Business Roundtable on Reasonable Accommodations and Assistive Technology in the Workplace

A report of the Center on Effective Rehabilitation Technology

February 2014

On Wednesday, October 30, 2013 the Council of State Administrator of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and its partner Center on Effective Rehabilitation Technology (CERT) held a Business Roundtable with public and private sector representatives from five different organizations. These businesses represented National Employment Team (NET) partners from both the private and the public sector. As leaders in hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities, these individuals came together to share their strategies on a number of issues. These included wholistic approaches to accommodations, tracking of assistive technology use and effectiveness, and staff training. Their aim and ours is that other businesses might benefit from the strategies they shared as well as the current trends and challenges they identified. This report offers a brief summary of the Roundtable.

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Introduction

The Center on Effective Rehabilitation Technology service delivery (CERT) works to identify, document, and analyze models of rehabilitation technology (RT) service delivery shown to be effective in promoting successful employment outcomes. Many people with disabilities need and receive assistive and accessible technology in the workplace. CERT is identifying best practices in the employer model of RT/AT service delivery to support productive and successful work experiences for their employees with disabilities.

While we are learning much from service providers, the community of persons with disabilities, and other studies of employers, we decided to host a "Business Roundtable" – a small focus group of employers who have led the way in enabling inclusive workplaces to learn from their unique knowledge, experiences, and insights. Getting this business perspective enriches our understanding of what it means to provide technology in the workplace for employees and emerging issues that face employers in providing appropriate technology for their employees. The main objective of the roundtable was to look at the company perspectives on reasonable accommodations and bringing assistive technology to the workplace in an effective way through hearing from representatives from companies and businesses who are leading this area to develop strategies for other companies and businesses.

The overarching questions guiding this roundtable were:

- Getting an overview of accommodation and AT policies and processes of companies leading in providing inclusive workplaces for their employees

- Recommendation and tips they would offer to other businesses

- Trends and challenges to think about in shaping inclusive workplaces and strong AT services for employees

Participants

The invited participants are leaders in hiring and accommodating applicants, employees, and customers with disabilities. The focus group was conducted online. Participants included:

- Beth Butler, Employee Relations – Central Services, Lowe's Companies

- D. Kay Mathis, Senior Vice President CITI, INC.

- Tyler Haugen, senior manager, Partner Resources Support Center – U.S. & Canada, Starbucks Corp.

- Michael Murray, Principal Advisor on Government-wide Disability Policies and Programs, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

- Alison Levy, Disability Employment Program Manager, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Kathy West-Evans, Director of Business Relations, CSAVR/NET, acted as the moderator. Participants were also joined by members of the CERT/CSAVR Team: John Connelly, Meera Adya, Deepti Samant Raja, and Mary Killeen.

Findings

There were several common themes shared by the business roundtable participants including:

- Once an employee requests an accommodation, the process should begin at once and be expeditious,

- Staff throughout the business should have knowledge of the reasonable accommodation process and be trained in it, especially supervisors,

- Train appropriate staff in how to manage the records and conduct an individualized assessment through a 1:1 interactive process,

- There should be a centralized resource within the company that can provide advice and guidance in addressing reasonable accommodation requests and engaging outside experts when necessary,

- Centralized funding is also beneficial in supporting the reasonable accommodation process, and

- Websites where jobs are listed must be fully accessible and provide a clear process for requesting a reasonable accommodation.

Some of the tips or practices shared were:

- Do your own research as a business to ensure products are accessible and do not rely totally on the vendor, this includes testing the compatibility with company IT and equipment,

- Check a possible vendors website for accessibility and if it is not accessible then chances are their products (especially software) are not fully accessible,

- It was recommended that the business create a confidential self-identification process tied to the employee file in a way that doesn't reveal disability information in an inappropriate way. It is important for employers to track the retention and effectiveness of accommodations for the existing workforce not just new hires.

