

**Employer Perceptions of Need  
When Hiring and Retaining People with Disabilities**

**A Report Prepared for the Utah  
Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities  
Diane Russell, Director**

Prepared by

Lynn Purdin  
Department of Workforce Services

Hank Liese  
College of Social Work  
University of Utah

Sarah Lehmann  
Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

Supported in part by the Utah Work Incentive Initiative (UWIN) Project  
A Grant from the U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services  
Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services  
Grant # 91217/8  
Cathy Chambless, Project Director

April 7, 2003

INTRODUCTION

In February and March of 2003, the Governor’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities hosted six focus groups examining needs of employers when hiring and retaining people with disabilities. The purpose was to gather information that would assist the Governor’s Committee in developing and implementing its strategic plan. The graphic below summarizes each focus group held:

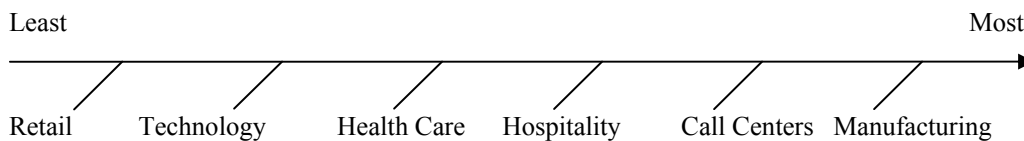
Industry	Number of Participants	Date	City	Facilitator
Call Centers	5 <sup>1</sup>	2/24/03	Salt Lake City	Lynn Purdin
Hospitality	3	2/24/03	Salt Lake City	Hank Liese
Manufacturing	7	2/25/03	Ogden	Lynn Purdin
Technology	3	3/6/03	Provo	Hank Liese
Retail	1	3/6/03	Provo	Hank Liese
Health Care	6 <sup>2</sup>	3/19/03	Ogden	Lynn Purdin

FINDINGS

Listed below, in order, are the 10 questions asked in each focus group and a summary of responses.

**1. What has been your experience hiring people with disabilities?**

Of employers participating in focus groups, many, but not all, have hired people with disabilities in the past or currently employ a person with a disability. A continuum has been created to show industries having the least amount of experience to the most hiring people with disabilities.



On our continuum, the “least” amount of experience is defined as no experience while “most” can be interpreted as having hired close to or more than 100 people with disabilities. It is important to note that this continuum is representative only of the experiences of these focus group participants and cannot be generalized beyond these groups. For example, there was only one respondent in the retail focus group, and this individual had no experience in hiring people with disabilities. Had the retail focus group been

<sup>1</sup> One participant was not present at the 2/24/03 focus group but was later interviewed by phone.

<sup>2</sup> One participant participated in a one-on-one interview on 2/25/03.

comprised of more members with such experience, it is possible (and, the authors believe, likely) that retail would be closer to the right, or “most,” end of the continuum.

## **2. What is your CEO’s/Senior Management’s interest in employment for people with disabilities?**

In each industry, senior management does not appear to play any significant role in hiring or retaining people with disabilities. While they are supportive of human resources’ efforts to hire an individual, make accommodations, and train individuals as the need arises, they do not actively send a message to human resource personnel that hiring people with disabilities is important for the company.

## **3. If you have hired people with disabilities, what are some of the reasons you have chosen to do so?**

Reasons employers cite in hiring people with disabilities are rather similar across industries. In each case, human resource personnel are interested in the most qualified applicant. If any person can meet the minimum requirements to perform a job safely, they are considered for hiring. In a few instances, however, it was noted people with disabilities are hired out of fear of a discrimination lawsuit, or “a soft-hearted” recruiter feels sorry for a person with a disability. Thus, they are hired based on the disability rather than being the most qualified applicant.

## **4. What strengths do you find people with disabilities bring to their jobs?**

The strengths people with disabilities bring to the job were occasionally mentioned as reasons for hiring. Qualifications such as dependability, longevity, staying focused, contributing to high company morale, and showing appreciation for the job were cited frequently. The following quotes capture the flavor of responses to question #4:

“We had a gentleman who became disabled in a motorcycle accident off the job. It was very stressful when he returned to work because we were not sure how the company was going to respond to him. But co-worker embraced him, management made many considerations for his disabilities and it was a very successful re-entry. Team morale was very high, workers understood they were important to the company and company saw employees’ appreciation. It was a win-win situation.”

And,

“We hire mostly men between the ages of 18 and 24. We don’t know if they are going to show up for work the next day. But people with disabilities will be there. That’s for sure. So they are many times the best candidate for hire.”

