



September 16, 2016

Effective Engagement with the Business Community

The CA Consortium model “Disability Inclusive- Diversity smALL Business Initiative” focused on placing college students, recent graduates and veterans with disabilities into eight-week internships with small businesses. Small business is the engine of U.S. economic growth, and the data on diverse owned business growth clearly shows that these businesses are not only a significant contributor to the long term health of the United States economy, these segments are among the fastest growing. Over the past 10 years, diverse owned businesses have grown at approximately double the rate of all firms in the U.S. economy. “Diverse owned” refers to all minority owned businesses as well as those owned and operated by women, individuals with disabilities, and LGBT people. The small businesses in the California Consortium were identified and affiliated with the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC). The NGLCC served as the Consortium’s business partner. This resource information is based on the lesson learned by our Consortium.

Business owners think differently than disability employment advocates!

Business owners are motivated by outcomes, profitability and innovation. The most effective way to move a business owner out of dialogue (just conversations about hiring people with disabilities) and into a transactional relationship (actively interviewing and ultimately hiring qualified people with disabilities) is to speak directly to these simple and clear motivations.

Fear is a factor!

Business owners generally have some well-defined fears that can be triggered unintentionally by the use of ineffective/ non-business oriented language. Some fears can be understood and addressed if trust is established. Safe space conversations are critical and effective. Fears and concerns must be addressed in business language. Disability employment advocates should avoid governmental compliance and non-profit language. This is the opposite of business language and will make it impossible to establish trust.

If a business owner expresses concerns that hiring a person with a disability could increase their risk of being fined or sued these concerns must be addressed in

business language and in a way that increases their comfort level with the manageability of risk.

The stakes are high for the business owner. Their day-to-day concerns extend well beyond worrying about their own self-interest.

They are also thinking about:

- The overall sustainability of their enterprise
- The welfare of their employees and their families
- The concerns of their customers, vendors and collaborators

Any opportunity offered to a business owner must align with outcomes that serve all of these concerns.

A simple way to think about this and adjust the language is to understand what motivates and what de-motivates a business owner.

Motivation: Profitability, controlled costs, innovation that will increase competitiveness and/or market share, and predictable outcomes

Demotivation: Unmanaged risk, increasing costs, litigation, government regulation and compliance

Examples of messaging that motivate business owners:

“Our candidates are navigating their education and workplaces with natural instincts for finding the most effective approach to every situation or task. Their disabilities present daily challenges that most employees have never faced. They are instinctively and innately innovative.” What the business owners hears - *Innovation, diverse market share.*

“Our candidates are pre-screened and possess the specific skill sets you’re seeking for the projects you have right now.” What they hear - *Predictable outcomes, urgency.*

“Our candidates may help your business qualify for financial incentives from the government. These incentives will help offset onboarding and training costs.” What they hear - *Profitability, controlled and predictable costs.*

Examples of messaging that de-motivate a business owner:

“Our candidates will require accommodations in order to perform their duties and as their employer you will be required by law to provide those accommodations.” What they hear - *Government regulation and compliance, increased costs, risk of litigation.*

“Your workplace will have to be fully compliant with all ADA regulations. There will be an audit.” What they hear - *Unmanaged risk, increasing costs, litigation, risk.*

Business language translation:

“All employees require productivity tools in order to be effective. Our candidates have navigated their educational experience using the tools they need, they will be well versed and prepared to navigate your workplace and systems.”

“Our team will be happy to help you assess any accessibility issue concerns you may have, in fact our agency can provide guidance and tools for you.”

Any initiative or program that intends to connect business owners to employment candidates who are people with disabilities must be prepared to speak the language of business. It may not be obvious to advocacy professionals that business has it’s own language, just as business leaders would not immediately understand the language of advocacy. Word choices matter and this shift may take a little practice. The most important thing to remember is that a mistake in language will result in a strong reaction from a business owner and the odds of a second chance at the conversation are virtually zero. Learn to speak the language quickly and be sure and identify a “champion” quickly. A champion is simply an individual that believes in your initiative and is also a person the business owner knows and trusts. Local Chamber leaders are often perfect champions. Business owners that have hired through your program and had a positive experience can also be great champions. The role of the champion is to secure meetings and open effective dialogue geared to deliver transactional relationships.

The business owners and /or business associations must become a full partner in the initiative. All healthy partnerships begin with an understanding of each other’s needs. The business owner’s problems must become your problems. When partners address each other’s needs consistently, effective outcomes are the result.

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