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SPRING 2007

NEWSLETTER VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2

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.

It is a Good Time for Marketing Job Seekers with Disabilities

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, within the next five years there will be 174 million available jobs but only 162 million working age adults to fill them. This shortage will create increased competition on the hiring front while also necessitate more careful attention to employee retention. This signals good news for programs and organizations who assist job seekers with disabilities in finding meaningful employment since companies will begin to tap into formerly overlooked labor sources. With such information in hand, this is a good time to start marketing our consumers to potential employers and establishing the business case for hiring them. Aside from highlighting the bleak statistics related to the number of working-age adults with disabilities or their unemployment rate, we may be better served by focusing on the value employees with disabilities bring to the workplace:

- higher retention rates
- creative problem solving

- excellent attendance and productivity
- increased morale and productivity of co-workers
- a representation of diversity at the workplace

Since retention will become increasingly more important as the baby boomers are beginning their mass exodus into retirement, some of the following strategies may be especially important for retaining workers with disabilities:

- creation of a welcoming environment where co-workers and supervisors are familiar with basic disability etiquette
- establishment of disability related affinity groups where employees can contribute to the development of programs, products and services
- inclusion in all aspects of



Abilities, Inc.
201 I.U. Willets Road, Albertson, NY 11507
(516) 465-1400

- employment including informal networks and gatherings
- provision of flexible work hours and reasonable accommodations
 - equality in training and promotion opportunities

Workers with disabilities desire the same things others do: respect, appreciation, and fairness. Let us help and support them in meeting their goals.

Abilities, Inc.
 201 I. U. Willets Road
 Albertson, NY 11507
 Judy Young
 Vice President, Grants Administration
 and National Program Development
 516-465-1491

CAREER OPTIONS

Job Retention – Best Practices

By Anita Zimmerman

For consumers referred to the Career Options Project, job retention does not start the first day of employment; it begins months prior to completing the job application and is ongoing. The intake process is really only the first step in assisting our consumers in achieving a successful job placement. This interaction helps build strong communication and trust between the consumer and the Placement Specialist. Our willingness to listen and provide support towards individual goals, issues and concerns, establishes a rapport that strengthens this bond. The intake should clarify all expectations on both sides. To assist in meeting this criteria, in depth gathering of education/training, work background information, interests, skills/abilities, location preference, work time schedule, means of transportation, salary requirements, and type of work environment, provides the Placement Specialist with the tools needed to assist the consumer with finding the right job, which is critical to long-term job retention, regardless of employment barriers. Therefore, aside from assessing limitations, we must also consider the personality type. Is the person introverted,

extroverted, patient, compassionate, charismatic, friendly, aloof, etc.?

After resumes and cover letters are created, it is time to concentrate on finding the right job match. The ideal situation is to “try out” a job first. We have found internships as a valuable means of experiencing a job first hand. In addition, consumers are provided with opportunities to participate in job shadowing experiences, tours of companies, networking sessions, practice interviews, group discussions, and Mentoring Days. Members on the Business Advisory Council donate their time to help consumers gain insight of job requirements, work environments, as well as the culture of the company they represent. Job seeking skills are taught and business etiquette is stressed throughout the consumers time spent working with the Placement Specialist. We have found that they benefit greatly from these types of programs, especially if they are entering the work force for the first time or learned new skills that enable them to re-enter the work force after an interruption caused by a disability.

Long-term job retention is the goal we set for all our participants, and we work very hard to ensure that they remain on the job. We provided them with skills, guidance, counseling, job coach services when necessary, and establish trust. We feel they are ready, but are they ready?

The best way to ensure a successful transition and assist our consumers in retaining employment is to **continue** to provide intensive follow-up. It is critical that during the first three months we check-in as much as possible to let them know that we are available to discuss any issues, concerns, or challenges that may have risen during this time period. Once our consumer has been in a job for several months and feels comfortable with his/her surroundings, routine, and job expectations, our

contact with him/her can become less frequent. We have experienced that most employers appreciate this follow-up and will sometimes call us to intervene when something is not going well.

Do these tips work? Based on the number of our consumers who are still at work in the corporate sector, many years after leaving Abilities, it would seem so.....

