

Disability in the Workplace – By Joe Dale, CIM

The following is the second of a four-part series on disability in the workplace. In *Part One: The Economic Case* the author reviewed the demographics of the Canadian workforce and highlighted the financial impacts of not increasing participation rates for this segment of the population and pointed out some of the benefits of including people who have a disability in the workforce.

Are Ontario Businesses Missing Out on a Valuable Labour Source?

Part Two: Employer Awareness and Acceptance on the Rise

For many years community employment agencies faced the daunting challenges of marketing their services and the people they represented to the business sector. For the most part they were ill equipped; with little marketing or sales expertise, few resources to apply to marketing programs and, for the most part, faced an uninformed and unreceptive audience. Business operators didn't understand disability or why they should consider people who have a disability in their workplace.

Early on employment service operators learned that, given this lack of expertise and resources, the best way to reach employers was with a business to business approach. But the challenge was in finding champions – business leaders of stature and profile – who understood the issues and why people who have a disability should be included in the workforce and who were prepared to take on this cause. There were a few early champions like Gar Bauer of Loblaw Companies. Gar worked diligently to develop strategies and programs to include people who have a disability in Loblaw's grocery stores.

In the early to mid 2000's a new awareness seemed to come to the attention of the business sector. Corporate leaders began talking about disability and accessibility issues. Equity departments and programs now included disability along with the other major equity groups – women, visible minorities and aboriginals.

And finally, in the last few years corporate leaders began to see a role for themselves in promoting the inclusion of people who have a disability in the workplace. The following is just a brief synopsis of some employer awareness campaigns – primarily those driven by the business sector – that are in play in Ontario.

The **Honourable David C. Onley, O. Ont.** www.lt.gov.on.ca/en/default.asp was appointed as Ontario's 28th Lieutenant Governor in September 2007 and one can't overlook its significance. As a person who himself lives with polio and post polio syndrome he represents both a role model and strong advocate on behalf of people who have a disability. His Honour is our most visible champion on accessibility and disability issues and routinely delivers a strong message about accessibility and the need to include people who have a disability in the workforce to business audiences, service clubs and community groups,.

Partnering with the likes of BELL, IBM Canada, Tim Hortons, Oracle and a number of the big financial institutions, Toronto's Job Opportunities Information Network has sponsored a **Business Leadership Network** (BLN) www.joininfo.ca/Toronto/BLN/WhatWeDo.aspx. As with most BLNs in North America and the UK, Toronto's BLN plays a leadership role in ensuring the ongoing hiring of people who have a disability and has a mandate to address education and awareness, accessibility, workplace accommodations and information about the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

Rotary at Work www.rotaryatwork.com is a unique partnership between Community Living Ontario and Rotary Clubs in Ontario. Through education and awareness presentations to Rotary Clubs and individual Rotarians, the needs and the benefits of including people who have a disability in the workplace are identified. The project aims to persuade Rotarians, as community-minded business leaders, to include people who have a disability in their candidate pool when hiring and to champion this cause with their parent corporations and business colleagues.

Business Takes Action (BTA) www.businesstakesaction.ca is a Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association initiative aimed at promoting the benefits of hiring qualified people who have a disability to meet skill shortages. This program was created and is steered by the business community. Their mandate is to provide the tools and resources that employers need to remove physical and attitudinal barriers associated with recruiting, training, accommodating and hiring people who have a disability.

The **Ability First Coalition** www.abilityfirst.on.ca is a business-to-business partnership that aims to bring business people together to share best practices and experiences related to hiring and retaining people with disabilities. The Ability First Coalition provides resources for employers interested in making a commitment to hiring people with disabilities so that these they can find the organizations and the resources that can help them honour that commitment.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services' **Don't Waste Talent** www.ontario.ca/DontWasteTalent has two portals – one for employers looking to hire and one for people who have a disability looking for work. The Employer portal targets larger corporations and is dedicated to helping them: understand what hiring people with disabilities can bring to their business; learn tips to make their workplace and hiring practices more inclusive; and, connect with an organization that can help them find a qualified candidates.

The Challenge

One might conclude that, between increasing awareness and growing demand, the future looks bright for people who have a disability. Unfortunately, with unemployment rates at a staggering 49% and participation rates in the Federally Regulated Private Sector at only 2.7% *, it's easy to understand why people who have a disability might be growing impatient.

So why are participation rates virtually unchanged since 1995 and the unemployment rate more than 5 times the provincial average? One might just look to the some of the principle sponsors of these various awareness campaigns – large corporations.

In a recent survey of employment agencies only 8% of 1,400 job placements in the last 12 months were in large businesses (over 250 employees). Is it that small and medium sized businesses already know and understand the benefits of including people who have a disability in the workforce? Are they more flexible and better in tune with the communities in which they operate?

In the words of one business owner with a solid track record for hiring people who have a disability: “diversity is becoming a sexy word for human resource departments in large companies to show they are world class. Unfortunately that doesn't help the disabled unless something is actually happening. I recently visited a Canadian company, very well regarded, with a cool diversity program that had not hired any disabled employees because they were still "looking into it" four years after inception. However the glossy handouts were awesome.”

* 2008 annual report of the Federal Employment Equity Act

Future Articles

Best Practices in Employment Services

Government Policy – Enabler or Added Barrier

The Author

Joe Dale has worked in the disability field for over 30 years with much of that time dedicated to addressing issues related to disability in the workplace. Currently Joe is the Executive Director of the Ontario Disability Employment Network and Manager of Ontario's Rotary at Work initiative.

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