

Editorial

Deficit marketing: Good intentions, bad results

Imagine that you were out of work and in urgent need of a job. In this situation, you might seek a career counselor with the reasonable expectation that this individual's expertise would maximize your chances for a successful job search. Now, imagine that your counselor started in on your case by randomly calling businesses, with no clear idea of what sort of work went on in those businesses or what jobs were available. What if your counselor then described you as someone who could only do the easiest jobs, and would probably not be able to manage all the tasks associated with those jobs? What if they suggested that you start out as a volunteer? What would you think of the service you were getting if the counselor went on to say that you were willing to work for less than the standard wage, and tried to entice the business into hiring you with promises of tax credits or salary subsidies? Naturally, you would consider this to be totally unacceptable. Yet this is exactly how professionals in the rehabilitation industry – with the best of intentions – approach job placement for people with disabilities.

Deficit marketing, that is, using negative descriptors to “sell” a potential employee, is an approach that is totally at odds with the business mindset. Indeed, it seems downright absurd when applied to an able-bodied person. Yet, it is firmly ingrained in rehabilitation practices, not by design, but rather as a sort of organic by-product of the structure of rehabilitation industry. In some cases, the programs and procedures put into place to help people with disabilities get jobs end up stigmatizing them or setting them apart. It's no wonder that rehabilitation professionals repeatedly come up against skeptical or unwilling employers, and they can hardly be blamed for concluding that business has no interest in hiring people with disabilities. Certainly, there is more that business could do, but it is equally important that the rehabilitation industry take a hard look at entrenched and self-defeating practices.

Let's start with the initial contact with the business. Rehabilitation counselors often make cold calls to businesses. Unless you are an unusually skilled talker, this is a sure way to get the relationship off to a bad start. A cold call immediately sets the counselor apart as a non-business person with a non-business approach. That is, someone who does not understand business culture, rules or procedures. Further, it gives the impression that this is not serious or well-considered request. An equally unproductive, but commonly used approach – particularly in school-to-work programs – is to suggest that an individual enter the workplace as a volunteer. Without doubt, volunteering at a hospital, or other not-for-profit organization, is a worthwhile activity that should be considered by everyone in the position to do so, but it is not a pathway to employment. Anyone hoping to gain employment through an unpaid work experience needs to enter the workplace through the “student intern door”, not the “volunteer door.”

In some cases, it is the jargon of the rehabilitation industry that undermines a job candidates chances. Take the term “job carving”; it makes sense to a rehabilitation professional. It simply refers to the modification of job duties to fit the particular skills of a job candidate. This is something that happens routinely in the workplace. For example, an individual might be hired as a social worker, but once on the job might display a particular aptitude for computers. That person might end up spending more time working on the department website and database than seeing clients. They're not doing the exact same thing as the other social workers, and they're not doing what was expected at the time of hiring; but they are making an equal contribution to the department, nonetheless. This sort of scenario might seem entirely logical to a manager when it is described in this way, but when it is framed in terms of “job carving” it connotes a job performance that is incomplete

or lacking rather than simply different. When rehabilitation agencies initiate the conversation by bringing up job carving, they not only send a negative message to the employer, they may also be underestimating their consumers. By making too many a priori assumptions about job candidates' capabilities, they rob potential employees of the opportunity to prove themselves.

Another example of self-defeating industry jargon is the term, "job-coaching". Why is it that a person with a disability needs a special word for something that is known as "orientation" for all other employees? Businesses routinely spend a great deal to orient new staff. In a hospital, for example, a new nurse often works with a preceptor for as long as 6 months. In a bank, it is not unusual for newly hired managers to spend a good part of their first year of employment in training. Job coaching is a necessity, but it is a necessity for everyone, not just people with disabilities. If we simply refer to it as orientation or training, it is transformed from a special accommodation for the person with a disability – and a nuisance to the business – to a familiar concept that is understood and valued by business.

Employers that hire people with disabilities may be eligible for tax credits, and in some cases may be granted permission, through special provisions in the Fair Labor Standards Act, to pay less than the prevailing wage. Employers should be informed of these programs where applicable, but they should never be used as a selling point for a job candidate. Although intended to provide incentives, these programs actually have the paradoxical effect of being a disincentive for hiring – setting up an expectation of failure and giving the impression that the candidate is a high-risk hire or a known poor performer. On a larger scale, it feeds into the erroneous perception that people with disabilities, in general, will not make a positive contribution to the workplace and are not capable of true competitive employment.

Funding for disability issues continues to grow, and the disability industry grows along with it. But so far, while this growth has had a positive impact on employment for rehabilitation workers, it has not translated

into a better employment outlook for people with disabilities. Certainly, this is a complex issue, and many factors enter into this outcome, but the habit of deficit marketing is one clear barrier that is within the power of the rehabilitation industry to change. It is a habit that can only be routed out when we start to look at job placement, not from a traditional rehabilitation perspective, but from the perspective of employers and of people with disabilities. The key to doing this is to look at every practice and ask two simple questions: Is this consistent with normal business hiring procedures? Would I want to work or be hired under these conditions? Such reflection leads to the surprisingly simple conclusion that what works for people without disabilities also works for people with disabilities:

1. Look for a job that matches the interests and skills of the job candidate.
2. Learn as much as you can about a business before you make a call.
3. Focus on the skills and good attitude that the job candidate would bring to the business.
4. Don't give the business the impression that hiring the candidate would be a philanthropic gesture. Instead, make them feel lucky to be getting this person!

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