

## **A BLUEPRINT FOR EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

One of the biggest challenges businesses face is finding skilled workers, who are willing and committed to their jobs. The solution to this problem is to introduce them to an ignored talent pool – People with disabilities. There are already a number of big companies like Walgreens, Microsoft along with mid-sized companies who say that many of their most talented workers are people with disabilities. The number of disabled people is going to continue growing and they are a part of the solution to the problem of skilled workers that businesses face. The National Governors Association began an initiative, introduced in 2012. ‘A Better Bottom Line: Employing people with disabilities. This initiative mainly focused on the role that the government and businesses can play in refining the employment outcome and creating more opportunities for people with disabilities.

The U.S economy has been experiencing constant rapid change that has resulted in high unemployment and skills shortage. Employing people with disabilities could be a solution to both these issues. There are numerous reasons for businesses to employ people with disabilities:

- Businesses are looking for available skilled workers
- Most businesses already employing people with disabilities report positive results. Walgreens experienced a 120% productivity increase.<sup>1</sup>
- Global companies like Microsoft need to employ a workforce that would be a reflection of their consumers, in order to fully understand their consumer base.

The fact is that there are over one billion people globally who are disabled<sup>2</sup>, most of them do have the skills that businesses are searching for, but these workers are underutilized. These are the facts:

- An estimated of 54 million Americans with a disability only 20% are employed or even seeking employment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Wasson, CEO of Walgreens. Opening Plenary speech. NGA Winter Meeting, February 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Disability Funders Network, “Disability Stats and Facts,” <http://www.disabilityfunders.org/disability-stats-and-facts>.

<sup>3</sup> Disability Funders Network, “Disability Stats and Facts,” <http://www.disabilityfunders.org/disability-stats-and-facts>.

- People with disabilities bring valuable skills to the workforce – an approximate of 600,000 scientists/ engineers in the U.S. are disabled.<sup>4</sup>
- Top inventors like the chief executive officers of Apple and Xerox have disabilities.<sup>5</sup>
- Almost 8% of the 3 million government employees are disabled.<sup>6</sup>

These realities prove that businesses are open to hiring people with disabilities, because they do have the skills required to be a part of the workforce. Along with these statistics, advancements in technology is making its more possible and easier for people with disabilities to work smoothly and comfortably. There are numerous mobile apps for smart phones that make life for the disabled easier.

Despite all of this most disabled people are not being given a chance to prove themselves, as they are not even given the opportunity to work. The Americans Disability Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, but besides that employment rates have not improved. These low employment rates contradict the fact that majority of the people with disabilities express a desire to work<sup>7,8</sup>. The government as been spending billions to support people with disabilities, but their efforts are not being paid off because employment for the disabled is not rising.<sup>9</sup> In order to improve employment for people with disabilities, there are four areas of action the government and businesses need to look at. The main focus of these actions is to emphasize on ways to help and support businesses support disability employment.

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<sup>4</sup> National Science Foundation, “Employment Status of Scientists and Engineers with Disabilities, by Age at Onset of Disability: 2008,” <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/wmpd/2013/pdf/tab9-10.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Love, Dylan. “15 CEOs with Learning Disabilities,” Business Insider, May 19, 2011. <http://www.businessinsider.com/ceo-learning-disabilities-2011-5?op=1>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Murray, “The Federal Government as a Model Employer” (presented at the NGA Institute on A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities, Seattle, Washington, May 22, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Digh, “Finding New Talent in a Tight Market,” MOSAICS (March/April 1998), <http://www.asacenter.org/Resources/white-paperdetail.cfm?ItemNumber=12173>.

<sup>8</sup> Society for Human Resource Management, “Jobs Outlook Survey Report,” 2012, <http://www.shrm.org/research/monthlyemploymentindices/lmo/documents/jos%20q2%202012.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Brault, “Americans with Disabilities: 2010,” U.S. Census Bureau, July 2012, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/p70-131.pdf>.

The first area of focus is to make employing people with disabilities part of the government's workforce strategy. This will result in increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities, as they will be seen as a priority. Statistics show that the number of people with disabilities in working in integrated employment settings – alongside those without disabilities has not grown in the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> To change this the government needs to make integrated employment a priority. By recognizing this, the government will be giving numerous agencies that serve people with disabilities employment goals. These agencies will have to work together, sharing resources and expertise to create an integrated workforce. While working together the government and agencies can ensure that businesses that do employ people with disabilities are supported. To shift disability employment efforts into a broader workforce strategy that government needs to move to defining a person by their ability not their disability. They need to define success as matching a person to a job with benefits and running disability employment as a priority while tying it with economic development. These are the crucial modifications that can be made to improve disability employment.

