



Alabama

California

Florida

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New York

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### Our Mission

*Abilities, Inc. is a non-profit agency dedicated to facilitating integrated employment and full participation of persons with disabilities in their work and living communities. Employment is accomplished through direct service to youth and adults with disabilities and to employers, insurance carriers, schools and colleges and other rehabilitation programs. Services are delivered, when possible, in diverse community settings in response to consumer and business needs and legislative mandates. Abilities, Inc. is committed to developing and demonstrating programs and services of national excellence.*

## Success Among Us

By Judy Young

In this newsletter we are sharing best practices that contributed to meeting the goals and objectives of our Projects With Industry (PWI) programs during the first year of operation. While Abilities, Inc. has significant experience with PWIs, we were joined this year by four new sites (Atlanta, Las Vegas, Garden Grove, Orlando) for whom this was a new venture.

The first few months focused on ramping up, which included hiring staff, marketing the program to referral agencies, potential consumers and employers, and learning the specific eligibility documentation and compliance requirements. We also held kick-off meetings for the local business community at all the new sites. As we “boast and brag”, we are looking back to a year of hard work and hopefully, at a good measure of

personal satisfaction. This is also a time to reflect on what worked, what did not, and how we can improve our efforts. Such reflection and evaluation is a valuable learning experience for all involved.

PWIs are unique because they are one of the few federally funded rehabilitation programs that must meet strict standards and indicators. These address the basic project requirements and are primarily quantifiable: how many consumers were served, placed, have significant disabilities and long unemployment history. Each project is scored on these indicators using a pass or fail basis. Projects that receive a failing score are put on a six-month probation period to demonstrate their ability to meet the requirements. Failure to do so results in the withdrawal of funds. Since each of our PWI programs consists of several



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sites, our scores depend on the collective effort put forth by all parties. So, let's learn from each other and implement some or all of the best practices described in this newsletter. There is no downside to trying. As Henry Ford

had said: "Whether you think that you can, or that you can't, you are usually right".

Let's have a great second year.

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## CAREER OPTIONS

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### Learning from History

*By Valentina Janek*

As Socrates said, "Know Thyself".

Here at Abilities, Inc., its good advice to "Know Thy Consumer".

Working in partnership with our consumers requires successful career planning and self-assessment. Placement Specialists at Abilities, Inc. working under the Career Options PWI project initially meet with each consumer to gain a realistic understanding of their aptitudes and skills, awareness of responsibilities of job titles and tasks, and to develop an action plan for successful job searches and employment. We have found that with each meeting we continue to discover their interests, preferences, values, goals, and abilities for long term employment success. While one might argue that one of the best practices in seeking employment for consumers is effective job searches using on line job sites, newspaper postings, or company web sites, clearly there is something to be said about face-to-face contact with actual recruiters prior to a real interview. After all, if the consumer is not

ready to "ace" the interview, he/she may not get the job that they are qualified for and diligently researched.

Recently, Business Advisory Council (BAC) resource managers from Long Island companies participated in a mock interviewing day for consumers in our Business Skills with Office Technology Applications Training Program. Consumers and BAC members stated that they all found these sessions to be a valuable experience and "win-win situation. The consumer is given the chance to practice and gain important feedback related to interviewing techniques, in addition to developing an interest in a particular industry. BAC members are given an opportunity to hone in on their interviewing skills and learn disability etiquette first hand. We have also found that consumers become motivated in playing an active role in their search for meaningful employment and many BAC members consider the practice interviews a "screening" in seeking out qualified candidates.

Practice interviews, group discussions,

tours, internships and networking events held at Abilities, Inc. not only enhance the awareness of organizations and companies to successful placement of individuals with disabilities but also peak our awareness as Placement Specialists to our consumers' preferences, as well as any obstacles that might arise during the pre-employment stage. As an added bonus, these types of events create growing

relationships with our consumers and working partnerships with corporations.

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## AT YOUR SERVICE

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### Utilizing Work Incentives Planning and Assistance for Consumers Who Receive Social Security Benefits

*By Craig Pickens*

Serving people with disabilities can have several challenges. One significant challenge that can become a barrier to employment is how Social Security benefits are affected by working. WIPA (Work Incentives Planning and Assistance) can help. WIPA, formally BPAO (Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach) is a cooperative agreement Social Security has with community-based organizations to provide information to beneficiaries on available work incentives. In addition, WIPA can demonstrate how earnings will affect their benefits, including medical coverages. There are WIPA projects in every state. To find the WIPA project that can assist your consumers, go to [www.ssa.gov/work/](http://www.ssa.gov/work/). One can find information on numerous programs Social Security has for beneficiaries who want to work. They include Ticket to Work, Disability Program Navigator, and Protection and Advocacy.

