



Effective Workplace Practices: Accessible Technology and Employment

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I. INTRODUCTION

With 600 million people worldwide and 54 million people in the US living with disabilities, it is essential that corporations commit to the philosophy of inclusion and equal opportunity for people with disabilities. And with the development of innovative technologies—spanning such areas as transportation, health care, information technology, the Internet, and telecommunications—it is essential that they are both accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. To create truly accessible and usable technologies, it is imperative that their designers and developers incorporate into their innovations the principles of universal design, accessibility, usability, and compatibility with assistive technology. But for these accessible technologies to take root and impact how and to what extent individuals with disabilities work, leaders and decision-makers in the corporate, government, and academic sectors must recognize the importance of accessible technology and collaborate in implementing the changes necessary to foster a culture of inclusion.

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies, led by Economic Systems Inc. and supported by Bender Consulting Services, Inc., held four policy conferences on accessible workplace technologies in 2009. The policy conferences were held in Pittsburgh, PA (June 2009), Atlanta, GA (in conjunction with the National Industry Liaison Group's Annual Conference in July 2009), Las Vegas, NV (September 2009), and in Chicago, IL (in conjunction with the Assistive Technology Industry Association in October 2009). Practices to increase employment of people with disabilities and ensure accessible workplace technology infrastructures were discussed, and effective practices employed by leading companies were identified and are described in this document. Examples of how these effective practices were implemented are also noted.

Additionally, the Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies asked the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) to develop six case studies related to the successful business strategies. These case studies are referenced in this document and are included within Appendix A.

II. SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS STRATEGIES

The following business strategies are essential to creating a culture of inclusion of people with disabilities, as well as an organization-wide commitment to the creation and implementation of accessible technology systems providing a platform for increasing employment of people with disabilities.

An accessible workplace is essential to the full participation and efficiency of people with disabilities. To be truly accessible, a workplace must support the following:

- A welcoming environment
- An effective strategy and policies to recruit, retain, and support people with disabilities
- An environment that is committed to developing, procuring and implementing accessible technology

To that end, this document provides additional detail for the following successful effective practices, initially identified as successful business strategies at the Business Dialogue on Accessible Technology and Disability Employment. These effective practices are demonstrated by committed organizations to enhance the employment of persons with disabilities and ensure an accessible workplace technology infrastructure.

1. Securing Leadership by Creating a Network of Champions

There is a need to secure leadership through a network of champions consisting of executives throughout multiple lines of business, as well as corporate policymakers and enforcers. While it is important that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company maintains a commitment to including people with disabilities within the workforce, it is equally important to have multiple executives who maintain this commitment as well. This ensures a sustained effort amidst changes in the executive leadership; with multiple leaders committed, efforts to proactively employ those with disabilities are sustained even if individual leaders are replaced. Effective practices that were identified within this category include the following.

Educating Executive Leadership

Committed CEOs communicate their commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities within their workforce to the executive leadership team and throughout the organization using multiple messaging channels. One committed organization mandated language focused on hiring of people with disabilities within their executive leaderships' performance appraisal goals, thus ensuring that performance in this area is tracked and measured.

In addition, this organization assigned a senior leader to sponsor an employee resource group focused on disability. This leader actively participates in their disability-related events. The company believes that senior leadership participation sends a positive message throughout the organization, while senior leadership absence sends a negative message regarding commitment to hiring people with disabilities. The committed executives of this organization ensure their message is shared using organization-wide tools such as newsletters and the intranet.

According to the executive leader, “Leadership starts at the top. The measure of success comes not from opening the door, but from hiring someone with a disability.”

Creating an Executive Office Statement of Corporate Commitment

Committed organizations demonstrate their commitment by including supporting language in their mission. As a result, this commitment is viewed by others internally and externally, throughout their corporate offices, as well as on the company’s website. One technology company that provides products to both individuals and businesses modified their mission statement to add the phrase “regardless of age or ability”. This simple phrase conveys a commitment to inclusion of people with disabilities.

Creating an Overall Organizational Commitment from Accessibility Stakeholders throughout the Company

While some companies solely focus on hiring and promotion of people with disabilities within the human resources discipline, committed organizations understand the need to involve multiple stakeholders. Hiring and promotion of people with disabilities requires an organizational commitment to this end, including a commitment to an accessible workplace technology infrastructure.

One company recognized that multiple stakeholders would be required to play an active role in the process to ensure an optimal effort in providing an accessible workplace; executives selected and included associates from human resources, information technology, procurement, and facilities/real estate to serve on the accessibility team. These individuals meet and collaborate on a regular basis. As a result, a more positive outcome has been experienced in the areas of hiring people with disabilities and accessible workplace technology.

2. Making the Business Case

Businesses that hire people with disabilities evidence a workforce of employees who are dedicated, loyal, and committed to excellence. A DePaul study released on January 28, 2008 of 314 employees across several industries indicates participants with disabilities had fewer absences than those without disabilities, and that all participants had nearly

identical job performance ratings. Effective practices that were identified within this category include the following.

Redefining What Constitutes Standard Operating Procedure/Practice

Some organizations consider accessibility an afterthought or a process that, if needed at all, is executed at the end of a technology development process. This traditional philosophy needs to be reset to ensure that companies understand that accessibility efforts should be a part of the standard operating procedures and practices.

A leading company clearly understands the business case of including people with disabilities within the workplace, as well as the need for an accessible workplace to allow these employees to reach their optimal performance. They have included accessibility with other disciplines, such as security and privacy, to communicate to the organization that accessibility is a part of standard operating procedures. To support this effort specifically they have developed an accessibility development lifecycle, which is executed within each phase of their technology development, deployment, and support processes.

Recognizing Changing Demographics of the Workforce

As the number of persons with disabilities and functional limitations increases, employers will need to be more focused on accessible technology as the great equalizer for productivity. In 2003, Microsoft commissioned a study, *The Market for Accessible Technology—The Wide Range of Abilities and its Impact on Computer Use*, that was conducted by Forrester Research. The study of 18 to 64 year old computer users indicated that 57 percent of the individuals surveyed can benefit from the use of accessible technology. As a result, when businesses are focused on streamlining functions and reducing costs, providing accessible technology to support employees will be positive for businesses.

Mitigating Legal Risk

Ensuring accessible technology both internally for employees and externally for customers will mitigate risk associated with lawsuits and negative public relations. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities shape the legislation and regulation landscape requiring businesses to ensure that their workplace is accessible for people with disabilities. Leading companies remain abreast of legislation and regulations, communicate those requirements, and develop policies, practices, and programs supporting them. Providing accessible

workplace technology ensures compliance with laws and regulations and prevents negative public relations and risk associated with lawsuits.

Improving Productivity and Reducing Costs

Ensuring accessibility and usability of technology in the workplace provides an infrastructure that allows people with disabilities to be successful in the workplace. In addition, these accessibility and usability features frequently enable those without disabilities to also realize productivity gains, while simultaneously reducing costs. For example, a leading health care provider implemented a new system to track information related to patient care. Employees who were not identified as individuals with disabilities were experiencing difficulty in reading the information on the monitor. In response to the feedback from the employees, the information technology department deployed a screen magnification software package for all individuals who used this health care software package. The screen magnification software allowed for personalized settings that could be customized for each user. As a result of implementing this screen magnification solution, productivity increased. This solution will also reduce errors associated with small difficult to read font sizes.

