



Employing People with Disabilities: Contact Center Industry Leads the Way

By Allanna Kelsall

People with disabilities have long represented a qualified but underutilized part of the workforce in the United States. In fact, federal estimates put the unemployment figure for this segment of the population as high as 75 percent

The skills and intelligence possessed by Americans with disabilities have always been recognized, but access to and active engagement of this demographic now has the potential to expand more rapidly than ever. Due to technological advancements and innovative new staffing models, those within the contact center industry are perfectly poised to tap into this untapped yet highly qualified labor pool

Political Support

Finding and retaining qualified agents is one of the most important challenges facing contact centers today. While more mature, professional agents undoubtedly provide better service, recruiting from this segment can be difficult for almost every contact center

Since 1938, when President Roosevelt passed the Wagner-O'Day Act, which provided employment opportunities for blind people to make mops and brooms, the government has continued to play a role in providing job opportunities for those with disabilities

Congress strengthened this policy in 1971, when the late Sen. Jacob Javits (R-NY) led an amendment to the original act to include a broader group of people with severe disabilities. Today, the Javits-Wagner-O'Day (JWOD) Program is a federally mandated program that requires that certain government purchases of products and services come from entities employing disabled workers

The typical challenges faced by people with physical disabilities, however, have only recently been addressed through a number of technological advances.

In the past, for example most employment opportunities for disabled workers still required a commute to a work location. According to the National Telecommuting Institute (NTI), there are

1.2 million disabled workers in the United States today. Of those workers, 12 percent would directly benefit from a work-at-home option. Today, through personal computers, broadband Internet access, low-cost telephony and advanced management capability, working from home is a reality for thousands of people with disabilities.

The contact center industry has been the clear leader over the past two years in adapting to the needs of disabled workers. The advent of home-based outsourced contact centers, or the employment of people working from their homes to answer phone calls, has been particularly successful.

A Direct Application

One example of the intent of the JWOD program is the relationship between NTI, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and Alpine Access, Inc. Alpine Access, a private-sector provider of exclusively home-based agent services for clients including Office Depot, J. Crew and 1-800-Flowers, teamed up with NTI in late 2004. Together, Alpine Access and NTI created a joint solution for the IRS to handle phone calls for its 1-800-TAX-FORM service under the guidelines of the JWOD program.

The IRS has set aside jobs for forms and publications order operators to be filled by people with disabilities who need to work from their homes. NTI coordinates with local state vocational rehabilitation centers to recruit home-based employees with disabilities, while Alpine Access's technology enables connectivity of calls to the next available agent. The agent can work from a cabin in Montana or from an apartment in New York City. The job travels, rather than the individual.

NTI is working with state vocational rehabilitation agencies from around the country to fill up to 500 seasonal positions and 80 year-round jobs. Peter Catanese, an NTI employee working for the IRS, says that this is the first employment opportunity he has encountered that meets his needs. Catanese was hit by a car more than 30 years ago and has had more than 60 operations since then to repair damage done to his legs.

"I have a lot of pain from my knees and from other parts of my body that prohibits me from working eight hours a day," explains Catanese. "This job has given me back my identity and is something I can really be proud of."

NTI and Alpine Access jointly handle the hiring process, which is done entirely online. NTI screens candidates, while Alpine Access determines voice quality and technical competency. The new hires are then trained on a conferencing system with trainers and Web-based materials.

Programs like the NTI/Alpine Access/IRS relationship are win-win situations for taxpayers, the employees and the organizations that are now able to tap into this highly qualified market of professionals. It is just one example of how innovation has increased opportunities for people with disabilities, as well as providing mature, experienced call center agents for contact centers.

Overcoming Challenges

While it may seem like an intimidating venture for companies that have previously not sought out workers with disabilities, finding qualified applicants with disabilities should not be difficult for any organization. There are a variety of resources available to companies interested in recruiting disabled workers

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a governmental entity responsible for aiding in job training, job placement and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. VR contact information can be found in your local telephone directory, listed under state government.

The Employment Assistance Recruiting Network (EARN) is another free service that allows employers to list specific job vacancy information. EARN communicates with local disability-related employment organizations that represent qualified, job-ready candidates. EARN relays this information to the employer, who then contacts these organizations directly.

Also, the Employers' Resource section of www.disabilityinfo.gov contains information on interviewing, recruiting and hiring people with disabilities, including links to resume posting sites for people with disabilities

The most immediate challenge for employing people with various disabilities is providing a work environment that meets the needs of each person. The best sources for information on this topic are the people themselves. In the event that the person cannot provide complete details, the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a comprehensive source of information for employers. JAN operates the Searchable On-Line Accommodation Resource, which contains easily accessible employment-related information for workers and employers. JAN also has publications that provide accommodation ideas grouped by type of disability

Interviewing Tips

So what does an employer need to know about interviewing people with disabilities? Employers may not make any inquiry on an application form or in an interview as to whether, or to what extent, an individual is disabled prior to an employment offer. The employer may ask a job applicant whether they can perform particular job functions. A terrific source of additional information on interviewing applicants with disabilities can be found at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) Web site, www.eeoc.gov.

With the high level of unemployment currently plaguing the disabled workforce, there is great opportunity for organizations to benefit from the education and skills of that workforce. Technology and innovation has delivered many new opportunities for work. New capabilities for managing individuals working from their homes means more options for disabled workers will continue to be possible.