Abilities, Inc.
 201 I.U. Willets Road
 Albertson, NY 11507
 Anita Zimmerman
 Program Manager
 516-465-1546

AT YOUR SERVICE

Job Retention Best Practices: Setting Goals for Maintaining Employment

By Craig Pickens

Congratulations on your new job! Working with a consumer on pre-placement services, job searches and interviewing can be rewarding, especially when the consumer lands the job! Now the real work begins. As an Independent Living Center, we help the consumer develop an Independent Living Plan, focusing on their employment goals. We help consumers focus their goals on achieving employment through pre-placement skills.

At the employment stage, we help the consumer work on a new goal, maintaining the job. The skills necessary for maintaining a job can be summarized into three different areas: (1) having a positive attitude; (2) knowing the

rules and (3) playing the game well. Making a good impression on the first day of work at the new job is imperative. We stress being on time for work, perhaps even arriving 15 minutes early to settle down. However, if the consumer has to report to Human Resources and complete paperwork, we suggest arriving earlier. Learning about the company is important, reading the company handbook, brochures or annual reports can help the consumer understand the company's mission, vision and success. The consumer should request a copy of their job description. Meeting with the consumer to discuss the essential functions of the job prior to them starting on the first day can assist them with determining whether they

need an accommodation and how to negotiate one with an employer.

Furthermore, we encourage the consumer to learn the names of their co-workers. Working on social skills may be necessary at this point. Often, we can begin working on these skills before the consumer is offered a job. Additionally, teaching the consumer to observe how others dress and interact with each other is a helpful guide in judging what is acceptable for the employer. Typically, what is acceptable to one employer is not to another. Lastly, we coach the consumer to set a time to meet with their Manager or Supervisor to discuss their performance standard and expectations. Being pro-active on managing performance issues can prevent unnecessary problems and consequent job loss.

Employers are looking for a positive attitude, likeable and motivated employees willing to work, and team players that are dependable and loyal. Helping your consumer accentuate their strengths, overcome their weaknesses, become productive, set performance goals, and develop and maintain constructive working relationships with coworkers and managers can result in improved job retention and ultimately consumer independence.

*Center for Independent Living
in Central Florida
720 North Denning Drive
Winter Park, FL 32789
Craig Pickens
Program Manager
407-623-1070*

Job Retention Best Practices – How We Assist in Retaining Employment

By Robert Saunders

If securing gainful competitive employment for our consumers is a challenge, then working with the consumer and the employer to maintain that employment is an even greater one.

In a matter of speaking, when the consumer has successfully maneuvered through the application and interview process, actually starting the job is where the tires meet the proverbial road. Where we are normally able to directly assist the consumer through applications and interviews we are not able to be at work with them on a day to day basis. Even though job coaching is available, typically for as long as may be needed, there is still the day to day job activities which determine if job coaching will be required in the beginning and the open ended situation when the coaching is over. Situations

considered resolved while the coach is there may be revisited once they are gone.

Of course there are practical situations which assist in employment retention no matter the needs of the consumer which should be considered standard practice:

1. Each consumer should be made to understand that constant communication with the job development organization is extremely important and key to their successful employment as we are unable to address issues we are not aware of.
2. Consumers should immediately contact their Job Developer if they have any problems, issues or needs at work before interacting with the employer about them where

- possible (i.e., don't quit or walk of the job and then call us!).
3. Where prudent employers should be aware that assistance is available to aid our consumers in successful employment.
 4. Where indicated, consumers would receive job seeking skills and successful employment classes.
 5. Consumers would be provided with everything they need to work before employment begins, where possible (i.e., bus passes, gas cards, work clothing or tools and job coaching, etc.).
 6. The consumer has a family support group. They should be involved in the process. There should be family members who can be contacted on the consumer's behalf or if the consumer is unreachable by his or her normal means.
 7. If there are other agencies involved, the consumer's counselors from those agencies should also be involved (i.e., if the consumer is also a mental health client, his mental health professional should be a resource for continued successful employment). This is also very important if the consumer is on parole or a sex offender.
 8. The development agency should ensure that the consumer is comfortable with whomever they are working with and feels that they can be totally honest with them. The Job Developer needs to establish a relationship with the consumer which is non judgmental and confidential. A relationship where the consumer has complete trust in the fact that the job do works for their best interest.
 9. Of course the agency should make it policy to have initial personal contact with the consumer both on a scheduled and as needed basis.
 10. Our mission is not just to find employment for our consumers but to ensure their successful employment through our best efforts where ever possible.