The “making the business” successful business strategies within the original Roadmap document also included the following topics:

- **Framing the Issue:** Identify the market as a driving force behind initiatives adopted by businesses (e.g., return on investment, direct and indirect benefits to employees, direct and indirect benefits to the company).
- **Personalizing the Issue:** Share examples of how accessible technology and employment have positively impacted employees with disabilities.
- **Developing a Contemporary Talent Management Strategy:** Communicate to the untapped labor pool of people with disabilities, particularly in light of the threat posed by the retirement of large numbers of baby boomers.
- **Focusing on Accessibility as a Differentiator:** The company is recognized as an exemplary employer, as accessible information and communications technology benefits those with disabilities, the aging population, and those individuals who do not align with English as their primary language.
- **Enhancing Retention by Adopting Turnover Prevention Strategies:** It is less expensive to provide accessible technology and accommodations for injured employees or those who age and align with disabling conditions than it is to pay disability claims or lose an asset who has valuable business knowledge.

- **Responding to Public Concerns:** The company's community standing is enhanced when it is responsive to current public issues, such as the reintegration of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with disabilities.

Additional information supported by the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy regarding communicating the business case for employing and creating accessible workplace infrastructures can be found at <http://www.earnworks.com/businesscase>.

3. Refining and Advancing Corporate Policies, Practices and Programs

It is important to include people with disabilities in the corporate vision and mission statements as well as the company's diversity, customer service, communications, mentoring, recruiting, telecommuting, technology accessibility, and procurement programs. Refining and advancing corporate policies, practices, and programs are critical to enhancing the employment of people with disabilities and providing a commitment to accessible workplace technologies. Effective practices that were identified within this category include the following.

Corporate Procurement Policies

Leading companies adopt criteria for the purchase and use of information and communication technology to prevent the need for more costly interoperability fixes. One example of effective practices in this area is a company that includes three words when procuring technology within their requests for proposal: Provide Accessible Solutions. This company indicates that these three words mandate that partners must provide accessible solutions.

This same company has also established a mandate for the assessment of accessibility characteristics for all new products, and has ensured the integration of accessibility requirements into their development processes. This mandate applies to all products produced, marketed, or sold by the company and their subsidiaries, even if the product uses parts not developed by them. They indicate that accessibility is one of the criteria they use to select vendors or suppliers, and is identified as a requirement when procuring components from third parties.

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, "Adopting procurement policies for purchase and use of accessible information and communications technology and devices". This case study, indicated as Case Study #2, is included in Appendix A.

Recruitment Policies and Practices

Leading companies implement accessible on-line application systems and other human resources systems to ensure access to all people with disabilities for hiring and promotional opportunities.

One leading organization has established an innovative regional partnership model to increase the employment of people with disabilities. This model includes a one-year cooperative experience to increase the employability of persons with disabilities. With over 60 percent of people with disabilities considered outside the labor force according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, people with disabilities are often overlooked for professional employment due to a lack of work experience.¹ This leading company provides a one-year cooperative experience to remove this barrier to competitive employment in professional areas. This partnership model includes an integral partner who identifies the skills that are in demand at employers within the community and ensures the participating individuals with disabilities align with those skills. This ensures that the worker has on-going competitive employment after the one-year cooperative experience.

This company has had a history of hiring people with disabilities, and has established this program to demonstrate an increase the employment of people with disabilities within the community, removing the lack of work experience barrier.

Internships, Mentoring, and Shadowing Programs

Providing internships, mentoring, and shadowing programs gives the organization and the individual with a disability the opportunity to gain experience, which enables leading companies to use existing programs to populate the pool of people from which they choose direct hires with people with disabilities.

One example of an effective practice identified is a company who has had a long history of providing mentoring, shadowing, and internship programs. This company has demonstrated success in hiring associates after graduation from the pool of those who participate in these programs. As an effective practice, this company began to include people with disabilities within the already existing mentoring, shadowing, and internship programs. As a result, several people with disabilities have been directly hired by this company upon completion of their academic experience. This program demonstrates that companies do not always need to establish new programs to provide

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "New Monthly Data Series on the Employment Status of People with a Disability", *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*, Washington, DC: Department of Labor (2009): Available <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsdisability.htm> (Accessed November 18, 2009).

a feeder for recruitment; instead, they can use already-existing programs and simply ensure that an adequate number of students with disabilities participate.

Their mentoring programs have also resulted in associates with disabilities being promoted within their company.

Workplace Technology Accessibility

Leading companies are committed to ensuring accessibility of their internal and external Web applications, as well as all of their application systems used within the workplace. The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Ensuring workplace accessibility of information technology and telecommunications systems”. This case study, indicated as Case Study #1, is included in Appendix A.

Specifically, some federal contractors are ensuring access to their on-line application selection systems, which are used by individuals who are applying for a position via the Internet.

An example of an approach to ensuring workplace accessibility of application systems demonstrated by one federal contractor includes the following:

- **Establish accessibility requirements:** This company has established requirements based on the standards established by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- **Develop an accessibility plan:** This approach includes an accessibility development lifecycle.
- **Implement the plan:** This is based on priorities of accessibility feature requirements.
- Establish a system to track feature requests and provide for continuous improvements in accessibility.

Product Research & Development

Universal design is the concept and process of making things usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities, and within the broadest range of circumstances, as possible. Leading companies understand the business benefits of using accessible and universal design concepts to ensure accessible products for employees and customers. Employees are more productive when accessible workplace technology is available to them, and companies that create products that are accessible are able to sell those products to a wider range of customers.

One business leader noted that universal design is not extra work—it is doing the right work the first time. This leader’s business therefore focuses on the following items during the design process:

- Designing for people with disabilities
- Designing for all users in limiting conditions, such as a “situational disability”
- Making products flexible enough to accommodate a diverse population and the different ways in which people use them
- Where a product cannot itself support all users, designing so that it is compatible with assistive technology

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Using Accessible and Universal Design Concepts to Develop Accessible Products for Employees and Customers”. This case study, identified as Case Study #3, is included in Appendix A.

The successful business strategies for “refining and advancing corporate policies, practices, and programs” found in the original *Roadmap* document also included the following topics:

- ***Vision and Mission Statements:*** Statements recognize the commitment to universal design and accessible technology to support the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- ***Overarching Plan:*** Designs an overall plan supporting corporate and strategic partnership initiatives, including identifying champions and collaboration opportunities.
- ***Diversity Program:*** Establishes disability as a part of the diversity program, including mechanisms for directly reporting to the CEO and board of directors. This should also include a commitment to equal opportunity and non-discrimination, working with vendors to ensure their commitment to employment of people with disabilities, and subcontracting programs for entrepreneurs with disabilities.
- ***Disability Retention, Management and Prevention Programs:*** Establishes a commitment to workers remaining part of the workforce.
- ***Telecommuting Programs:*** Provides flexible programs for working at home or at other remote sites.
- ***Model for Other Companies:*** Showcases its operations in employing people with disabilities and creating an accessible workplace technology environment.

4. Implementing Corporate Infrastructures and Organizational Strategies

Key corporate infrastructures and organizational strategies are required to realize and sustain the vision articulated in the policies, practices, and programs described above. Effective practices that were identified in this category include the following.

