Evaluation of the Bridges to Business Program: Final Report

by William F. Mabe Jr., Ph.D., Maria Heidkamp, and Charyl Staci Yarbrough, Ph.D.

Introduction

The Kessler Foundation uses its Signature Employment Grant program to invest in selected programs that seek to assist people with disabilities to develop job skills and gain meaningful employment. Through its Signature Employment Grant program, between 2005 and 2010, the Kessler Foundation provided over $10 million in funding to support 27 different employment programs for people with disabilities. In 2009, the Kessler Foundation contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, to conduct a two-year evaluation of its Signature Employment Grant to the National Organization on Disability’s (NOD) Bridges to Business program.

From 2010 to 2011, the Heldrich Center conducted the year one evaluation of the Bridges to Business program and wrote the first-year evaluation report. The focus of this, the final evaluation report, is identifying the components of the Bridges to Business program that functioned effectively and those components that could be improved, and provide feedback both to Kessler and to NOD on the extent to which the Bridges to Business program met the objectives that it laid out in its proposal.

Bridges to Business is a “demand-side” program to provide competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Whereas many disability employment programs emphasize customizing a job based on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of an individual with a disability (the “supply” side), Bridges to Business starts with an employer’s hiring need for specific positions — complete with a defined set of tasks and responsibilities — and allows people both with and without disabilities to compete for them. NOD identified Lowe’s as an employer interested in hiring people with disabilities and worked with Lowe’s to implement the Bridges to Business program in three of the company’s regional distribution centers (i.e., warehouses). (Lowe’s refers to the Bridges to Business program as the Outreach program.)

In the final evaluation of the Bridges to Business program, the Heldrich Center found that the program successfully placed over 100 people with disabilities in jobs that paid about 40% more than the minimum wage.

Of all the programs designed to place people
with disabilities in employment that the Heldrich Center has evaluated to date, Bridges to Business demonstrated the greatest success in job placement.

From the evaluation, the Heldrich Center generated a number of findings that explain why the Bridges to Business program has been effective at placing people with disabilities in employment:

- The program has a strong and genuine commitment from Lowe’s to hire qualified job candidates with disabilities. Because the program started with the employer’s hiring need for specific positions and the employer’s willingness to allow people both with and without disabilities to compete for these jobs, it had largely resolved the substantial challenge of employer buy-in by the time the program began.

- By serving as a business partner to Lowe’s, NOD added expertise that the company lacked in terms of reaching out to the disability community and identifying qualified job applicants.

- NOD played a critical role in providing sensitivity trainings to Lowe’s staff to generate buy-in among Lowe’s staff to hire people with disabilities.

- NOD also used its expertise in disability employment to identify a competent local service provider that could screen and refer large numbers of job seekers with disabilities to the program. Good screening of candidates with disabilities by a dedicated lead service provider that is familiar with the jobs at the Lowe’s regional distribution center has contributed to this success.

- NOD also provided key technical assistance throughout the course of the program, facilitating communication between all stakeholders and helping to identify solutions to challenges that arose.

The evaluation also generated a number of lessons that could inform future implementation of the Bridges to Business program as well as programs based on the Bridges to Business model:

- Employment consultants or job coaches play an important role in providing support for the individuals with disabilities as they master their job tasks, but it is also important that they encourage the individuals with disabilities to become integrated socially into the workforce by keeping a supportive, but low profile.

- Roles of the different partners must be clear for supervisors, employment coaches, individual employees with disabilities, and other employees at the worksite. Different Lowe’s sites have elected to have the individuals with disabilities either directly become Lowe’s employees after qualifying for the job, or have a transitional probationary period as an employee of an external entity as they learn the job. In one site in particular, there was confusion over whether the recently hired individuals with disabilities reported to the external employment coaches or the Lowe’s supervisors, which was problematic. This site has since altered its model so that future employees with disabilities will be direct Lowe’s hires reporting to Lowe’s supervisors.

- The distribution center jobs have a set of well-defined tasks with explicit, measurable performance targets, and Lowe’s provides coaching to all of its employees to help them meet and exceed performance targets (which also results in bonus pay). Having such explicit targets makes it easy to measure the successful performance of the individuals with disabilities, who are essentially held to the same standards as everyone else. Based on the performance results, Lowe’s believes the Bridges to Business model provides a viable source of new employees who are able to meet the performance Lowe’s needs.
Table 1. Disabilities of Rockford Outreach Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asperger’s Syndrome</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
<td>&gt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
<td>&gt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Impaired</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>&gt;0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Illinois Growth Enterprises program data*

Findings

Through interviews conducted during the site visits and review of program documents, the Heldrich Center generated the following 13 findings.