Special Employment Services, Inc.
P. O .Box 81166
Las Vegas, NV 89180-1166
Robert Saunders
Director
702-877-0650

EXPERIENCE COUNTS

Effective Relationships Promotes Retention

By Santoya Baxter

The Projects With Industry staff pre-screens all candidates for employment based on their interests, experiences, prior work history, hobbies and current abilities. Staff begins the

pre-screening process by asking consumers to complete generic employment applications and analyzes the information. This allows staff to actually view length of employment, types of

employment and inquire about the consumers likes and dislikes about the overall position. Consumer's who express interest in a specific type of employment but lack adequate training or those who are unsure of their career goal are given the option to gain experience through volunteering, internships or temporary employment agencies/services. Offering such options to the consumer will help the PWI staff place the consumer in a position that he/she will excel and meet the placement requirements of three (3) months and promote employment retention.

Prior to gaining employment, staff discusses the essentials with consumers regarding transportation, childcare, clothing and other employment essentials. These individuals are referred to Vocational Rehabilitation Services and other agencies to receive assistance with essential needs. Providing the consumers with helpful information for their basic needs will assist in the consumer maintaining employment.

Communication is key to maintaining a good staff to consumer/employer relationship. Staff inquires about the consumer's employment progress by phone, email and/or mail. Using a variety of follow-up methods increases the likelihood of contacting the consumer. Staff will follow-up with consumers and/or employers by visiting the consumers

place of employment. Due to work schedules and personal situations, this is usually the best means to follow-up on the consumer. Consumers are encouraged to contact PWI staff regarding grievances, accommodations or for other assistance with maintaining employment. We encourage all consumers to contact us should they need further information, referrals or assistance. We also encourage employers to contact the PWI staff should they have any questions or concerns or other employment vacancies. Opening the lines of communication between staff, consumers and employers promotes job retention as well.

Consumers who have reached their goals with assistance from the PWI staff often refer others to the program for employment assistance. Employers who have had trust worthy, dependable and loyal employees that were referred by the PWI staff often contact a staff member when looking for persons to fill other vacant positions. Pre-screening consumers, assisting with the essentials and communicating effectively help all parties involved in promoting employment and employment retention. This continuous cycle increases placements in the Birmingham PWI Program.

*Birmingham Independent Living Center
206 13th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35233
Santoya Baxter
Employment Coordinator
205-251-2223*

**Retaining Employment and
The Business Advisory Council**

By Michael Dolan

Many of our consumers have experienced a long road back to where they are

now entering into the world of work for either the first time in their lives or may be returning

to a totally different career path due to a disability that prevents them from their past employment. Either way, our candidates are experiencing many feelings as they embark on their jobs, fears, anxiety, excitement, just to name a few. As Job Developers and Employment Specialists, our role is to help prepare them for this next step in their quest for entering, or re-entering the world of work. We have all held the job seeking classes, the job hunt clubs, and we have all reassured the candidates about our follow up services and that PWI placement will do all we can to assist and make the job work for them. But now, they are on the job, not with the PWI placement staff. They are now in the working world not with Case Managers and trainers. They are with accountants, lawyer, managers and various leaders in industry. They are expected to help those companies make money. To be honest, there is no answer to guarantee success, but as good Job Developers, we can do the following things to reassure the new employee.

- Get the consumer on interviews with employers as often as possible, whether it be practice or real. The more they see that the employers are no different than themselves, it will alleviate some of the initial fears.

- Have networking time scheduled with the consumers with training and the Business Advisory Council (BAC). Make sure that your BAC is a cross section of various industries so that the candidates will have some understanding of the type of business that he/she will be working in.

When the consumer is hired, make sure that they understand that you recognize their fears and address them.

- Job Coaches are one of the best and most underrated for assuring success on the job. Not only for the new employee on the job, but quite often, to meet and talk during lunch, after work, to tell someone about their day, to reassure them that they are doing fine. The job coach can, speak to the supervisor if the need arises.
- Lastly, and still the best, as I wrote in the beginning, the simple “follow-up”. Just a call on the phone will quite often reassure the new employee/consumer that they have not been forgotten and if they ever do need you for anything down the road, the new employee now is assured that they can still count on you. As it should be.