Designation of Authority/Centralized Responsibility

Leading employers understand the importance of appointing and empowering associates who have the ability and credibility to provide input on disability matters relating to employee and customer issues. One leading technology company has created an organization whose purpose is to establish policies, practices, and programs to ensure the accessibility of workplace technologies. Their responsibilities include the following:

- Facilitate a workgroup of executives across multiple departments, including human resources, information technology, procurement, and facilities
- Optimize the accommodation process to centralize information regarding accommodations and providers, as well as to centralize the financing process of those accommodations
- Evaluate the accessibility of new products at pre-defined checkpoints in the research and development process
- Communicate the message of shared responsibility for accessibility between business units and the information technology group
- Develop and maintain relationships with strategic accessibility partners
- Document and maintain success stories

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Assigning responsibility and authority within the organization for realizing the commitment to equality and full access for people with disabilities”. This case study, identified as Case Study #4, is included in Appendix A.

Employee Resource Groups

Leading companies committed to diversity have established employee resource groups to gather information, feedback, and knowledge of disability issues from participants in the group, including employees with disabilities. One leading company that has developed a strong disability employee resource group across the United States has found the following practices to be effective:

- Develop a collaborative process that identifies diversity and inclusion champions, create communication strategies, and provide for strategic partnerships and alliances
- Create regional and local disability employee resource groups that interact with the corporate council, led by the CEO of the company
- Communicate disability employment and empowerment messages using internal and external websites, corporate communications channels, corporate and line of business newsletters, and “brown bag” lunches and other diversity awareness events
- Include issues and initiatives related to disability with all diversity-related strategic partnerships
- Align interested disability employee resource group participants with formal and informal mentoring programs
- Collaborate with the internal human resources department to leverage a pipeline of candidates with disabilities for open positions through disability employee resource group partnerships and alliances

Centralized Accommodation (including Assistive Technology) Strategies

Leading companies establish a center of expertise and funding for assistive technology and accommodation. As technology for both workplace application systems and disability-specific assistive technologies advances, providing centralized financing, information, and support for the accommodations processes have been found to be vitally effective practices.

The key factors identified by one company for a centralized accommodations group process include the following:

- Develop key partners within the organization from human resources, information technology, procurement, and facilities; these partners should meet on a regular basis
- Provide services, resources, and support to the human resources department when accommodations are required for the interview process. Also provide services to managers who have new or existing employees needing accommodations.
- Provide centralized funding for accommodations, thus removing accommodations from the hiring manager’s budget process
- Communicate success stories, including the message of hiring and promoting talent with disabilities

- Maintain strategic relationships with groups like the Job Accommodation Network to maintain up-to-date products and effective practice information regarding accommodations,

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Adopting procurement policies for purchase and use of accessible information and communications technology and devices”. This case study, identified as Case Study #2, is included in Appendix A and shares additional detail about the benefits of the centralized processes as well as the flexibility of a shared model of provisioning accommodations and financing for companies where the centralized process needs to be adapted.

Strategic Partnerships

Leading companies align their disability employment, accessibility, and accommodations initiatives with expert recommendations by developing a network of government, community, and corporate partnerships, thereby building a network of ‘best practices’ information-sharing.

One company has demonstrated particular success in increasing the employment of people with disabilities and educating of their workforce on this issue by developing innovative strategic partnerships. These partnerships have specifically assisted them in creating a talent pool of candidates with disabilities from which to fill their open positions. In addition, they have also utilized the valuable information about effective and reasonable accommodations obtained through their partners. Finally, their partners have assisted them in communicating the message about diversity by participating in diversity speakers events.

This company has identified the following practices as being instrumental to producing successful outcomes from the partnership:

- Educate partners about the company’s business objectives from both a line of business and a community outreach perspective
- Develop target partnership goals to indicate success and provide a measurement mechanism
- Include the partners in related events to make the partners aware of the culture of the company, as well as the formats of other outreach programs that are not focused specifically on the disability inclusion audience
- Provide feedback to the strategic partners regarding the success of their collective efforts, and propose quality improvement initiatives
- Promote the partnership within the community and to other businesses as a mechanism for increasing employment of people with disabilities

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Developing strategic partnerships including a network of government, community and corporate entities to best address disability issues”. This case study, identified as Case Study #5, is included in Appendix A.

Accountability Mechanisms and Continuous Improvement

Leading businesses understand the concept of creating accountability mechanisms and continuous improvement processes to ensure successful outcomes. In addition, they believe that this action is an effective practice as it relates to the inclusion of people with disabilities within their workforce. These mechanisms and practices have been applied throughout many companies in areas related to hiring, retention, promotion, accommodations, workforce education, and the accessibility of technology.

One company in particular has created comprehensive accountability mechanisms and continuous improvement processes for web accessibility. The process used to identify, prioritize, and repair web accessibility issues is as follows:

- Identify the critical “use cases” that users of the system must successfully perform on a regular basis
- Perform an assessment to determine if the web pages that support these “use cases” are accessible
- Prioritize the accessibility issues on these web pages, as well as those found on the web pages supporting non-critical “use cases”
- Fix the priority accessibility problems
- Document progress
- Sustain and improve the accessibility of the website

By assessing and creating an inventory of accessibility issues, assessing and prioritizing the issues, and repairing and documenting the progress, this company focuses on being accountable and providing for continuous improvement in the area of website accessibility.

The Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies developed a case study related to this subject, “Instituting accountability measurement and continuous improvement processes to track outcomes”. This case study, identified as Case Study #6, is included in Appendix A.

The successful business strategies for “implementing corporate infrastructure and organizational strategies” in the original *Roadmap* document also included the following topics:

- ***Informal Network of Employees Impacted by Disability:*** Include employees whose children, spouses, siblings, and other family members are living with disability in discussion forums.
- ***Team Approach:*** Implement a cross-functional team approach enabling managers who do not have experience in hiring and managing employees with disabilities to access a network of managers who do.
- ***Professional Development:*** Increase the knowledge level of associates as it relates to disability employment and accessibility issues through training sessions, and newsletters.

APPENDIX A: ACCESSIBLE WORKPLACE TECHNOLOGIES CASE STUDIES

The US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) awarded a contract to Economic Systems Inc. (EconSys) to create a series of case studies on topics related to accessible technology and disability employment through the Collaborative on Accessible Workplace Technologies. The Collaborative, which includes Economic Systems Inc. and Bender Consulting Services Inc., asked the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) to create six case studies on the topics listed below:

1. Ensuring workplace accessibility of information technology and telecommunications systems;
2. Adopting corporate procurement policies for purchase and use of accessible information and communications technology and devices;
3. Using accessible and universal design concepts to develop accessible products for employees and customers;
4. Assigning responsibility and authority within the organization for realizing the commitment to equality and full access for people with disabilities as employees and customers;
5. Developing strategic partnerships including a network of government, community, and corporate entities to best address disability issues; and
6. Instituting accountability measurement and continuous improvement processes to track outcomes.

AAPD contacted fifteen companies that have made a commitment to accessibility and/or disability employment. Nine of the fifteen companies were interviewed to elicit information about policies and practices being used today to create disability-friendly workplaces. Some companies were interviewed on all of the topics; others provided input only on some of the topics. Participating companies represented a variety of industries, including health care, technology, consulting, insurance, and retail. Some of the participating companies have also been acknowledged by the US Department of Labor for their commitment to the employment of Americans with disabilities.