- Survey employees after they receive an accommodation as part of your evaluation of the effectiveness of your process,

- The NET and State VR agencies are an excellent partner and wonderful source of information,

- Have a catalogue of the most common accessibility software for employees to review once they have requested an accommodation so as to hopefully move the process along quickly and

- When possible demo or have the capacity to test assistive technology, some businesses reported have their own internal technology resources or partnering with a state/community agency.

- Maintain an inventory of assistive technology and software procured and installed for employees. This will allow IT to test the impact of patches (e.g. security and software updates) BEFORE they are pushed to the employees' desktop. This information will be useful in managing/maintaining current versions of assistive technology and software as the company updates IT hardware and software.

Some interesting trends were:

- One business noted that they are growing their customer accommodations and accessibility and are consulting with their employees as to accommodations that they would recommend based on their experience,

- Centralizing the process for addressing reasonable accommodations within the business was another trend shared with the caveat that this should not add more red tape and slow the process and when possible include a centralized funding strategy;

- Centralizing knowledge and funding of accommodations helps ensure standard practices throughout a company, therefore minimizing the potential for civil rights grievances and violations;

- Centralizing reasonable accommodation services and support reduces the administrative burden on direct supervisors and minimizes managers' fears about "extra work" in hiring individuals with disabilities;

- The development of a holistic approach to accommodations to include diversity, HR, Legal, Risk Management, Worker's Comp., etc., take a holistic view of accommodations and make it part of the overall company strategy; when possible tie the accommodations to both employees and customers; and

- Look at centralizing contracted accommodations, such as interpreters, to increase efficiency of the process and manage cost.

- Economies of scale – working larger contracts should bring costs down while improving standards.

Some challenges and recommendations noted were:
- Most technology available has been written for the home rather than the corporate or business environment and software developers need to consider the business environment needs and usage and

- The creation of a centralized means of tracking accommodations is needed in some businesses.

One of the major areas explored during the round table was whether or not a person who has their own technology could bring it into the workplace to use in their job. The answer was basically not always because the businesses will provide any needed reasonable accommodation. Further, there are data and security issues that may prevent people from using their own equipment or devices. In most instances a person provided with an accommodation will be able to have it move with them as they move in the business and new positions will be evaluated for any additional accommodations needs.

Linking with results from other CERT and past studies

The roundtable allowed participants to share several recommendations for promoting the provision and service delivery of rehabilitation and assistive technology in the workplace. Many of these also reflect research findings from other CERT projects and past projects on workplace inclusion.

Need for training and sensitization of supervisors. CERT in collaboration with the WorkRERC conducted a national survey of over 2,000 employees and supervisors who reported on the process of making requests for technology based accommodations as employees and/or receiving requests for accommodations as supervisors. In addition the study conducted personal interviews with employees and supervisors. Supervisors were the initial point of request for a majority (62%) of employees who needed an accommodation. Findings from interviews suggested that employees were more comfortable requesting an accommodation if they felt their immediate supervisors or managers would be understanding about it.

Data collected by BBI and its partners from six diverse companies in a large study of corporate culture and employment demonstrated that employees with supervisors who exhibit behaviors that value diversity were more likely to find accommodations processes to be just irrespective of results, and also reported greater satisfaction and organizational commitment (Disability Case Study Research Consortium [DCSRC], 2008).

The value of centralized funding and resources for accommodations. The six-company corporate culture study provides further evidence of the value of a central pool of funds for accommodations. Participating managers in that study noted that centralized funding pools would be helpful to take the burden off department budgets and provide greater consistency in accommodations (DCSRC, 2008). Some managers from the large study also echoed the "caveat" by one of the focus group participants that centralized systems should not add bureaucracy but offer flexibility for managerial discretion and efficiency.

Thanks to our business partners who participated in the round table.

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References:

Disability Case Study Research Consortium. (2008). *Conducting and benchmarking inclusive employment policies, practices, and culture*. Retrieved October 12, 2012, from http://www.dol.gov/odep/research/CorporateCultureFinalReport.pdf