoma, by helping them move products quickly and efficiently. Reddwerks' management understood that the expansion of disability employment efforts in its customers' distribution centers provided a market opportunity to create a new product to meet that need.

The Reddwerks system displays information visually, using letters, pictures, and easy-to-follow prompts, as well as text instructions. As a result, the software system decreases the training period and provides real-time feedback on performance. Employees have the ability to tailor their interface to adapt to their speed, memory, and learning styles, thus increasing efficiency for all employees. For employees with disabilities, especially those with developmental or cognitive disabilities, this software helps individuals seamlessly integrate into the production team without the need for a different system or training tool. More importantly, tools such as Reddwerks, enables employers to expand its pool of employment candidates with disabilities for positions in a distribution center.¹³

More information on the Reddwerks software, and an illustration about how it works, can be found at: http://www.reddwerks.com/prod_tab.php?tab=o&ID=35&ID2=4&panel=4.

The Reddwerks software system is a dramatic step in the expansion of the disability employment initiatives in distribution centers. For companies wanting to implement a disability employment program and the community partnerships that support them, there is now a readily available resource to assist employees with disabilities meet the performance requirements of distribution center positions. Additionally, it is significant that Reddwerks, a major distribution center supplier, is responding to the needs of customers in the supply chain industry for products that support their disability employment objectives and benefit all other members of their workforce. Jean Belanger, Reddwerks Founder/CEO, said, "Human resources are the challenge of the 21st century. Where are distribution facilities going to find the millions of workers needed as the economy turns up from recent recessionary levels? Bad software design with its poor user experience is stopping the millions of Americans with disabilities from rising to meet this challenge. We are very proud of our software and the ability to help our clients find talented employees with disabilities."¹⁴ In fact, Reddwerks was so convinced it had something special that it approached NOD and requested a product endorsement demonstrating Reddwerks software as disability friendly. NOD reviewed the Reddwerks system, analyzing the system interface, visiting three different distribution centers (in three different companies), interviewing managers, employees with and without disabilities, and job coaches to understand how the system is used by all employees and the benefits the Reddwerks software has for employees with disabilities. NOD found that indeed the Reddwerks software is disability friendly.

Project SEARCH, Walmart Distribution Center, North Platte, Nebraska

Many companies that are establishing disability employment initiatives at their distribution centers use the model developed by Walgreens as their point of reference. However, the Walmart distribution center in North Platte, Nebraska chose a different model, called Project SEARCH. Project SEARCH is a school-to-work transition program originally developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. It provides real-life work experiences to help young adults with disabilities make successful transitions from school to adult life. In the Project SEARCH model, students with disabilities spend their last year of secondary education at a local employer, receiving vocational coursework along with the opportunity to train and rotate through various jobs. After completing the program, vocational rehabilitation agencies place graduating students into jobs at the host employer or at other employers in the community. The Project SEARCH model provides an opportunity for students with disabilities to experience a workplace and try different jobs based on their interests and skills. A real-work setting establishes a basis for students to make informed decisions on job selection and career exploration. Driven by these elements, Project SEARCH has proven to be an effective model for preparing students with disabilities to meet employer workforce needs, and provides employers the opportunity to get to know potential employees. Currently, there are nearly 200 licensed replication sites in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Project SEARCH has also expanded from its original hospital model into other sectors such as banking, government services, and now distribution centers.¹⁵

In this program, the Walmart distribution center partners with the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the local school system to provide training and job opportunities for students with disabilities on site. Although the Project SEARCH model has been replicated in various industries, Walmart is the first corporation to develop a licensed Project SEARCH program at a distribution center.¹⁶