**Finding #1. Whether the Lowe’s RDC hired the Outreach employee directly from the outset or whether the Outreach employee was initially hired by a third party did not make a significant difference in whether the Outreach employee was retained on the job.**

Being Lowe’s employees from the first day means the Outreach employees are subject to the same rules related to behavior and absences as other team members. Thus far, this does not appear to have posed a problem for the Outreach employees. In the other model — which it should be noted again that Statesville is currently moving away from and replacing with an approach that resembles Rockford’s — Outreach employees have something resembling a grace period, during which they are effectively employees of an external entity, meaning their absences — “occurrences” in Lowe’s jargon — do not count against them during the probationary period. Although the on-boarding process at Rockford could theoretically make it more difficult for Outreach employees to keep their jobs, in practice this does not appear to have been an issue. On the other hand, by having the employees on board as Lowe’s employees from the start, the team members are integrated into the structure at Lowe’s from the outset, including for orientation and training, even if they receive additional assistance as needed from the employment consultant.

**Finding #2. Lowe’s staff thought that NOD selected capable service providers.** One reason for Lowe’s bringing NOD on in the first place was to help the company have easier access to potential employees from the disability community. Based on feedback from Lowe’s staff obtained during the site visits, as well as observation of the implementation of the model to date, it appears that NOD selected capable service providers in each of the locations. The service providers play a vital role in providing access to clients, including screening them to ensure that they are appropriate for Lowe’s needs. The service providers have also been instrumental in organizing the employment consultants to provide additional support as needed for the Outreach team members. The service providers have monitored the progress of the Outreach team members, both on site and through phone calls and emails, offering additional information when necessary about particular disabilities or accommodation strategies. **NOD’s knowledge of “demand-driven” disability employment strategies seems to have contributed to their successful selection of service providers.**

Moreover, at Statesville and Rockford, the employment consultants have been working on site for about a year. During this period, they have acquired substantial knowledge about Lowe’s in general and the specific job tasks that are required to complete most of the jobs in the warehouse for which the Outreach employees are being trained. At Rockford, some Lowe’s staffers joked that the employment consultant could conduct the orientation on her own. She also provided supplemental training to the extent that it was needed after the Lowe’s coaches had finished training the employee.
Finding #3. The employment consultants have built up substantial valuable knowledge that enables them to better serve Outreach employees. The service providers have selected employment consultants at each site. Before the employment consultants started supporting Outreach employees, they spent two weeks getting trained in various job tasks and doing these job tasks. This training allowed them to be able to provide supplemental training as needed to Outreach employees after the Lowe’s training period for the Outreach employee had ended.

In Rockford, the employment consultant was an employee of the service provider, IGE. In this case, the service provider selected an energetic employment consultant who is passionate about the employment of people with disabilities. The employment consultant has developed a deep understanding of the employment processes and performance measurement systems used by Lowe’s. She has attended many orientations for the different groups of new hires and is considered by the staff at Lowe’s as a capable training provider. This deep understanding of the job tasks combined with an understanding of disabilities allows the employment consultant to work effectively in supporting the Outreach team members. The employment consultant works with them as needed on technical and behavioral issues that arise and also advocates on the behalf of the employees with disabilities, reminding the company that although these individuals have demonstrated that they can hold jobs, they remain individuals with disabilities and need different levels of accommodation. The employment consultant is available as needed but also tries to keep a low profile, including trying to avoid sitting with Outreach employees during lunch and breaks, encouraging the employees to interact with their co-workers.

In Statesville, NOD identified a job coaching firm to provide employment consultants for the project. Overall, the employment consultant, Advocations, has performed well and with tremendous energy. At the start of the program, the Advocations job coaches came into the facility and worked for two weeks to learn the different job tasks, to get an understanding of the stresses/challenges of the job, and to see what challenges arise in the course of the work day that are out of the ordinary or not part of the routine.

Finding #4. In Statesville, confusion arose among Outreach employees and Lowe’s staff over the employment consultant’s role in the project. One issue that arose at Statesville was that Outreach employees and Lowe’s staff had some confusion over the employment consultant’s role at Lowe’s and in implementing the Bridges to Business program.

According to interviews, the Outreach clients sometimes viewed the employment consultant from Advocations as their supervisor. In some cases, the clients did not look to Lowe’s staff for authority, but instead to the employment consultant. This sense of confusion may have been partially due to the fact of the Outreach employees being employees of the temporary agency, Strata Force, rather than direct Lowe’s employees.

