Program Overview

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) created “Bridges to Business” (Bridges) to provide competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities by forging more effective links between employers and organizations that represent job-seekers with disabilities. In approaching employment from business’ labor force needs, Bridges differs from conventional disability employment models that match a job to the skills and abilities of individual job-seekers.

Testing the Model

In 2010, NOD partnered with Lowe’s, the world’s second largest home improvement retailer to pilot the Bridges concept in three of the company’s regional distribution centers. The Kessler Foundation funded the demonstration and commissioned an independent evaluation of the program by Rutgers University’s John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.

Rutgers Evaluators concluded that:

“Of all the programs designed to place people with disabilities in employment...‘Bridges to Business’ demonstrated the greatest success in job placement.”

Program Results

- In 12 months Lowe’s hired 119 employees with varying disabilities.
- On average, these employees earned 40% more than state minimum wage, and many receive significant performance bonuses. All are eligible for comprehensive health, 401(k) and other benefits. As a result, employees are able to decrease their dependence on public benefits.
- A majority met or exceeded all of Lowe’s performance standards.
- Turnover was lower than or equal to that of other Lowe’s employees.
- After 18 months, Lowe’s committed to expanding the program nationally, hiring a full-time disability employment expert to oversee the process.
Bridges to Business Program
Clearly Defined Roles are Keys to Success

Defined Roles
The Heldrich Center report highlights the clarity of roles among NOD, service providers and the employer as key to the program’s success.

NOD’s Role: Project Manager and Trainer
- Visited each site to determine job requirements and understand workplace policies, practices, and culture.
- Recommended improvements to Lowe’s processes to ensure successful integration of new employees.
- Identified, assessed, and recommended service providers based on their fit with the company’s hiring needs and corporate culture.
- Conducted training with Lowe’s staff and service provider to define roles and metrics of success.
- Provided disability awareness training to 375 Lowe’s managers and staff.
- Organized regular communication among all partners to review employee performance, solve problems, and identify promotion opportunities.

Service Provider’s Role: Screening and Support
- Screened job candidates and helped employees master job skills and integrate into Lowe’s workplace culture.
- Trained under Lowe’s staff to understand job requirements and performance metrics in order to provide ongoing support to new employees.
- Ensured employees had transportation to and from the job site.

Lowe’s Role: High Standards and a Culture of Inclusion
- Provided well-defined tasks and coaching to help employees reach performance targets.
- Held employees with disabilities to the same standards as other employees.
- Facilitated manager training by NOD to address concerns and misconceptions about employees with disabilities.
- Managers expressed pride in working for a company that demonstrates a commitment to diversity.

“Bridges’ demand-driven approach to filling positions - starting with the company’s job openings and training candidates to fulfill the expectations - means that employers do not have to sacrifice performance standards to hire people with disabilities.”

Since 2010, the Bridges to Business program has partnered with more than a dozen Fortune 1000 companies.

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It’s ability, not disability, that counts