*Abilities, Inc. c/o VESID
1215 Zerega Avenue
Bronx, NY 10462
Michael Dolan
Program Manager
718-931-3125*

Preparation is the Best Practice For Retention

By Kathy Herron

So many times, when one starts down a new path with work, things just do not go as one hopes. There are challenges that come up

that seem impossible and it seems, these challenges all happen at once and it makes everyone crazy.

For example, the car breaks down after two weeks on the job and money is needed for repairs. Your child becomes ill and needs to stay home from school. In addition, a co-worker leaves some work on your desk that you don't know what to do with or who to ask for assistance and it becomes stressful. All these things are common problems that most people deal with. The time for strategy however, must come before these issues arise. This is the best practice for retention every time....begin with the end in mind.

While we assist individuals in finding and securing employment, our best strategy for retaining a job is to anticipate some of the problems an individual may have before they accept a position. We then assemble a team of support around a person to meet their needs so that when they get the job and issues arise, we are all prepared to assist. This team of support may consist of family, friends, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Employment Specialist and businesses in the community that can help; such as mechanics, pharmacists, day care workers, and doctors. And finally,

someone at the job site that is a friend. This team stays in place as the employed individual develops new strategies and supports over time to keep their job. All team members agree to be available periodically as problems get solved and the employee feels secure that he/she can keep their job.

Retaining a job is sometimes harder than getting one. However, when you have a good support system for solving problems that arise at work, things go so much smoother. That's the best practice for living life well and doing a great job.

***Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living
2568 Packard Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
Kathy Herron
Employment Specialist
734-971-0277***

PARTNERING FOR PLACEMENT

The Importance of Partnering

By Jessica Long

It is estimated that sixty percent of job seekers find their jobs through networking. Unfortunately, many find the process awkward, are afraid to network or don't know how to go about it. As an Employment Coordinator it is essential that I not only teach this skill but provide opportunities for practice. The most effective way to create these opportunities is to partner with organizations that share a common interest. Some of our partnerships include

government agencies, employers, universities, community agencies and hospitals.

Successful long standing partnerships take time to build and cultivate, but if done correctly, the rewards are many. They provide and open exchange of information and ideas, the opportunity to share best practices and experiences, expanded career and job opportunities for individuals, and the opportunity to identify gaps and unmet needs.

This practice is a vital piece in having job seekers hired and out into the community.

disABILITYLINK
755 Commerce Drive, Suite 415
Decatur, GA 30030
Jessica Long
Employment Coordinator
404-687-8890

Keys to Successful Job Retention

By Lisa Bullen

Assisting individuals with disabilities in retaining employment begins the moment the Employment Specialist makes the first contact with the job seeker. Personal attention and individual assistance will make a positive impact on the individual seeking employment. The Employment Specialist should already be considering the right "job match" for the job seeker prior to the initial meeting. What is the "Job Market" offering this individual? Thinking positive, and offering positive solutions to barriers that the individual may have is the next step.

Positive thinking is crucial. Often times job seekers with disabilities come to us after having been through discouraging events regarding their employment prospects. They are hoping that this is not going to be another fruitless effort. It is the Employment Specialist's responsibility to not only assist the individual in finding employment, but also to determine the correct job match to lead to successful job retention. Working together with the job seeker, discovering what it is that they would like to do for employment will aid in this endeavor. If the Employment Specialist does not provide individual assistance and does not involve the job seeker in their placement services, the likelihood of job retention is low.

"Where do you want to work?" That question is simple enough, and 9 times out of 10, the job seeker knows the answer. What are the steps to obtaining this job? Resume,

Application, Interview, Thank You Letter, Follow Up Call.....The chain of events in obtaining the perfect job.

Resume: The resume needs to be accurate and include information similar to the job description of the position for which the job seeker is applying. Many companies use a scanning program for resumes which picks out keywords. If the resume does not include the right "keywords", the resume will not be considered. The individual may be the perfect candidate for the job, but if the resume does not include the right wording, they will NOT be contacted.

Application: It is not enough to just have the resume, instruct the job seeker on how to complete an appropriate application. Do not leave any areas blank, or say "See Resume". Legible writing and no cross outs.

Interview: Practice, practice, and practice some more. What are the questions that employers ask? What are the answers that the Job Seeker needs to give? Everyone is nervous in an interview. Let's be positive and market one self. Turn any negatives into positives.

Thank You Letter: A hand written note addressed to the interviewer is a very nice personal touch.