The Center for Independent Living has experienced great success in utilizing the BPAO program to dispel consumer's fears about returning to work. Many find that they can work and still received their benefits,

including Medicare or Medicaid services. Others, determined to return to work full-time, find that the transition to working is manageable. Work Incentives, like PASS (Plan for Achieving Self -Support) can assist SSI Recipients maintain their SSI cash benefits, while earning income at work. As long as an SSI Recipient is SSI eligible, they should maintain their Medicaid eligibility. Several consumers have utilized the PASS Plan to achieve their vocational goals, including self employment.

In Summary, referring your consumers that receive Social Security benefits to the local WIPA project can break down several barriers to employment; and open new pathways to placement.

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## Our Best Practices

*By Robert Saunders*

Our best practices have always been those that bring the most people into our PWI program and those which find employment as soon as possible.

The most successful methods of getting motivated client's into the program is having them referred to the program by other agencies that have already pre-qualified them through intake, orientation and testing procedures. The fact that it may take a client two or three months for BVR to move them to the point where they are eligible for job development may be tedious for clients but their successful passage through this process provides us with clients who have demonstrated a high level of seriousness about gaining competitive employment. Though public service announcements and other direct means of reaching out to the disabled community do work the clients who come to us through these

means often prove to be not highly motivated. Finding other agencies to establish relationships with can create a larger and steady flow of clients into your program. As an example AARP, Catholic Charities, Boys and Girls Clubs, school systems, etc. are all sources of referrals.

This same relationship can also provide you with entrées to other employers as well as being potential employers themselves. Remember success is a team effort and the team is us and the community.

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## EXPERIENCE COUNTS

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### Getting the Job Done

*By Carolyn W. Agee*

The Projects with Industry (PWI) program in Birmingham, Alabama has been performing well for many years. Throughout those years, the employment specialists have utilized several techniques to recruit consumers and Business Advisory Council members.

Consumers are recruited and pre-screened for appropriate placement. One practice often used is finding employment around the consumers' interest level or hobby.

This practice allows the consumer to actually assist in finding suitable employment and helps the specialist with finding the right match.

Employers are very cooperative when you schedule appointments to speak with them regarding the PWI program. Employers like to know that employees are pre-screened. We explain to the employers about WOTC credits and other incentives for hiring individuals with a disability.

Consumers are recruited through Vocational Rehabilitation, non-profit agencies and professional referrals throughout the city. Best Practices will vary from place to place. Many factors depend upon "Getting the Job Done". Making a "Perfect Match" is very

important with a job placement. I am pleased to say the most effective practice is placing an individual in an area that makes them happy.

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## **Networking Tips from Me to You for Developing New Employers**

*By Michael Dolan*

At last month's PWI teleconference, I was asked to present my "Best Practices". Listed below are some of the key points that I presented. I hope that you will find this information useful.

### **WHEN ARE YOU NETWORKING**

Your goal is to let your primary contacts know what is going on in your life. (friends, family, or barber). Go where the employers go. Networking events.

- a) Business after hours (generally run through local Chambers of Commerce)
- b) Department of Labor events
- c) Attend job fairs
- d) Professional organizations
- e) Society of Human Resources (SHRM) events
- f) Weddings and holiday parties

### **KEYS TO NETWORKING**

#### **1. Confidence**

- a) Start with a smile – a smile is a sign of confidence that will make you and the contact person feel at ease.

#### **2. Appearance**

- a) The first impression is important.

#### **3. Pay Attention**

- a) Remember the persons' name that you just met. Listen carefully.
- b) If there is something unusual about the name, ask about the origin of the name.
- c) If you have trouble remembering names, use the persons' name in conversation. This will help you to remember it.
- d) Once you get the persons' business card, write specific things about the person on the back of the card that will help you to identify that person. (i.e., where they are from, if they have children, worked with other organizations before, etc.)

#### **4) Listen**

- a) As the person talks, you may learn more about the person.
- b) Ask question. (i.e., if person was talking about the importance of e-mailing resumes, agree with them but ask why?

#### **5) Try to find similarities**

You will never believe how much you may have in common with a person after speaking with them for 5 minutes.

#### 6. Indirect Selling

- a) Don't hit them over the head with your services.
- b) Have a reason to contact them. (get them to review resumes or conduct practice interviews)

#### 7. Flattery

- a) Comment on the office.
- b) Thank them for what they have done.