After conducting the interviews, AAPD summarized and analyzed the data collected in the interviews. In addition to reporting on practices that leading companies are using today to increase accessibility and to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities, the case studies also identify areas for improvement. Finally, at the end of some of the case studies,

the Collaborative has provided resources that provide additional information and tools related to accessibility and disability employment issues.

Case Study 1

Refining and Advancing Corporate Policies, Practices, And Programs: Ensuring workplace accessibility of information technology and telecommunications systems

Ensuring accessibility of information technology (IT) and telecommunications systems is essential to improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities in the 21st century. This case study examines companies' efforts to make their IT and telecommunications systems accessible to people with a variety of disabilities and to ensure that employees' assistive technology works effectively with these systems.

Details

Increasingly, computer access and literacy are critical to successful employment in many sectors. Companies committed to improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities and serving the disability market must improve the accessibility of their IT and telecommunications systems to people with a wide range of disabilities. Not only must the systems be accessible, the companies must also devote resources to ensuring that employees with disabilities have appropriate assistive technology and that this technology works well with the company's systems.

The challenge in creating accessible systems is to provide programmatic access to a wide range of people. People with disabilities may need to have information delivered in a different way, but the goal should be to provide them access to all of the information in the system that is available to similarly situated employees or customers without disabilities.

Once a company makes a commitment to ensuring that its systems are accessible to people with disabilities, it must do the following:

- Establish requirements
- Develop an accessibility plan
- Design and implement the plan
- Establish a system for feedback and iterative improvements in accessibility

These efforts will often require a significant commitment of resources and funds. Accessibility experts are available to provide consulting services to companies that do not have the expertise internally to improve the accessibility of their systems. Across corporate America, significant

progress is needed to ensure that people with disabilities are able to participate fully in commerce through information technology.

General Considerations

Much of the emphasis on accessibility has focused on the needs of people with vision and hearing disabilities and on the needs of people with impairments that affect manual dexterity. Going forward, more research needs to be done on accessibility and usability for people with cognitive disabilities. A technology framework needs to be created and implemented.

Providing access for people with one disability often has a multiplier effect. For example, some companies have included a spoken interface to provide access to people with impairments that affect manual dexterity. These companies learned that many members of the general public also find the spoken interface useful for a variety of reasons. In addition, captioning developed for people who are deaf or hard of hearing is used widely in sports bars, airport lounges, health clubs, and other venues. This multiplier effect allows companies to spread the development expense over a larger group of users.

With the growth of email and instant messaging technologies, there is less focus on telecommunications relay services than in the past. Nevertheless, leading companies continue to make equipment available to employees who use it, and they continue to use relay services to communicate with customers. Companies are aware of the need for captioning, but budgetary constraints limit their ability to caption all videos. Greater industry collaboration on captioning standards and technology could help ameliorate this problem.

Accessibility Requirements

The first step a company must take is establishing its accessibility requirements. In establishing accessibility requirements, leading companies have reviewed the standards established by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act but have not simply adopted the current technical requirements of those standards. Rather, companies have synthesized these standards into their own accessibility programs. Leaders believe that the more helpful standards speak to objectives rather than specific solutions. References to the standards should not be to the current technical requirements but rather should be to the standards as they evolve.

Leading companies look to these standards as a baseline for accessibility, but as one company noted, a disservice is done to the individual if accessibility only reaches that benchmark. Flexibility is essential. In other words, while the standards create a necessary baseline, they are insufficient to provide accessibility for people with a wide range of disabilities. As one leader noted, the design challenge is to come up with systems that are adaptable to individual needs.

Ideally, all members of a company's IT team would have a working knowledge of accessibility issues. At most companies today, there is still a centralized point of contact on the IT team for accessibility issues. One downside of channeling accessibility issues to an individual or centralized group is that a single person may not be able to solve every accessibility concern. Broadening the group addressing accessibility issues focuses more creative thinking on the problems and will over time lead to better solutions.

To continue to increase accessibility, experts should develop more automated tests as well as libraries and frameworks for accessibility. Accessibility testing by users with disabilities is also an important step in the process. While testing is necessarily limited by the degree to which accessibility varies among users, feedback from individual users remains critical. As one leader noted, "If you want products to be accessible, hire people who need them."

Assistive Technology

In addition to increasing the accessibility of their IT and telecommunications systems, to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities companies must ensure that employees are provided with assistive technology and that the technology is compatible with the companies' IT systems. For employees who are hired through recruiting sources targeted at the disability community or new hires with apparent disabilities, leading companies have established procedures to provide assistive technology and to make sure that it works efficiently with the company's IT and telecommunications systems. A focus on the efficient operation of assistive technology is especially important if employees with disabilities are in jobs where they are rated on the number of items they complete in a certain time period. Companies also need to ensure that employees who acquire disabilities, or who have disabilities that are not apparent, are aware of the types of assistive technology that are available and of the company's process for requesting it.

Leading companies are able to share information about available assistive technologies with employees with disabilities. At some companies, there are internal resources with substantial expertise on accessibility issues. Other companies have access to experts through their strategic partners. Leading companies also use resources like the Job Accommodation Network to learn about accommodations that might be appropriate for their employees. One leading company posts information about assistive technology on its intranet so that employees and managers can review it and become more knowledgeable.

Continuous Improvement Processes

To foster improvements in accessibility, there must be a mechanism for users to learn about accessibility features and provide feedback. Some companies report updates and/or obtain feedback from users on blogs focused on accessibility issues. Other companies receive feedback through email boxes.

At some leading companies, there is a specific feedback mechanism for accessibility concerns. At other companies, feedback is directed to a centralized source and then routed to the accessibility experts. As long as it is clear how feedback on accessibility should be provided and the people receiving the feedback are trained on accessibility issues, either of these systems can work. In determining how to channel feedback, companies should make sure that the feedback can be gathered and reported.

Results

Inherent in accessibility is the need for flexibility and receptiveness to feedback from individual users.

Companies need to commit to ensuring that their IT and telecommunications systems become increasingly accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities. Increasing accessibility often requires a dedication of resources and funds. While standards must be adopted, they simply create the baseline and are not the solution.

To date, significant focus has been placed on improving accessibility for users with vision and hearing disabilities and for people with impairments that affect manual dexterity. Going forward, increased focus should be placed on improving accessibility and usability for people with cognitive and other impairments.

To improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities, emphasis must be placed on ensuring that new hires and employees who acquire disabilities have access to assistive technology devices that will help them perform their jobs.

Increasing the general level of expertise on accessibility issues is a necessary part of the solution.

Additional Resources

For standards that can form the basis of an organization's accessibility requirements go to:

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 covers a wide range of recommendations for making Web content more accessible to a wide range of people with disabilities. Following these guidelines will often make Web content more usable for everyone.
- Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act
<http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Content&ID=3>
Federal agencies are required to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. The law applies to all federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain or use electronic and information technology.