Finally,

“I have employees who come to work everyday and want to know what I am going to do for them. They think that because they work here the company owes them. They want their paycheck and never give anything back to us. But people with disabilities, they appreciate the fact they have a job. They understand that a job is more than just a way to make money

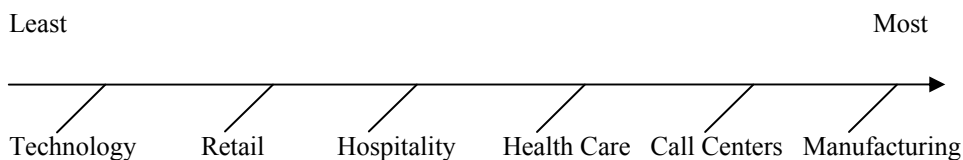
so they show up on time and are ready to work. They truly want to be a part of the company and respect us as employers. They get it.”

In general, the strengths people with disabilities bring to the workforce are beneficial for employee unity and morale. While there are individual attributes like staying focused and appreciating a job, participants in the focus groups often painted a bigger picture of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities and the impact such hiring has on the company as a whole.

### **5. How does your company go about educating and preparing co-workers, front-line supervisors, even top-level administrators, to work alongside people with disabilities in the workplace?**

Responses to question #5 varied greatly between those companies that actively build a culture of awareness and sensitivity and those companies that are “dealing with the situation” on a case-by-case basis. The amount of education and preparation appears to be contingent upon the number of people with disabilities employed in a particular workplace, and also appears loosely related to the amount of hiring a company has done in the recent past.

The continuum of participant industry focus groups from least to most involved/structured in education and preparation can be depicted as follows. As noted above under question #1, the arrangement of industries along this continuum should not be viewed as representative of anything more than the focus groups participating in this project.



It is worth noting that members of the manufacturing focus group expressed innovative practices in terms of involving persons with disabilities in employee training, for example, designating a “team leader” as the “expert” in the plant for individuals with disabilities. Manufacturing also stated that any training surrounding disabilities is done with the employee’s permission, support, and help.

Another innovative practice, this one related to preparing individuals with disabilities themselves for the workplace, was noted in the health care focus group. Here, “work simulations” were utilized to help determine whether employees coming off workmen’s compensation were ready to go back to work. Another innovative recruitment practice was noted in the hospitality focus group, where one member described how the company has a recruiter who signs, thereby increasing the number of job applications from individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Other methods for education and preparing co-workers included:

- A corporate initiative for diversity training.
- Sensitivity training as part of customer service within the company.
- A voluntary sign language class for co-workers.
- E-mail communication when there is a need for awareness around a particular issue.
- Posters that are displayed during disability awareness month.

## **6. In what areas, specifically, have you experienced difficulties, if any, in hiring and retaining people with disabilities?**

The primary difficulty discussed by the various focus groups was that of accommodations and what constitutes a reasonable accommodation in any given situation. Some companies find that their supervisors and management “over-accommodate” due to fear of lawsuits. Others mentioned the struggle in dealing with co-worker complaints of preferential treatment. The high cost of IT accommodations was discussed. Several companies expressed concerns regarding how far they should be required to accommodate when safety issues are involved, e.g., positions requiring communication on a two-way radio, positions requiring communication in a high noise level environment.

Responses to question #6 can be grouped along several different theme lines:

### Supervisors

- Training new supervisors to work with people with disabilities, overcoming their [supervisors’] fears, helping them see beyond the bottom line of production levels.

### Co-Workers

- Co-workers wanting to know, in the area of reasonable accommodation, “Why does this person get this?”, and not being able to give the co-worker a reason without disclosing a medical issue.
- Co-workers holding individuals with disabilities to too high, or too low, standards and, in the latter case, constantly “cutting them a break.”

### Transportation

- Having to give an employee with a disability a special shift because of a difficult transportation schedule.
- Finding wheelchair-accessible transportation.

### Undereducated Agencies

- Feeling that agencies who support people with disabilities are out of touch with the business community.
- UTA not allowing service animals on the bus or in the canyon (thus making it difficult for employees with disabilities to get to work, in this particular case, to a ski resort.)

### Proper Documentation/Legal

- Recognizing the need for managers to keep documentation showing what accommodations have been made (especially critical should an employee who has been dismissed come back and sue the company).

### Non-visible Disabilities

- Customers not recognizing that an employee has a disability, then complaining that that individual is slow or unresponsive.

**7. What information that you currently *don't* have might help you in your efforts to hire people with disabilities? This might include tips for hiring and working with people with disabilities, legal advice, information on agencies that can provide adaptive equipment for people with disabilities.**

One of the more interesting responses to this question was, “There is a world of information, and I don’t know what I need or what is out there.” More specific requests for information were in the following areas:

- ADA “requirements” when hiring and interviewing. Accommodations—how and when?
- Translators—who do you call to obtain them?
- Adaptive equipment, assistive technology.
- “Best practices,” i.e., what are *other* companies doing?
- Employer responsibility/liability, e.g., “How would I get in trouble if I disciplined someone?”
- A list of state-funded resources.
- Tips and guidelines for interviewing people with disabilities.
- Tax incentives for hiring people with disabilities.
- Drug and alcohol use. “Is this a disability?”, asked one participant.
- The benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