Follow Up Call: It is good form to make a follow up call a couple days after the employer

has received the Thank You note. It is not considered being pushy, it is showing interest.

Working together with the job seeker, not just handing them a job, is the key to successful job retention. Job seekers should be

given these tools to not only assist them with their present job search, but to make a difference in their employment efforts for years to come.

*Dayle McIntosh Center
13272 Garden Grove Boulevard
Garden Grove, CA 92843
Lisa Bullen
Senior Employment Specialist
909-214-8379*

Taking the Proactive Approach

By Catrina Lian

Strategies for job retention.....a straight forward concept for staff with over fifteen years experience in job development and placement. Boy was I surprised when I found myself staring at a blank page without a strategy to be found. And concerned I might add. We've placed literally hundreds of project participants since our first PWI in 1989, so why am I stumped? Then it came to me...it's the word *strategy* that's throwing me off. So I changed my approach to "Job Retention Best Practices" and ...still blank. But I figured out why. I was looking at this from the wrong end, from the point *after* we help a client get a job. What strategies do we use to keep them there?

I thought I found one recently when a visually impaired consumer we had placed into a great job called and said she wanted to quit and find something in a different field. Having known and placed this client for over a decade into several "different" fields, we weren't surprised at her "I've had enough of this job" pattern. Besides, she had successfully worked there about four years (that's like being placed 16 times), so we encouraged her to re-apply for services so we could start working together again. Then it occurred to me that we had a current client with similar skills and disability that would be perfect for her replacement. I

eagerly told her I would speak with her manager to set up an interview, and she could possibly train her during her two week notice. The interview date was set when I called the day before to confirm with the Resource Manager. "You're not going to believe this," he said, "but Mary told us this morning she has decided to stay." I thought to myself, "Hmm.")

But I freely admit after fifteen years I don't know any "after hire strategies" that work, which is why we do our best to avoid that scenario and address job retention *before* the consumer gets a job.

It doesn't take long working as a job developer on eastern Long Island to get a clear understanding of which culprits tend to sever the consumer from his job needlessly, prematurely or heaven forbid, before 90 days. Secondary issues that may not be directly related to an applicant's ability to perform his job but can directly relate to an exasperated resignation or, worse yet, termination might include problems with reliable transportation means, child care arrangements, unstable housing or concerns over entitlement benefits. Whatever the "peripheral" issue may be, it is *always* addressed and rectified before the job

search even begins, because it *always* impedes on job retention.

But what about the *primary* issues that negatively affect job retention? For us, it always boils down to one thing: the wrong job match. How much easier our jobs would be if every client knew exactly what they wanted to do and were exactly qualified to do it.

Occasionally, you may see a consumer who recently completed a vocational evaluation and career assessment inventory which can be helpful in determining the right job match, but hardly ever foolproof. I am reminded of a client whose career assessment determined, among several other career paths that he would be an excellent cheese maker, and of course, that's the path he perseverated on. For those of you not familiar with Long Island, there are not a lot of cheese factories. And for a consumer who didn't drive, was concerned about losing his social security benefits and was temporarily living with his neighbor, this was problematic.

After several months of getting to know him quite well through the resolution of those pesky secondary issues, we were able to identify his core skills and successfully place him in a (non cheese related) job where he is still employed years later.

Thankfully, most consumers do not require "career assessment de-programming," and determining the right job match is attained through asking the right questions and really listening to the answers, identifying accommodations, if necessary, early in the job search process and eliminating peripheral barriers before the first interview.

Or maybe you may have better luck than me at employing the "I have a great replacement for your job" strategy. I tried it only once after Mary, and the client said, "Great. Can he start tomorrow so I don't have to give two weeks notice?"

*Abilities, Inc. c/o VESID
524 East Main Street
Riverhead, NY 11901
Catrina Lian
Program Manager
631-727-6929*

News from NBDC

Suggested Accommodations for Functional Limitations Associated with Muscular Disorders

Submitted By Laura Francis

Individuals with severe muscular disorders, like Spinal Muscular Atrophies (SMA), Muscular Dystrophy (MD), or Muscular Skeletal Disorder (MSD) will experience different levels of debilitation, as the degree of limitation will vary among individuals. It is also evident among many cases, that many individuals will not need assistance performing manual tasks or accommodations to perform their job and some may only need a few accommodations. Every person's disability is very personal and very different from another.