At the same time, Lowe’s staff did not fully understand the role of the employment consultant. Initially, some Lowe’s employees thought that the Outreach employee reported to the employment consultant and that the employment consultant was the Outreach employee’s supervisor. Some Lowe’s employees were confused about the employment consultant’s role in a different sense. According to interviews, Lowe’s staff sometimes asked the employment consultants to do job tasks — such as to clean up work areas — that were the responsibility of Lowe’s employees. Being asked to complete such tasks placed the employment consultants in a difficult situation at the start of the project. In order to build a positive rapport, they did not want to refuse to do such tasks, but doing them may have taken away from their primary function to support the Outreach client on the job and may have also reinforced an incorrect understanding among Lowe’s employees about the role of the employment consultants.
NOD addressed these issues by reiterating the role of the employment consultants in its bi-weekly calls with Lowe’s as well as in one-on-one meetings with senior management at the Statesville facilities.

In an interview, one individual thought that the employment consultants may not have fostered as much independence in the Outreach clients as they might have. As an example, this individual explained that the employment consultants routinely joined the Outreach employees at lunch, which may have inhibited the Outreach employees from developing social bonds with non-Outreach co-workers and affected their ability to become fully integrated into the work environment.

**Finding #5. To date, while the Outreach program has employed individuals with a variety of disabilities, many clients needed support from an employment consultant.** So far, all Outreach employees have needed the assistance of the employment consultants, some more or less based on their particular disabilities. There were some observations made by Lowe’s staff, most of whom had not worked with people with disabilities previously, about different types of disabilities needing different levels of job coaching, from supervising individuals who are deaf or who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or intellectual disabilities.

Thus far in Statesville, the service provider has only referred Outreach clients who have needed an employment consultant, which may have been influenced by the fact that the job coaching service was there and available. As noted earlier, the model is in flux in Statesville with changes under way in terms of the on-boarding process as well as changes to the employment consultant piece of the model. In the future, the service provider will not use a single organization for employment consultants. The service provider will arrange for a job coach/employment consultant who may have previously worked with the Outreach client, selecting employment consultants that it thinks are best suited to the individual Outreach employee’s needs.

**Finding #6. Transportation was not a barrier to participants’ success in Rockford but was a barrier in Statesville.** In Findlay, the service provider picked up program participants at their homes and drove them to and from work. In Rockford, transportation has not been an issue for any of the Outreach employees to date. In Statesville, however, transportation was a barrier for Outreach applicants. The service provider incorporated the ability to get to Lowe’s into its screening criteria. If a person did not have a plan or an ability to get to Lowe’s, then they were not generally considered for the position. The service provider did arrange for transportation for some clients, including organizing carpools among Outreach members. For clients who lived about an hour away from Lowe’s, the service provider arranged for a van service, for which the Outreach clients paid, to get them to work.

**Finding #7. The Bridges to Business program is extremely successful with client placement.** In large part because the program is driven by employer demand, Bridges to Business has helped to place a lot of people with disabilities in employment. NOD reported that 119 individuals with disabilities have been hired under Bridges to Business from the time NOD started, and of those, 37 left employment for various reasons and 82 are currently working full time with benefits.

One of the stakeholders explained in an interview that the program has given job seekers with disabilities a “foot in the door” to these positions that they might not otherwise have had. These are individuals who might not have gotten these jobs without this program, this person explained, because these individuals might have difficulty filling out the application or presenting well at an interview, even though they can do the jobs. Another individual mentioned that the model
helped get around the discrimination that impedes the ability of people with disabilities to get jobs for which they are qualified.

In addition, through the Bridges to Business program, several individuals who had been participating in sheltered workshops transitioned into employment with Lowe’s. Moving sheltered workshop clients to competitive employment represented a systems change for the service providers.

Finding #8. Outreach employees have generally performed well, with a majority of them reaching Lowe’s 100% performance standard. According to the performance data that Lowe’s and the service providers generated for the Heldrich Center, the Outreach employees in Statesville and Rockford have generally performed well, though at Rockford only about half of the Outreach employees are achieving an average performance level of 100% or greater. (Data were not available for Findlay.)

Table 2 presents the overall average performance levels of Outreach employees at various stages in their employment at the Lowe’s Statesville RDC as well as their cumulative performance in 2011 through November. At Statesville, 13 of the 18 Outreach employees are performing at or above the 100% standard. The other 5 are performing very close to that standard, with only one employee below 90%.