The second area of focus is to find and support businesses to employ people with disabilities. The government needs to ensure that they are good partners to businesses. Businesses will be willing to hire people with disabilities if they have the reliable support they need. There have been a few successful initiatives and they are sustained by a partnership with an intermediary, who recruit individuals, provide assessments, training and support for prospective employees.<sup>11</sup> To ensure that more businesses are being encouraged to hire people with disabilities the government can apply the same strategies that encourage employment for other workers. These include a dedicated staff with business expertise, working with multiple businesses in the same sector and

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<sup>10</sup> State Employment Leadership Network, *Accomplishments Report*, 2012, <http://www.selnmembers.org>.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Nicholas, "Ready and Able: Addressing Labor Market Needs and Building Productive Careers for People with Disabilities Through Collaborative Approaches," National Technical Assistance and Research Center to Promote Leadership for Increasing Employment and Economic Independence of Adults with Disabilities, April 2011, <http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/projects/all-projects/ntar-leadership-center>.

including smaller businesses that generate a majority of jobs.<sup>12</sup> Businesses do want to hire people with disabilities, but they require a long-term partner to make this possible. To ensure this partnership the government can provide one point of contact. This is the most important element<sup>13</sup>, as it provides all businesses with one ‘go to’ agency to gather the information they require. Governments can also run programs that focus on the skills and abilities of people with disabilities thus making recruitment a smoother and easier task for businesses. It is important that the government makes it clear to both the employees and the employers what the benefits are people with disabilities to be a part of the workforce.

The third area action the government can take to improve disability employment is for themselves to become model employers. The government does have numerous opportunities to improve employment opportunities for the disabled. They can do so in two ways. Create a fast track hiring system, which would allow people with disabilities to go through the system more easily; this would also help employers fill positions faster. 10 states in the U.S. have adopted this fast track hiring system, and have combined specific policies to create an alternate pipeline of hiring disabled employees.<sup>14</sup> The second thing the government could do is implementing complementary approaches in becoming a model employer. They could designate an advisory board that will simplify progress at all stages. They could also ensure that websites and other materials are welcoming and easy to understand. These sources provide important information for the employee and the employer and making these easy to understand will be very helpful. It is also necessary to train managers on disability etiquette, as this could be a barrier. A disability awareness curriculum could

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Jo Waits and Joe Cortright, “Growing State Economies: A Policy Framework,” National Governors Association, 2011–2012, <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/11HEINEMANFRAMEWORK.PDF>; and Zoltan Acs, William Parsons, and Spencer Tracy, “High-Impact Firms: Gazelles Revisited,” Small Business Administration, June 2008, <http://archive.sba.gov/advo/research/rs328.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> As reported by business panelists participating in the NGA Experts Roundtable (Washington, D.C., October 24, 2012) and the NGA Institutes on Employing People with Disabilities (May 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Rita Landgraf, Secretary, Delaware, Health and Social Services (reported via email to NGA on June 12, 2013).

be introduced where there is mandatory training. Doing so would create a welcoming environment, which is key in disability employment.<sup>15</sup>

The fourth area of action is to make the best use of the available limited resources. The government should direct agency heads to continuously review the opportunities available for federal support and partnerships with agencies, private and nonprofit sectors. According to the U.S Government Accountability Office there are more than 45 federal programs that support employment for people with disabilities<sup>16</sup>, these resources are not being used to its fullest. Agencies may not be able to change deferral policies but they could make the best use of the resources that are being provided. Agencies should consider how disability benefits interact with the changes that resulted from the Affordable Care Act (ACA). They should also use the research and evidence based data that is collected by the U.S Department of Educations office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS). They have taken on several initiatives that would help youth with disabilities to transition into the workforce. Examples of these initiatives are – Parent training that provides them with the tools to help and support the youth to transition.<sup>17</sup> They have also introduced the Schools Wide Framework for Transformation (SWIFT), which is a grant that combines resources in schools to help people with disabilities. Another way to make the best use of resources is to connect the private sector and the nonprofit sector. Doing so will complement the ongoing funding of the public sector. There are three elements to consider:

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Linkow et al., “Leveling the Playing Field: Attracting, Engaging, and Advancing Peoples with Disabilities,” The Conference Board (2013), [https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/news/ConfBoardResearch\\_020813.html](https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/news/ConfBoardResearch_020813.html)

<sup>16</sup> United States of America. Government Accountability Office. Government Accountability Office. *Government Accountability Office*. N.p., July 2012. Web. <<http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/592074.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> Parent Training Technical Assistance Center Network website, <http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/national/resources.html>

1. Community and corporate foundation are expressing interest in employing people with disabilities.
2. The resources from community and corporate agencies can fund and facilitate experimental projects. These aim to build new inventions and conduct evaluations that would make it easier for people with disabilities to work in an office environment.<sup>18</sup>
3. Foundations act as a ‘neutral conveyer’. They can foster public – private across different sectors in a community.

It is also important for businesses to take advantage of the many disability experts at their disposal. The main goal of these experts is to provide information on disability employment, as their aim is to increase the opportunities people with disabilities have in the workforce. These experts include advocacy groups, research experts and private sector stakeholder. The government needs to align their efforts with these people instead of competing with them.

The main aim is to increase awareness among the government and businesses about the prospects and benefits people with disabilities will bring in the larger workforce. It has been made clear that there are not enough opportunities available, and the only way to change this is to make businesses aware that people with disabilities have the same capabilities and skills. They not only help the business image but also improve productivity. This research paper clearly states four advancing opportunities that should be considered. The key is to focus on people’s abilities not their disabilities.

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<sup>18</sup> Karen Tamley et al., “A Quest for Equality: Breaking the Barriers for People with Disabilities” (Chicago: Chicago Community Trust, 2010), <http://www.cct.org/impact/partnerships-initiatives/strengthening-communities/persons-with-disabilities/quest-for-equal-ity>.

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