Jim Coyle, Director of Employment for the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Program, facilitated the relationship between Project SEARCH and the Walmart distribution center in North Platte. Mr. Coyle indicated that by 2009, Nebraska had seven Project SEARCH sites, either in operation or in the planning stage, all located at hospitals. Based on the impressive employment outcomes from these sites, an increasing numbers of school districts were contacting him expressing interest in partnering with the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Program on establishing new Project SEARCH programs. Originally, the North Platte school system wanted to pursue a Project SEARCH replication at the local hospital, but that facility was unable to participate. Mr. Coyle decided to approach the Walmart distribution center, which is one of the largest employers in North Platte, with this unique opportunity. The general manager for the distribution center expressed an interest in exploring a Project SEARCH program at the center. Mr. Coyle then invited Susie Rutkowski, co-founder of Project SEARCH, to present about the program and the employer partnership to the Walmart distribution center staff. Based on this additional information, the general manager decided to move forward to develop a Project SEARCH program and subsequently received the necessary approval from Walmart's corporate headquarters. The Project SEARCH site at the Walmart North Platte distribution center is licensed by Project SEARCH Cincinnati, meaning that it complies with all essential elements of the Project SEARCH program.

The 2010-2011 school year was the first year of operation for Project SEARCH at the Walmart distribution center in North Platte. Students were referred to the program by the area schools. The North Platte school system provided a teacher who is responsible for the vocational coursework and coordination of the program. The Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Program provides \$25,000 to the school district for a job coach to support students and Walmart staff during job rotations. Mr. Coyle noted that supports for job coaching to support retention is available for students placed in jobs through a relationship with Nebraska's Developmental Disabilities agency.

In addition to vocational course work, Walmart staff mentor students while they are experiencing jobs and developing valuable work skills. Mr. Coyle noted that this mentoring process has provided opportunities for students to develop friendships and greater participation in their local communities. He added that students are routinely involved in employee activities, including extensive community volunteer work that Walmart staff perform.

Eight students with disabilities in their exit year of school participated in the first year of the program. They spent each day at the distribution center, participating in vocational coursework on employability skills (e.g., problem solving, communication, use of technology, budgeting, and hygiene) and the opportunity to learn and perform various jobs at the center through internship rotations. At the end of the year, one student with a developmental disability was hired by the distribution center into a full-time job with benefits. Four other students were hired by other local employers based on the skills they developed through the Project SEARCH program.

Mr. Coyle said the distribution center management team values Project SEARCH and is extraordinarily committed to making the program successful, noting that 17 supervisors received training on the program model and common disability employment needs. Throughout the program implementation, he acknowledged that as issues arose, Walmart management worked hard to resolve the problem and move forward to implement the program.

Mr. Coyle is pleased with the Project SEARCH program at Walmart's North Platte distribution center. He said, "I'm a big supporter of Project SEARCH. The program does what it says it will do." He concluded that he continues to be impressed by the Project SEARCH employer partners, such as Walmart, for recognizing that people with disabilities bring value to the workplace.¹⁷

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs Rule

In December 2011, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs issued a notice of proposed rule-making that would require federal contractors and subcontractors with contracts of \$50,000 or more, and 50 employees, to have 7% of all new hires be people with disabilities.

According to the proposed rule, these employers will be responsible for data collection, record keeping, and creating self-disclosure opportunities for existing employees with disabilities. While the proposed rule is under review, it is creating considerable interest in disability employment best practices. The initial reaction of some contractors is that the rule will be a burdensome requirement for employers, yet other companies are working to move beyond compliance to better understand what is needed to create a welcoming environment (similar to all other diversity efforts) for persons with disabilities.¹⁸

The proposed rule can be found at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-12-09/pdf/2011-31371.pdf>.

Since the Walmart program is a new model for distribution centers, data will be collected to track outcomes. However, based on the early success of the Project SEARCH program at the North Platte distribution center, another Walmart distribution center located in Minominee, Wisconsin has established a Project SEARCH program starting with the 2011-2012 school year. Additionally, Mr. Coyle said that the North Platte program has broadened his thinking on the types of employers that may be potential partners for further Project SEARCH programs in Nebraska. As of April 2012, he noted that the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Program has 10 Project SEARCH sites: 7 at hospitals, 1 at the Walmart distribution center, and 2 at Embassy Suites hotels.¹⁹

The Project SEARCH program at the Walmart distribution center in North Platte, Nebraska illustrates another option for companies operating distribution centers to meet their disability employment goals.