### WHO DO YOU KNOW

1. Family
2. Friends
  - a) Auto sales people who do not call on friends earn 15.5% less than those that do tap into their friends.
3. People at the office.

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## **Our Best Relationships**

*By Kathy Herron*

As the PWI grant year closes it is great to look back and evaluate what was successful and what was not. Additionally, it is important to share with others in the job placement business the activities that produced the best results for the people that we serve. This includes individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment, the local branch of our state's vocational rehabilitation agency and of course our community of businesses.

First, I believe one of the most important aspects of our PWI project here in Ann Arbor is our relationship with our State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (VR). Our PWI staff has integrated into our local VR agency to served not only consumers of that agency but the Counselors as well. One way we have done this is to present ourselves and the services we provide through PWI at their weekly orientation. We meet with consumers applying for services, and assess if we can help them prior to becoming eligible. If consumers

are ready, we set up an appointment to meet with them at our office.

Additionally, we meet regularly, at a VR Counselor's request, with consumers and counselors to provide a team approach to the placement process. This approach allows us all to share responsibility for meeting the needs of the consumers and share ideas about where the consumer should start in the community to network for employment.

Second, our practice of getting leads about where they would like to work in our community and then targeting them for a visit with a PWI staff member, has Also proven to be very successful. It allows us to serve a business by sharing with them the possibility of creating greater diversity in their workforce and creates an opportunity for a person with a disability to become employed. This also often leads to a greater network of employers who are looking to hire someone with a disability.

Our hope as we continue through the next year is to discover more best practices and share them as we move along.

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## PARTNERING FOR PLACEMENT

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### Failing to Prepare is Preparing to Fail

*By Jessica Long*

As an Employment Coordinator, my job is to assist job seekers in determining what type of job they are looking for and then giving them the tools and the confidence that are needed to enter a successful job search. I have found that the most effective way to accomplish this is by requiring all job seekers to attend a weekly job class. In the classes the job seekers not only receive valuable information but the class acts as a support and networking group.

As the group leader, it is important that I set the correct tone and atmosphere. I do this by practicing the following; holding the job seekers responsible for their own job search, setting high expectations, believing that everyone is employable, using people first language, being honest, taking advantage of every opportunity, validating dreams, sharing

my knowledge and experience, and never allowing the job seeker to give up or sell themselves short.

Those that stick with the program and follow the steps end up with an impressive resume, personal business cards, the courage to step outside of their comfort zone and network, the ability to think outside the box, permission to rekindle their dreams, and most importantly, they gain a skill that will last a lifetime and that they can continue to pass on to others.

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### Job Matching is Best Practice

*By Lisa Bullen*

If you have the motivation, I can help you to go to work. That is what I tell every client I meet for job placement services. Motivation is the main factor in assisting someone in job placement. If someone is motivated to go to work, they will go to work.

I can't instill that in someone. I can't make anyone do what they don't want to do.

Finding out what a client wants to do for work is one of the first questions asked of a new referral. It is not our business to just "PLUG" people into jobs. Job matching is

very, very important. When an intake is completed for a client, the time needs to be taken to ask the questions regarding "Vocational Goal". If a client wants to work with animals, I am not going to steer them in the direction of being a "Long Haul Truck Driver". That just doesn't make any sense.

We all have employers who we try to fit our clients with, but the majority of the time our clients want something special. Talk about the different aspects of the job, and what about the job aspects that interest them. Put the clients to work on the job placement efforts

themselves. When the client takes part in the job placement program rather than just being sent to work, they feel responsible and proud of themselves for taking charge of their lives. Going to work is a huge change in anyone's life. Let's help our clients to help themselves in changing their lives.

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## **Moving in a Successful And Positive Direction**

*By Catrina Lian*

Over the years, the Projects With Industry Program in Riverhead has seen many changes in the way we conduct business. Some changes were made because of new program objectives, others made merely out of necessity.

We've implemented strategies to improve attendance to our Job Hunt Club, came up with creative ways to gain employer involvement, and attempted to devise fool-proof methods to monitor project numbers and statistics. These and so many other strategies we employ every day are truly important to the success of our programs, but clearly, our best practice here in Riverhead is, and has always been, the goal of customer service...a concept that sounds quite trite actually, but has been so long neglected that it's almost new again.

