

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
Putting Ability to Work

By Jackie Gast, Director

Recently, the ESBLN held a networking meeting for job placement counselors who serve people with disabilities. Of the five agencies represented, if transportation were a non-issue, it was estimated that 90 more individuals would be available for employment. There are many more than five agencies on the eastern shore of Maryland that work to get individuals employed so I can only imagine what that number would be if all agencies were counted. Because of the rural nature of this area, the public transit system cannot justify increasing the number of runs. In addition, the bus schedules do not always meet the time schedules employers need.

So what creative things can employers do? Would employers consider subsidizing an employee's transportation cost especially if that employee is a good, solid worker? Our local experience is that people with disabilities have an 85% retention rate. Consider transportation cost versus the cost of re-recruiting, re-hiring, and re-training. Also consider coordinating work schedules with public transit schedules.

Management styles greatly influence the success rate of hiring people with disabilities, particularly for those with developmental disabilities. Those who have good communication skills and are flexible are more successful, focusing on abilities rather than disabilities. This may mean customizing the job to fit the employee or simply trading tasks among employees. How many jobs and how much time could be saved if we just learned how to communicate! Employers are people too. I think about a friend that would rather give away her first born than have a confrontation. The job counselors at the networking meeting all had experiences with employers who let an employee go before trying to work things out. Many times, just a small adjustment is needed for success. It goes both ways. One employee quit because he wanted more hours but did not adequately communicate that to his employer. The employer reluctantly accepted his resignation but did not ask questions. When the counselor followed up, she was able to set things straight. The employee was rehired and all was good again but a work week had been lost. Flexibility and customizing jobs applies to the elderly and for young mothers trying to achieve independence as well.

Not too long ago, people with disabilities were segregated from the mainstream. Recently, schools have made huge strides for acceptance through "inclusion", meaning students with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classes. The mind set of many older parents is to shelter and protect. There are many individuals who work in sheltered workshops that are able to work elsewhere but do not want to leave their comfort zone. The mind set of many younger parents is to get their children a job and to be independent. This changing mind set will greatly influence the number of available workers entering the workforce. With a job retention rate at 85%, that is a pretty decent labor pool from which to recruit.