Conclusion

While there are many ways that employers and community-based workforce development and social service agencies work together to help people with disabilities gain employment, a new model is emerging. Often launched through the braiding of public and private funds, this paradigm supports a single agency or small number of agencies that recruit, train, support, and provide job retention services for companies wishing to employ large numbers of individuals with disabilities. The Kessler Foundation, through its "Transition to Work" grants program, has invested in these ventures with promising results. Organizations, such as NOD, are offering corporations technical assistance to explore and implement these initiatives. States and local government programs are creatively using public funding to increase employment for people with disabilities locally in their communities, as described in the Connecticut and Nebraska profiles. Companies such as Walgreens, Lowe's, Toys R Us, and Proctor and Gamble are establishing local partnerships to streamline recruitment efforts for persons with disabilities to meet business talent needs. Other companies, demonstrated by Reddwerks, are developing products for this expanding marketplace.

For community-based providers, state and local government, and employers looking to establish this program in their community, it is important to keep the following three key points in mind:

1. **Employers continue to realize that people with disabilities are a viable and productive part of the workforce:** Disability employment initiatives are popping up across the United States in diverse industries and among a variety of employers. These efforts are expanding employer diversity programs to better include current and future employees with disabilities. The disability employment movement is shifting from a separate work environment needing only lower-level skills (e.g., custodial work) and sub-minimum wage, to high-performing jobs that offer equal pay, have equal performance requirements, and where all employees — those with disabilities and those without disabilities — work together side by side.
2. **One size does not fit all:** Disability employment programs and strategies by local, state, and national organizations that help employers tap into talented workers with disabilities are as varied as the employers seeking this labor pool. Disability employment programs such as these are expanding and government and nonprofit service providers will need to respond with a stronger understanding of business acumen.
3. **Disability for profit:** Not only are employers seeing the value of hiring people with disabilities, but also businesses are beginning to understand that disability in the workplace is here to stay. Creating products that adapt to people of varying learning styles is good for all employees, and profitable for the companies that make and use these products.

While this brief focuses on expansion and promising practices in distribution centers, the practices noted have application in other business sectors, which can lead to further employment opportunities for people with disabilities and expanding profit margins for employers. The information presented in this brief has the following implications for fostering the continued growth of initiatives to meet the employer workforce needs of job seekers with disabilities:

For State Officials

- State agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Workforce Development can follow the lead of states such as Connecticut, Ohio, and Nebraska to establish programs and funding structures that develop and support partnerships between local workforce, disability service, transportation, and other social agencies and employers seeking to establish disability employment initiatives.
- States can be prepared to use a variety of program models to support employers based on employer needs and local resources (e.g., Walgreens, Project SEARCH, etc.).

For Local Service and Support Agencies

- Local service provider agencies can nurture partnerships with employers seeking to establish disability employment initiatives in order to fulfill new employment opportunities for the people they serve. Service providers should be prepared to accommodate what the employer wants and needs from its workforce and respond accordingly.

- Local service providers should create broad networks among other disability and workforce development organizations and be prepared to partner with other agencies as typically one agency cannot fulfill the demand for talent.

For Employers

- Employers should assess current diversity programs to ensure that they are effectively including people with disabilities. A review of hiring efforts (especially online applications), on-boarding, and training should be reviewed to ensure people with disabilities can effectively assimilate into the organization.
- Employers can take note of the increasing number of companies that have established disability employment initiatives to recognize the business benefits of hiring employees with disabilities.
- Partnerships with local workforce development, disability, and social service organizations assist employers in recruiting, training, and retaining employees with disabilities. If needed, resources such as NOD's Bridges to Business program are available to assist employers in establishing partnerships with trusted local agencies, and reviewing internal processes (training, on-boarding, policies, etc.) to ensure they are inclusive of people with disabilities.
- Local partnerships may fund recruitment, training, and job retention supports through public or private money, rather than corporate dollars. This provides employers with an additional return on investment. However, there is a growing number of employers that recognize the value of disability employment, and are more willing to directly underwrite the costs associated with disability recruitment initiatives — similar to costs associated with their other diversity programs.
- Technology, such as Reddwerks software, is available to distribution centers that support training and job performance for all employees and enable employees with disabilities to effectively integrate into the workforce, signaling that there is opportunity to be realized by for-profit companies as disability employment expands beyond distribution centers and supply chains.

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Kessler Foundation's fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today's marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$25 million since 2005 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.

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