For information on accessibility features, go to:

- Microsoft's enable website <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/>
- IBM Human Ability and Accessibility Center's Developer's Guidelines <http://www-03.ibm.com/able/guidelines/index.html>
- Google's new accessibility site <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/10/new-home-for-accessibility-at-google.html>.
- AOL's Accessibility site <http://site.aol.com/accessibility/index.html>
- Tips for Accessible Web Pages <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/webpages.html> gives legal and technical instructions on how to design accessible web pages

For information and experts on assistive technology, go to:

- Universal Design and Assistive Technology in the Workplace <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=Universal+Design+and+Assistive+Technology+in+the+Workplace&aq=f&oq=&aqi=>
This ten-page factsheet describes how to select equipment that has universal design features and assistive technology for individuals with disabilities.
- Accessibility, interoperability and usability in the workplace <http://www.earnworks.com/docs/FactSheets/Employer/FS-ER-Interoperability.pdf>
This two-page document describes the benefits of addressing the accessibility of information technology and its interoperability, or compatibility, with assistive technology.
- Find a certified assistive technology professional at www.resna.org/find/index.php
This webpage lists consultants who have validated knowledge and qualifications in technology and disability.
- Searchable Online Accommodation Resource (SOAR) <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/soar/disabilities.html>
This section of Job Accommodation Network's website gives disability specific accommodation information.

Case Study 2

Refining and Advancing Corporate Policies, Practices and Programs: Adopting procurement policies for purchase and use of accessible information and communications technology and devices

Difficulty in procuring accessible information and communications technology, including devices has been identified as a barrier to employing people with disabilities. Leading companies have focused on developing processes to provide accommodations to employees and have begun to adopt new procurement processes to facilitate the purchase of accessible technology and devices. This case study focuses first on the advantages of instituting a centralized accommodation process and on potential features of the process. It next addresses the need to increase the focus on other procurement practices that could have a positive impact on accessibility. Companies should consider adopting procurement policies that require vendors to provide accessible products and that include companies owned by people with disabilities in supplier diversity programs

Details

Procuring accessible information and communications technology and devices has been identified as a barrier to employing people with disabilities for the following reasons:

- Line managers may be concerned about the expense associated with providing the technology.
- Managers may not understand the company's policy of providing accommodations.
- Managers may not have any knowledge of available products or how and where to obtain them.
- Employees may be reluctant to request accommodations because they fear that their employment will be adversely impacted if they disclose disabilities.
- Employees may be concerned about negotiating accommodations with their supervisors.

Centralized Accommodation Process

Many companies have found that creating a centralized process for providing accommodations to employees with disabilities can alleviate these concerns and can foster an environment in which employees with disabilities are comfortable requesting accommodations and in which

employees receive the tools they need to do their jobs. There is significant variability in how companies have configured their accommodation processes, and some companies believe they succeed in accommodating employees with disabilities without creating a centralized process.

Effective Centralized Accommodations Practices

In general, companies' centralized accommodations processes include the following elements:

- Employees first request accommodations from their managers or local HR representatives.
- The request is then directed through a centralized process, which includes an interactive process among the manager, HR representative, and the centralized resource.
- If necessary, the centralized resource serves as a third party in negotiations, makes recommendations, and guides the process to a conclusion.
- The centralized process may include on-going monitoring after the accommodation is put in place.

Some leading companies work with their procurement departments to compile information about vendors from whom assistive technology can be procured, and have established standard purchase orders for accommodations that are frequently required, such as sign language interpreter services. Other leading companies provide information through their intranets to managers and employees with disabilities about accessibility and other disability-related issues. The ability to learn about the issues online helps managers become more comfortable and creates an atmosphere in which employees are comfortable requesting accommodations.

In some companies, all requests for accommodation are addressed through a centralized process. At other companies, managers or local HR representatives have the authority to approve certain accommodations without using a centralized process.

Fully Centralized Process

A fully-centralized process in which all requests for accommodation are addressed through the centralized process has the advantage of ensuring that all accommodation requests are treated consistently. It also increases consistency and mitigates the risk that managers will provide more extensive accommodations than the company's policy contemplates.

Another significant advantage of the fully-centralized system is that the accommodation continues in place if the supervisor changes. In a system that empowers supervisors to approve accommodations, a new supervisor may be reluctant to continue an accommodation. Changes in supervisors may be particularly problematic with accommodations related to flexible scheduling.

An additional benefit of the centralized process is that the employees running it develop expertise concerning available assistive technology and other resources. Even though employees may request different accommodations, this knowledge is valuable in addressing subsequent requests.

Other Approaches

At many companies, managers and local HR representatives have the authority to approve certain accommodations outside of the centralized accommodation process. Accommodations are sent through a centralized process only if the initial decision would be to deny the accommodation request, to propose an alternative accommodation, or if the cost would exceed an established threshold. Allowing approval of certain accommodations locally has the advantage of streamlining the process.

Companies that do not see a need to create a centralized accommodation process believe that they have created a culture in which employees are comfortable requesting accommodations, in which appropriate resources are available to respond to requests for accommodation, and in which accommodation requests are not improperly denied for budgetary reasons without centralizing the process.

Funding Of Accommodations

Companies have taken different approaches to funding accommodations. Many companies have created a centralized accommodation fund. Other companies centralize the approval process for accommodations but charge the cost of accommodations locally. The argument for centralized funding is that it alleviates all budget concerns on the part of managers and simplifies tracking the amount of money spent on accommodations. The chief argument against centralized funding is that it is too difficult to establish and manage a budget for accommodations given the variability in the number and cost of accommodations. Since most accommodations are inexpensive, some companies believe that the cost of accounting for the centralized funding outweighs the benefit. It is also noteworthy that at companies with a centralized fund, the costs may in fact be charged back to local budgets for accounting purposes.

Need for Additional Procurement Policies

Companies are beginning to consider including suppliers owned by people with disabilities in their supplier diversity programs. As a first step in this process, some companies are including suppliers owned by disabled veterans in their programs. And when purchasing IT services and products, leading companies require their vendors to adhere to the company's accessibility policies. Because of the iterative nature of technology development, some companies include

contractual language that requires improvements in accessibility for subsequent phases of product design.

Results

By improving their procurement processes, companies can help ensure that their workplaces are accessible to employees with disabilities and that employees receive appropriate accommodations. In order to ensure that accommodations are provided to people with disabilities, companies should confirm that their accommodation process meets the following criteria:

- Includes safeguards to ensure that accommodations are not improperly denied due to:
 - Budget concerns
 - Lack of knowledge of available devices
 - Ignorance of company policy and the law
- Promotes an environment in which employees are comfortable requesting accommodations
- Alleviates the tension inherent in a negotiation with a direct manager
- Provides expert resources to assist in identifying and procuring appropriate assistive technology
- Ensures consistency (to the extent the company desires)
- Enables the company to track accommodations

Companies should also establish procurement processes to require vendors to provide products and services that meet the company's accessibility standards, and include companies owned by people with disabilities in their supplier diversity programs.

Additional Resources

For background information that can be used to develop organization procurement policies, go to <http://www.accessibletech.org/index.html>, a website designed to build a partnership between the business and disability communities.