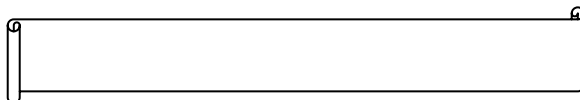
Unlike other service based businesses that focus on the needs of an individual customer, we have a whole line of people in tow when we agree to assist a consumer with their job search. Towing along will most likely

be a State VR Counselor, as well as parents, spouses, Case Anagers, employers and colleagues. And to make matters more interesting, they each have their own distinct personalities and expectations, some rational and some, well, you know. It can be challenging at times to effectively manage this diversity, but well worth all efforts to remember the old adage "*the customer is always right*". Okay, the customer *isn't* always right, whether it be a VR Counselor, consumer, or parent, but with some practice, you can let them think they are, then covertly guide them in the right direction, always contributing successes to the team effort. Although desired outcomes may not be met for every individual in "the line", they will remember and appreciate the respect and importance placed on their input.

There is a wide array of organizations providing placement services on Long Island. When a consumer, counselor or employer specifically request to work with our program, we know we have been successful in the "service" part of our jobs.

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## News from NBDC

### Misconceptions Link to the Unemployment Rate of People with Disabilities

By Laura M. Francis

In a recent publication, *The New Standard*, Catherine Komp, author of "Attitude, Not Cost, Barrier to Disabled Workers", reported on data from the U. S. Department of Labor (DOL) implying that employers who make an effort to accommodate employees with disabilities can accomplish this at a low cost, yet the employment rate for people with disabilities continues to diminish.

If it's not the cost of accommodations that is scaring employers away from hiring people with disabilities, then what is?

Almost sixteen years ago, in July 1990, when Congress signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), many hoped that employment opportunities for people with disabilities would increase. According to Cornell University, the employment rate of people with disabilities did increase; in fact, it peaked around 25 per cent in the 1990's, but for specific reasons unknown, sadly decreased below 20 per cent in 2004.

In various reports by the DOL, this decrease has been attributed to the misconception that providing accommodations to employees with disabilities is very costly, but later on, the DOL reported that the opposite was true – most workplace accommodations are very affordable and many of them very easy to implement.

According to the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), many people with disabilities are more concerned with negative attitudes in the workplace rather than accessibility issues. Presently, Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is working on a survey with a scheduled completion date for 2007, but released preliminary results that were based on responses from close to 800 employers that had contacted the agency for information about employing people with disabilities. Many of the employers called because they were interested in learning how to retain their employees. About half of them reported that workplace adjustments were not expensive averaging around \$600 for a one-time cost of an accommodation. It was also reported that many of these easy-to-make accommodations have been very beneficial to employees without disabilities, such as telephone headsets, or computer software (magnification) for low vision.

Of the employers surveyed by JAN, 9 out of 10 benefited from retaining a valued employee through better workplace accommodations in addition to seeing increased productivity, and over half said they eliminated the costs of hiring and training a new employee. Employers also reported benefits such as improved interactions with co-workers and customers, increased company morale and improved workplace safety. Anne Hirsch, Director of Services for JAN and co-author of the study responds that this finding is "*nothing more than the product of good management skills.*"

*Employers who are proactive look at workplace accommodations as how can we use this to improve work for everyone”.*

Advocates for people with disabilities interviewed by *The New Standard* were all concerned that “*in the larger market, stereotypes and discrimination present greater hurdles*”. Linda Richman of Liberty Resources, who manages a job-training course for people with disabilities, believes that “*many employers mistakenly believe that hiring a person with a disability means that you're automatically compromising somehow on the quality or volume of work. That means that workers that really want to work may not have the right exposure to the business world, and it also means employers are still carrying around a lot of misconceptions about what it would really be like to work with a person with a disability every day.*”

Disability advocates report that barriers such as tight job market, fear of losing SSI benefits, access to reliable transportation, and workplace misconceptions are all issues tied into people with disabilities and unemployment. Kristen Stern, an employment consultant, says that *people with disabilities are sometimes hindered by their own apprehensions about the employment*

*process. A lot of people that have disabilities may be afraid to go back to work. If it's a recent disability, they might not know if they can do the job, or they might not have the confidence needed to do the job,”* Stern told *The New Standard*.

Employer perception and a person's own perception of what they can accomplish in the workplace are “awareness” issues. Awareness is necessary in order to move forward in any direction. It is the process of educating people so that misconceptions are not formed.

NBDC continues to offer a variety of ways to provide awareness in the workplace by providing in-house customized training on a specific disability or workplace issue relating to job applicants or employees with disabilities, prepackaged (off the shelf) training, and awareness of assistive technology accommodations in the workplace.

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*We Focus on Ability*

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