There are, however, common characteristics in muscular disabilities, but range in severity. Individuals with muscular disabilities can experience a wide range of the following functional limitations:

- Decreased range of motion
- Decreased grip strength
- Loss of function
- Deformity
- Swelling
- Cramping
- Redness/loss of color
- Muscle fatigue or pain
- Tingling, numbness, burning, aching, stiffness

In addition to muscle weakness caused by MSD, Muscular Dystrophy (MD) affects the nervous system, heart, gastrointestinal tract,

eyes (causing cataracts) and endocrine (hormone-producing) glands.

While most employers are in compliance physically, creating accessible entrances and automatic doors, having accessible restrooms available with access to ramped parking areas, there are other, more personal actions that can be considered when making accommodations, and can also be seen as "simple courtesy". Some of these may be to:

- Allow use of a personal attendant at work
- Allow use of a service animal at work
- Provide a workstation closer to the restroom
- Allow longer breaks

As fatigue and weakness are common elements caused by muscular disabilities, the following may be necessary:

- Reduce physical exertion
- Provide support to staff on workplace stress, by developing strategies before they arise, for example: provide sensitivity training, allow telephone calls during work hours to doctors, provide information on employee assistance programs for counseling
- Allow short breaks away from workstations
- Allow flexible hours during work week

- Provide location options, for example, working from home

For persons who experience fine motor limitations, which is difficulty with tasks such as writing, poor balance and walking, and involuntary movements (uncontrollable movements of the arms, legs, face, neck, or other parts of the body), the following alternatives can be considered:

- Be sure workstation design is ergonomically correct
- Provide an ergonomically designed chair, if necessary
- Work with a job assessment specialist to provide assistive devices to utilize computers, telephones and other office equipment
- Other items may include arm supports on desks or chairs, writing and grip aids, page-turners, book holders and desktop carousels.

The same would apply to people who experience gross motor impairment, which causes awkward body movements, however, additional steps could be taken to ease exhaustion and increase stamina during the workday. Some of these may include:

- Provide parking close to the work-site with easy access to an accessible entrance with automatic doors
- Provide an accessible route of travel to other work areas used by the employee
- Require all departments to consider meeting reach range requirements so that all employees have easy access to materials.

As with many disabilities, medical treatment is routine and there may be times within a work week that visits to the doctor are necessary. In order to be sure that all essential

functions of the job are being met, it may be necessary to work closely with the employee so that a work schedule can be coordinated to meet the needs of the company and employee. This may include:

- Rescheduling hours during that day
- Allow a self-paced workload with flexible hours
- Allow employee to work from home
- Provide part-time work schedules

Speech is also an area that may be affected by severe muscular disabilities and there are many accommodations that can be made. For the simpler accommodations, consideration for easy communication can include email, instant messaging (IM) or fax. Flexible work schedules and/or periodic rest breaks are other alternatives. A more serious consideration would be to provide transfer options that do not require a lot of communication, or purchasing communication devices, such as speech amplification, speech enhancement, which would require a job Assessment Specialist so that the proper system is utilized to perfection.

The following are examples of easy solutions made by employers in order to assist an employee with a muscular disability:

- An employee working in a laboratory setting had difficulty walking to and from departments located on different floors of a large office building, while disseminating files and other information. The company provided him with a scooter with a large basket attachment.
- A researcher had severe hand weakness and was limited in her ability to use the keyboard. The employee was accommodated with a miniature keyboard with light touch features.

- A receptionist had difficulty grasping and holding office files. She was accommodated with a desktop carousel.
- A data entry employee was having great difficulty typing information into her computer due to fine motor limitations. A specialist was consulted and she was accommodated with speech recognition.

*National Business & Disability Council
Abilities, Inc.
201 I.U. Willets Road
Albertson, NY 11507
Laura Francis
Coordinator of Informational Services
(516) 465-1519*

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Staff responsible for the management of this project include:

Edmund L. Cortez, President and CEO
Abilities! and Abilities, Inc.

Abilities, Inc.

Francine Tishman President & COO	Judy Young Vice President	Lana Smart Vice President
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Anita Zimmerman Program Manager	Catrina Lian Program Manager	Mike Dolan Program Manager
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Lisa M. Harris
Coordinator of Special Projects



We Focus on Ability

201 I. U. Willets Road, Albertson, NY 11507
Abilities, Inc. provides employment and training services
for youth and adults with disabilities.