To review sample language to include within requests for proposal when procuring electronic and information technology, visit the following sites:

- *Washington State Department of Social and Health Services suggests using the language in this guide when issuing an RFP for software or software development through a vendor, to ensure that the software solution is accessible.*
- www.vsn.org/waasp/misc/purchaseguide.doc

- Located at Utah State University, the National Center on Disability and Access to Education lists three samples of procurement language that can be added to enhance accessibility of purchased or licensed products.
- <http://www.ncdae.org/policy/procurement.cfm#importance>
- The California State University Accessible Technology Initiative indicates sample procurement language in their document “10 Steps for Incorporating Gov. Code 11135/Section 508 Requirements in Procurement.”
http://www.calstate.edu/Accessibility/EIT_Procurement/

To study a centralized process for providing accommodations, visit the federal government’s Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program <http://www.tricare.mil/CAP/>

For information on how to find disability owned business visit the Disability Supplier Diversity Program of the Business Leadership Network <http://www.usbln.org/programs.html#ddsp>

For information about the costs and benefits of accommodations, review Making Workplace Accommodations: Reasonable Costs, Big Benefits:

- Word Version <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/publicat.htm#accommodations>
- PDF Version <http://www.dol.gov/odep/documents/reasonableaccomodatations.pdf>

For information on providing reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities, go to:

- The Accommodation Process: Steps to Collaborative Solutions:
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/misc/job.htm>
- Job Accommodation Network (JAN) Employers’ Practical Guide to Reasonable Accommodation under the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA),
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/Erguide/>
- the JAN Accommodation Information by Disability A to Z
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/atoz.htm>

For a beginning list of vendors from which you can procure assistive technology, go to The Alliance of Assistive Technology list of members, titled “Vendors”
<http://www.ataccess.org/community/vendors.lasso>

Case Study 3

Refining and Advancing Corporate Policies, Practices, and Programs: Using accessible and universal design concepts to develop accessible products for employees and customers

Increasingly, companies are recognizing the benefits of serving the disability market and are incorporating accessible and universal design concepts into product development. In doing so, companies are seeing that innovations designed for the disability community are often appreciated by a wide range of customers.

Details

Across a range of industries, companies have identified the disability market as an important part of their customer base. To better serve the disability market, leading companies are increasingly looking at accessibility and usability concerns during the conceptual and design phases of product development, rather than checking for accessibility features as a product nears completion. Leading companies make a commitment to accessibility a part of their mission.

Commitment To Increasing Accessibility

In the information technology arena, leading companies have committed to increasing the accessibility of their products and services and support the following:

- Leveraging industry group relationships to establish standards and best practices for accessibility. It would be counterproductive for competing companies to invent their own standards and conventions. An example of a productive area for collaboration is development of best practices in an effort to establish standard conventions for “keyboard only” users. Efforts to collaborate through industry forums have been productive to date and should be continued and enhanced.
- Developing a team of accessibility experts within the company to serve as a resource in the product development process. Accessibility experts can play a critical role in developing policies, standards, and best practices; in researching and incubating new accessibility solutions; and in conducting community outreach and education. This centralized group should not, however, have sole responsibility for creating accessible products. Rather, companies should charge each product design team with the responsibility for creating accessible products. Increasing the general level of expertise among developers on accessibility issues and increasing the level of awareness in the

business units that provide direction are necessary steps to increasing the accessibility of IT products and services.

- Increasing emphasis on creating design philosophies, software tool kits, and automated tests for accessibility. In particular, companies need to increase emphasis on developing cost effective captioning technology and guidelines on accessibility for users with cognitive impairments. Accessibility experts within the company should also conduct outreach efforts to educate all stakeholders on the importance and impact of accessibility in products.
- Establishing a floor for accessibility in their products and establishing a policy providing that products that do not meet basic accessibility requirements (like working effectively with JAWS software and including ALT Tags for non-text items) will not be released. Any exceptions to that policy should require senior-level approval within the company.

On-Going Proactive Efforts

Once products meet the core accessibility requirements, companies need to determine how they will balance broader accessibility concerns with other business needs. Leading companies have adopted technical standards and best practices that create a framework for creating and assessing accessibility in products. These standards and practices evolve over time. The process works best when the accessibility experts can collaborate with the product teams to set accessibility standards and weigh them against other business challenges. One goal of this collaboration should be the creation of an accessibility plan that looks to making products more accessible in subsequent iterations.

Testing by users with disabilities is an essential step in developing accessible and usable products. This testing can be performed by internal or external resources. In addition, there needs to be a path for customers to raise accessibility problems so that the problems can be addressed in subsequent iterations of the product. Leading companies funnel these inquiries to the accessibility team, which can escalate them within the company as necessary. Customer feedback on accessibility should be tracked.

Companies that are trying to better serve the disability market institute comprehensive training programs for all staff on disability etiquette, design accessible facilities, and engage in community outreach. Increasingly, these companies are finding that incorporating universal design principles creates efficiencies for all employees and customers. For example, in designing retail space and equipment to be used by employees and customers, companies are incorporating universal design principles rather than creating a few non-standard items to be available for use by people with disabilities. In incorporating universal design principles, companies are increasing efficiency and recognizing that facilities and products are becoming more usable for all customers. It is critical to gather people making decisions at the beginning of

a design process and ensure that disability/accessibility concerns are incorporated. Asking for changes at the end of the process is far more difficult and far less fruitful.

Companies that are trying to serve the disability market are increasing staff awareness and training. For a company to serve the disability market effectively, all employees need to be comfortable interacting with people with disabilities. Clear policies about service animals must be communicated; signage must be accessible and usable; product documentation must be available in Braille and large print. Companies also need to engage in outreach efforts to inform members of the disability community of the steps they have taken to promote accessibility and usability.

Results

Companies are increasingly recognizing that their businesses benefit from serving the disability market. Accessible and universal design principles should be promoted in industry forums and incorporated in product development from the earliest phases. Efficiencies can be realized by incorporating universal design concepts in all products, training employees, and engaging in community outreach.

Additional Resources

For background on how you can incorporate accessible and universal design concepts into product development, visit the Center for Universal Design (CUD)

<http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/>

For an overview of universal design standards, read The Principles of Universal Design

http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about_ud/udprinciples.htm

For information on how to apply universal design concepts into product development go to the CUD webpage on universal design and product usability

http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/pubs_p/pubproduct.htm

For examples of technology companies that have provided information on access to their products on their websites, visit Corporate Accessibility Portals

<http://www.accessinteropalliance.org/resources/corporate.html>

For general information on Universal Design in the Workplace, go to Universal Design in the Workplace

http://www.dbtacnorthwest.org/_public/site/files/ada/documents/UD_Workplace_Final_02.pdf

For information on the potential of people with disabilities as a market for your product, visit Customers with Disabilities Mean Business <http://www.ada.gov/busstat.pdf>.

For information on gathering input from people with disabilities to assure that your products are accessible, visit Gathering Input from Customers with Disabilities <http://www.ada.gov/custinfo.htm>

To study an example of leveraging industry group relationships to establish standards and best practices for accessibility, visit the Web Accessibility Working Groups list <http://www.w3.org/WAI/groups.html>.