**8. What would be the best ways for the Governor’s Committee to get this information to you? For example, would in-service trainings for you and your staff be helpful, or perhaps a conference or workshop that would include many different employers?**

There was a fairly strong sentiment across a number of focus groups that receiving lengthy written material, and even e-mails, would be too burdensome and time-consuming a method for information exchange. Participants favored quick, easy, and user-friendly methods, in light of how busy they are. Websites were frequently mentioned as such a method, as were CDs, since these could be utilized at the user’s discretion. For the same reason, a hotline was mentioned a number of times, a single “point of contact” when questions arose, a number people could call to “problem solve” and “trouble shoot.” (Said one individual: “Just give us a name and a phone number.”) Another suggestion was one-page fact sheets, i.e., something that could be “digested” quickly. One participant said she wouldn’t mind receiving information in a video.

Participants also saw the value in being able to network with other employers, who could share what works—or doesn’t work—in recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with disabilities. Mentioned specifically in the call center focus group was the Wasatch Networking Group, and the manufacturing focus group discussed the possibility of forming a Business Leadership Network (BLN) in Utah.

There were mixed feelings about the value of conferences and workshops as a means of sharing information. While some people favored them, others, especially smaller employers, felt they didn’t have enough time or financial resources to attend. Some participants suggested including information on hiring people with disabilities within larger, existing conferences, e.g., trade association conferences, as opposed to dedicating an entire conference or workshop to disability. This, they felt, would allow for more efficient use of their time.

**9. How would you advise the Governor’s Committee to approach employers who have never hired people with disabilities, to get our “foot in the door” and overcome any hesitation they may have?**

One participant said it was important to “fully educate” companies about what they can expect when hiring and training a person with a disability. One individual remarked that he didn’t want “government” encouraging his company to do anything, a sentiment that surfaced across several focus groups. Several participants were wary and distrustful of government involvement and anything that felt like compliance. Said one individual: “Government agencies are not there to help you. They are there to pick at you and find

fault...We are always seeking out best practices, and there is not a government agency that can tell us what that is. Other companies are the ones to look to.”

Other specific suggestions for approaching employers who have never hired people with disabilities included:

- Sharing “case histories” from companies within the same industry.
- Giving employers information they can use.
- Helping employers understand what ADA compliance really is. “If we knew what compliance was, we wouldn’t be scared,” remarked one participant.
- Airing something like the ThinkAbility campaign or other TV ads, especially during news hours when employers are likely to be watching.
- Talking about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
- Developing conference agenda items pertinent to hiring people with disabilities.

### **10. Is there anything else you can think of that the Governor’s Committee could provide to employers that would help them recruit, hire, and retain people with disabilities?**

There were few responses to this final question. One person suggested working with people with a disability at a younger age, giving youth with disabilities the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers to gain work skills. This same individual wondered if school-to-work programs were available to students with disabilities. Another suggested teaching people with disabilities how to apply for a job, how to interview, and how to make a good first impression.

Finally, one participant suggested having people with disabilities be involved in company policy in this area, including them in the planning stages of training and accommodations. This person saw value in looking at the points of view of people with disabilities, “rather than telling them what we think they need.”

### **OBSERVATIONS**

In conducting the focus groups and writing this report, the authors found several issues to be particularly noteworthy and wish to share these with the Governor’s Committee:

- There is debate over the best “point of entry” for recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with disabilities: senior management or human resources. The authors believe support from both would be most advantageous.
- It is critical that co-workers learn how to interact and communicate with individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Without this interaction and communication, people with disabilities will become increasingly isolated in their jobs.
- It would be helpful to research the average cost of accommodations in the workplace. National data tend to show that these costs are not nearly as high as many managers believe. Sharing this information with employers may allay fears about the “high cost” of accommodations.
- Many focus group participants expressed the desire to have a single “point of contact,” e.g., a hotline, that could be used exclusively by employers to get “straight answers” quickly, especially in the area of ADA accommodations.
- Employers feel the best way to get information on hiring and working with people with disabilities is by networking with other employers. They are wary of “government” telling them what to do, and, to the extent the Governor’s Committee is perceived as “government,” there may be resistance to

Committee efforts and initiatives.

- In actually hiring people with disabilities, many employers appear to be motivated by fear, e.g., of lawsuits centering around discrimination and ADA accommodation issues, rather than by “altruistic” reasons, e.g., leveling the playing field for individuals with disabilities. This “fear factor” has important implications for whatever initiatives the Governor’s Committee ultimately undertakes.
- In the focus groups, a number of examples were given of individuals who became disabled *after* they were hired (see, for example, the first quote under question #4). While the Governor’s Committee may focus its primary efforts on getting individuals with “pre-existing” disabilities hired, it may be good PR to also assist employers in those situations where disabilities occur post-hiring.