



CASE STUDY

EQUITABLE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

THE NOBLE AIM ---

Provide equitable opportunities for people with disabilities to fully participate in everyday aspects of life, such as recreation, transportation, employment, and civic engagement.

THE SITUATION ---

In 2015, a community of caregivers, service providers, public entities, individuals with disabilities, employer organizations, and other concerned citizens formed Greenville CAN (GCAN), whose mission is to make Greenville a better place to live for people with disabilities.

Through dialogue between GCAN partners, a **focused challenge concerning employment was articulated:**

Individuals with Disabilities: People with disabilities were disenfranchised from competitive, community-based employment.

Service Providers: Considerable competition existed between providers for connections with employers, creating a scarcity mentality, i.e., “there is a limited number of employers that hire our clients.” Other major barriers service providers experienced included clients’ lack of experience and soft skills, and inadequate transportation services.

Employers: Many employers with an interest in hiring individuals with disabilities expressed confusion about the different types of service provider offerings. Accommodations options were sometimes misunderstood, and inflexible hiring processes, work assignments, and/or environments posed additional barriers for people with disabilities. Other employers held limiting beliefs about the employability of individuals with disabilities.

THE SOLUTION

Identifying Readiness, Key Players. As the lead facilitator, Mike Teachey recognized that coalition participation and dialogue between key stakeholders was lacking. He identified key players and developed an environment for early dialogue focused on revealing the shared purpose rather than competition between providers. Mike facilitated relationships that ultimately were owned and maintained by the key leaders.

Setting the Foundation. Leadership buy-in modeled support among front-line staff. Regular leadership meetings led to meaningful engagement and leaders encouraging participation of their front-line staff. Opportunities for networking at the front-line became important and ongoing. Shared GCAN culture and identity was developed through “membership,” ground rules, and ongoing information sharing and discussion.

Strategy. Through dialogue, the front-line group devised the idea to “share” a trained HR consultant to engage with employers on behalf of all partners.

GCAN engaged Dr. Laura Bogardus, a certified human resources consultant who also was experienced in workforce development and working with service providers.

Laura worked with employers to build positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities at work, provide technical assistance, and engage the support of the local human resource association, Greenville SHRM. She encouraged dialogue and shared training among service providers and connected providers to employers with job opportunities.

A long-range strategy was developed to:

- Improve employer support for employing individuals with disabilities;
- Change the system by instilling a cooperative environment among service providers, which allowed for consultant services to phase out; and
- Create opportunities for shared training that enhanced in-demand skills of people with disabilities across service providers and individual employers.

THE RESULTS

Results came swiftly and continue to yield fruit today. Highlights include:

Quick win: More than 30 people with disabilities, supported by a variety of services providers, hired by local employers – including the largest local health care system - within the first year.

Quick win: Greenville SHRM was recognized with a national human resources award for disability awareness and inclusion – resulting in part from collaboration with GCAN.

Longer-range win: Service providers engaged in regular creative and constructive communication, collaboration, and group learning. Their collective voice loosened employment barriers, like diploma requirements, among several large employers.

Longer-range win: Funding and development of Ability ASCEND, an innovative skills-matching technology for job seekers with disabilities and employers with job openings.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES ---

In addition to these tangible wins, Laura uncovered several barriers that were not articulated prior to the project start. These challenges and opportunities to change systems are currently under discussion:

- A disparity between the skill sets sought by employers and the skills sets of service providers' clients with disabilities.
- Lack of flexibility among workplaces concerning shift lengths and management styles. Limited employer implementation of job sharing or flexed job descriptions.
- Transportation to / from work remains a significant barrier in a community with limited public transportation and a wide laborshed.
- Perceptions and realities of limits regarding social security income / social security disability income remains a common deterrent to full-time employment.



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