For an example of tests for accessibility, review WAI's Selecting Web Evaluation Tools <http://www.w3.org/WAI/eval/selectingtools.html>

For information on training organization's staff, visit Disability Awareness and Sensitivity Training Resources <http://www.earnworks.com/docs/FactSheets/Employer/FS-ER-DiversitySensitivityTraining.pdf>

Case Study 4

Implementing Corporate Infrastructures and Organizational Strategies: Assigning responsibility and authority within the organization for realizing the commitment to equality and full access for people with disabilities

After a company makes a commitment to providing equality and full access to people with disabilities, it must determine how it will support that commitment. Decisions need to be made about how to allocate resources and establish an infrastructure that will enable the company to make continuous progress toward realizing that commitment. This case study examines how leading companies have allocated responsibility for disability-related matters, and how companies have empowered the individuals with that responsibility to meet the goals set by the company's leaders.

Details

In order for a company to realize its commitment to people with disabilities, it needs to create an infrastructure with the expertise and authority to make the necessary changes. The nature of that infrastructure will necessarily vary between companies because each infrastructure will be effective only if it is consistent with the company's overall organization and culture. The organizational placement of the disability-related functions is critical to their ability to effect change. The credibility of the individuals and their ability to work together are also critical.

To create change there must be a commitment from the senior leadership of the organization, but that commitment alone is insufficient. In addition to expressing their commitment, the senior leadership must:

- Allocate resources and empower individuals to realize the commitment
- Find a pragmatic way to communicate the importance of the disability commitment to hiring managers and other line decision makers
- Ensure that the individuals primarily charged with realizing the commitment have adequate authority to influence the organization. Inevitably, the people charged with realizing the company's commitment to providing equality and full access for people with disabilities will need to negotiate with others in the company. It is important that the company vest these individuals with a level of authority that allows them to negotiate effectively with other internal groups. For example, an employee at a vice-president or director level has necessarily greater access to information and more influence in internal decision-making than a manager or associate.

- If senior executives are responsible for overseeing diversity efforts, it is important that these leaders make their personal support visible to a broad audience within the company. It is most powerful if these senior champions are individuals with disabilities or otherwise have personal connections to disability.

Collaborative Approach

In most large organizations, no single person will be responsible for all issues related to disability. Rather, responsibility is spread among representatives from different functional areas, including diversity, human resources, benefits, facilities, information technology, legal, customer service, and marketing. In addition, companies serving the disability market may have accessibility experts supporting product development, service delivery, and customer service. It is essential that the people in these varied roles create strong working relationships.

Diversity Team

At many leading organizations, primary responsibility for promoting positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities is vested in the diversity team. It is important that people with disabilities be fully integrated into the company's diversity efforts. A member of the diversity team is often charged with primary responsibility for diversity efforts related to people with disabilities. At some companies, the diversity representative is the official point of contact for all matters related to disability; at other companies the lines of authority are less clear.

Accessibility Team

Similarly, in companies that are creating accessible products and services the accessibility team needs to be positioned so that it has authority and influence to negotiate effectively with product teams. The accessibility team should be placed where it can have insight and influence on product development. Ideally, it will be situated with similar important functions, like privacy and information security.

Disability Outreach/Partnership Team

Companies trying to serve the disability market will have externally-focused efforts related to the disability market. These efforts should be consistent with and have resources comparable to efforts that serve other markets (e.g., women, Latinos, senior citizens).

Legal Team

By ensuring compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other relevant laws, the corporate legal team can also play an influential role in increasing access for people with disabilities. Strong relationships with that team can be productive in gaining authority and influence.

Informal Champions

In addition to the people who have formal roles related to disability and accessibility, it is important that there be informal champions at every level of the organization. These champions can play an important role in creating a positive work environment for people with disabilities.

Employee or associate resource groups generally have no authority, but they can serve as an important resource to the business for feedback and for creating an atmosphere that fosters inclusion and creates a comfort level that supports employees requesting the accommodations they need.

Results

Care should be used in creating an infrastructure to realize a company's commitment to equality and full access for people with disabilities. Commitment by the senior leadership should be reflected in an allocation of resources and authority that facilitates progress across the company's operations. People with relevant responsibilities may be housed in diversity, human resources, benefits, facilities, information technology, legal, customer service, marketing, and other teams. Developing strong cross-functional relationships will facilitate progress. Employee resource groups and informal champions can help create a work environment that is positive for all employees.

Additional Resources

To review presentations of companies that have developed support within their organizations to provide full access to people with disabilities, visit the Organizational Culture, Driving Results <http://www.odepsummit.org/agenda.html#Organizational>

This panel was part of a larger event titled A Summit on Disability Policy, hosted by the Office of Disability Employment Policy <http://www.odepsummit.org/index.html>

Case Study 5

Implementing Corporate Infrastructures and Organizational Strategies: Developing strategic partnerships including a network of government, community, and corporate entities to best address disability issues

Many government, community, and corporate entities are available to support a company's disability agenda. This case study examines how leading companies leverage partnerships with outside groups to further their disability goals.

Details

Leading companies unanimously agree that strategic partnerships are an important tool in realizing the goals of their disability programs, for the simple reason that no one can know everything. Strategic partnerships are valuable both for companies that are seeking to be employers of choice for people with disabilities and for companies that are seeking to serve the disability market.

Increasingly, companies are expecting their support of community organizations to be more than a philanthropic endeavor, and companies are increasingly measuring the value they receive from their outside partners. Given the strain on resources in the current economy, companies are relying on their outside partners as extensions of their teams.

Partnership Benefits

The voices of disability organizations can be critical in helping companies create and pursue a disability agenda. Companies seeking to serve the disability market can use community-based organizations as a sounding board for new ideas and to gain insight into what products and services would be attractive to people with disabilities. These partnerships can lead to changes in policies that can open new avenues of dialogue between the company and the disability community. Insights gained through this dialogue may result in improved policies and practices and may decrease the likelihood of litigation over disability-related issues.

Examples of IT Partnerships

IT companies may partner with disability organizations to:

- Increase the visibility of their efforts to make products accessible and to increase understanding of the importance and impact of accessibility
- Seek new ways to market to the disability community

- Create an advisory board comprised of representatives of disability organizations to help them improve their products

IT companies also join industry trade associations to collaborate in establishing accessibility standards while remaining competitive in other areas. These trade associations, including the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) and Accessibility Interoperability Alliance (AIA), promote dialogue among competitors about technical challenges which the industry should work together to solve, and provide a forum to set a minimum bar for accessibility.

Companies focusing on the disability market may also seek representation on state and local disability boards and task forces. It is important to these companies to listen to the challenges faced by the disability community and to remain abreast of relevant public policy initiatives.

Recruitment Partnerships

Companies with a goal of employing people with disabilities also find strategic partnerships critical to making progress. In hiring people with disabilities, companies look for partners who can help them identify qualified candidates with disabilities. Many companies establish several partnerships through which they hope to find candidates. These companies also value partnerships with organizations that can provide expertise and resources in accommodating people with disabilities. Local vocational rehabilitation providers and other local organizations serving people with disabilities (e.g., Lighthouse for the Blind; the Hearing, Speech and Deafness Center; and Centers for Independent Living) can be sources for training and for guidance on providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.

There are a wide range of organizations and independent consultants that assert expertise on disability and accessibility issues, including for-profit and non-profit organizations and cross-disability and disability-specific organizations. The level of expertise and the credibility of these organizations and individuals vary widely. Companies are increasingly measuring and monitoring the organizations that they partner with to ensure that they are receiving value from the partnership.

Companies report positively on their involvement with the Office of Disability Employment Policy and the services it provides. The Job Accommodation Network is viewed as a valuable resource for information on accommodating employees with disabilities.

Joining with other companies in organizations that seek to foster best practices, such as the business leadership networks, is also viewed as helpful. Benchmarking employment practices is highly valued by companies that join these networks.

Other Partnerships

Participation in workforce development efforts that are not limited to people with disabilities can also serve the disability market since people with disabilities are represented in all of the groups that are the focus of these efforts.

At a corporate level, large companies tend to form partnerships with national organizations while allowing their business units to interact with organizations at a local level. In some companies, many of the local community service projects are focused on organizations serving people with disabilities. These local partnerships are often with disability-specific organizations.

The potential for leading companies to participate in strategic partnerships to pursue policy changes that would foster progress on disability issues remains largely untapped.

Results

It is important for companies to establish strategic partnerships with government, community, non-profit and corporate entities to help them realize their goals related to providing equality and full access to people with disabilities. The goals they are furthering may include the following:

- Increasing penetration of the disability market
- Improving the accessibility of products and services
- Remaining aware of the public policy agenda of the disability community
- Identifying qualified candidates with disabilities
- Improving accommodations of employees with disabilities
- Staying abreast of developments in employment practices
- Improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities
- Reducing unnecessary litigation and potential liability related to allegations of discrimination

It is valuable for companies to regularly evaluate the partnerships they invest in to ensure that they are receiving value from them.

Additional Resources

- For national disability organizations, go to Disability Related Organizations <http://www.access-board.gov/links/disability.htm> provided by the United States Access Board <http://www.access-board.gov/index.htm>
- For federal, state, and non-profit resources, go to: http://www.earnworks.com/job_seekers/Tools/index.asp

- For industry trade associations for potential collaboration, go to:
 - Assistive Technology Industry Association
<http://www.atia.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1>
 - Accessibility Interoperability Alliance <http://www.accessinteropalliance.org/>
- For resources on job accommodations, go to:
Job Accommodation Network <http://www.ian.wvu.edu/>
- For additional tools and resources for employers, go to:
 - <http://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org/blog/index.php/employer-resources>
 - <http://www.earnworks.com/employers/tools/index.asp>

Case Study 6

Implementing Corporate Infrastructures and Organizational Strategies: Instituting accountability measurement and continuous improvement processes to track outcomes

In order for a company to ensure that it is making progress in its commitment to creating equality and full access for people with disabilities, it needs to understand the impact of its relevant policies and programs. This case study examines the metrics companies are using today and suggests additional measurements that could be used to track the effectiveness of efforts to improve employment outcomes and increase accessibility of products and services for people with disabilities.

Details

Leading companies report frustration with their limited ability to measure the impact of their policies and programs related to improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities and serving the disability market. While getting accurate numbers presents a challenge, there are both direct and indirect ways that progress can be tracked.

Current Tracking Mechanisms

Leading companies have begun identifying and tracking metrics that indicate how much progress is being made toward improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Some companies are tracking the number of employees hired through recruiting sources targeted at the disability community. This is an important measure of the success of their efforts to hire people with disabilities. These companies would have richer data on the success of their efforts to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities if they also tracked the retention and promotion rates of these employees.

Some companies also track the number of accommodation requests they receive from employees and candidates. Increases in these numbers may reflect an increase in the number of employees with disabilities or the comfort level of employees in requesting accommodations (which may reflect improvements in the employment environment for people with disabilities). Both of these are indicators of progress toward creating equality and full access. Other companies also track the effectiveness of the strategic partnerships that the company participates in, along with their progress in completing specific diversity initiatives.

Additional Accountability Measures

There is more that companies can and should be doing to measure their progress on disability-related goals.

Federal contracts should track affirmative action data to measure their progress in improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Since 1996, federal government contractors have been required to implement affirmative action for people with disabilities and to provide an opportunity for self-identification. Affirmative action data for people with disabilities can and should be tracked in the same way that affirmative action data for minorities and women are tracked. For a variety of reasons, some people with disabilities may elect not to self-identify. Nonetheless, increases in the number of people who voluntarily self-identify as having a disability are significant because they reflect either increases in the number of employees with disabilities or an increased level of comfort in self-identifying, or both.

Federal contractors should ensure that their affirmative action efforts for people with disabilities are robust, and they should track program data for people with disabilities as closely as they track data for minorities and women. Companies not subject to affirmative action requirements should work with their legal teams to create appropriate ways to obtain and track similar data.

During the presidential campaign, Candidate Barack Obama recognized that “affirmative action in employment for adults with disabilities is not enforced with goals and timetables like the affirmative action requirements for people of color and women.” He pledged to “direct his Secretary of Labor to make changes to the regulations implementing Section 503 so that they more closely resemble those implementing” the Executive Order on affirmative action for people of color and women.² Leading companies should strengthen their affirmative action programs for people with disabilities in anticipation of these regulatory changes.

Additional Tracking Measurement Suggestions

Companies should also increase their tracking of other indicators of progress toward improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Additional items that could be tracked include participation in employee resource groups, outreach efforts to community partners, hours spent in disability-related training, and responses to employee satisfaction surveys.

- **Employee Resource Groups:** Strong employee resource groups are important in providing support and mentoring for employees with disabilities and for employees caring for family members with disabilities. They can also serve as an important source of information and as a sounding board for companies. Furthermore, they can provide a

² Obama For America, *Barack Obama And Joe Biden’s Plan To Empower Americans With Disabilities*: www.barackobama.com/pdf/DisabilityPlanFactSheet.pdf (accessed August 13, 2009).

pool of people to test innovations in products and services. Increased participation in disability-related employee groups would indicate progress toward realizing the company's disability commitment.

- **Outreach Efforts to Community Partners:** The success of outreach efforts to community partners helps determine whether the company is investing its resources effectively. If not, the resources should be redirected to organizations that can more effectively help the company meet its disability and accessibility goals.
- **Hours Spent in Disability-Related Training:** Disability-related training can be an important tool in improving the employment environment for people with disabilities because it builds skills, dispels myths, and reduces fear of 'doing the wrong thing'. Tracking participation indicates how many people are developing these skills. Strong participation also indicates wide-spread support within the company for disability-related goals because employees and managers are willing to devote resources to the effort.
- **Employee Satisfaction Surveys:** Employee satisfaction surveys also provide an opportunity to measure improvements in the employment environment for people with disabilities. Companies should explore including an opportunity to self-identify as having a disability in the demographic section of employee satisfaction surveys. This would enable the company to compare the satisfaction levels of people with disabilities and people without disabilities. Companies should also consider including specific questions relating to disability and accessibility in employee surveys.

On the product side, companies should also improve the measures that they use to track the accessibility of their products. In addition, companies should track and report the number of people using accessible products. Companies seeking to serve the disability market can also improve the customer experience by contracting with consultants who employ people with a wide range of disabilities as 'mystery shoppers' and making changes based on the feedback provided.

Results

Creating and implementing accountability measures to track progress in improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities and in increasing accessibility of products and services is challenging. While some companies have begun measuring a few indicators, a greater focus on metrics will strengthen the business case for creating an inclusive work environment, as well as for improving accessibility and usability of products and services. Affirmative action data is available to many companies and should be tracked. Companies should also track other metrics that will provide indicators of improvements in the employment climate and of the company's success in serving the disability market.