In Statesville, of the 18 Outreach employees for whom data were reported, 72% had performance scores at or above 100%. Four of the remaining five individuals had scores at or above 90%, and the remaining individual’s cumulative score for the year was 85%, meaning 100% of the Outreach employees were at 85% or above for the year.

At Statesville, there are currently 18 Outreach clients working at Lowe’s. Overall, the Lowe’s Statesville staff reported they were satisfied with the performance of the Outreach employees. One issue that has come up was that other non-Outreach team members worry that having Outreach team members who do not perform up to or better than prescribed standards will affect their team’s chances for bonus payments, but Lowe’s staff responded that it is the company’s responsibility to equip people with the skills and training they need so that they can perform up to standards. It was also noted that an individual can be put temporarily in training status if necessary, which means that their performance scores do not affect bonuses.

Lowe’s staff reported that two Outreach employees are currently having attendance trouble, and that three to four Outreach employees have had injuries that were “OSHA-reportable” and would require safety managers to work with them.

Table 3 shows summarized performance information for 32 Outreach employees at the Lowe’s Rockford facility for the period from July 7, 2011 through the week of October 27, 2011.
Table 3. Average Weekly Performance Data for Rockford Outreach Employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Performance Score (7/7/2011-10/27/2011)</th>
<th>Number of Employees</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Illinois Growth Enterprises

During this period, many of the Outreach employees at the Rockford facility were new employees. According to Lowe’s staff, new Lowe’s employees typically start somewhat slowly as they adjust to the demands of the job and learn how to complete their key job duties. Table 4 shows the performance of the Outreach employees after three weeks on the job, and the data indicate a minor increase in performance. (Table 4 includes data on 29 employees, because 3 employees who appeared in the data worked three weeks or less during the July to October period.)

Table 4. Average Weekly Performance Data for Rockford Outreach Employees After Three Weeks on the Job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Performance Score After First Three Weeks (7/7/2011-10/27/2011)</th>
<th>Number of Employees</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-99</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Illinois Growth Enterprises

One Outreach team member is on a final warning due to safety issues, and two are struggling to use the company’s scanners.

Finding #9. The turnover of Outreach employees is the same as or lower than the turnover of non-Outreach employees.
Generally, turnover in the team member jobs is relatively high because the job involves a lot of hard, physically demanding work. According to Lowe’s staff and service provider representatives, the turnover of the Outreach employees is low. Although there are no data available for comparative analysis, Lowe’s staff and service provider representatives think that the turnover among the Outreach employees is about the same as the turnover among non-Outreach employees, perhaps somewhat lower.

Finding #10. Outreach employees earn up to a livable wage and receive full benefits — health care and 401(k) — that allow them to reduce their reliance on public assistance. For team members, Lowe’s reports wage information as an hourly wage, not as an annual salary. In Findlay, Statesville, and Rockford, Outreach employees earn signifi-
cantly more than the minimum wage. Table 5 displays the hourly minimum wages for the three states where the Lowe’s RDCs are located as well as the average hourly wage that the Outreach employees at each of the three facilities earn. On average, Outreach employees earn about 40% more than the minimum wage. (In addition, team members are eligible for bonuses based on their performance that can increase their hourly wage to $13.40 an hour.)

Although Lowe’s does not report wage information for team members as an annual salary, the Heldrich Center can calculate an annual salary based on a 40-hour work week for the Outreach team members. These calculations show that Outreach employees who maintain their employment for an entire year earn substantially more than they would have earned had they worked full time at the minimum wage. Table 6 shows the difference in annual earnings for minimum wage workers and Lowe’s Outreach employees, based on a 40-hour work week.

Annualizing the wages shows that for those employees who stay with Lowe’s for a year, they earn at least $6,300 more than they would have earned had they worked full time in a job that paid the minimum wage. This is a substantial earnings difference.

Lowe’s Outreach team members receive the same benefits packages as other employees of the company, including:

Table 5. Average Hourly Wages of Lowe’s Outreach Employees at Statesville, Rockford, and Findlay Versus State Minimum Wages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lowe’s Regional Distribution Center</th>
<th>State Minimum Hourly Wage</th>
<th>Average Hourly Wage of Outreach Employees</th>
<th>Percent Greater than Minimum Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statesville, NC</td>
<td>$7.25</td>
<td>$10.30</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockford, IL</td>
<td>$8.25</td>
<td>$11.48</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findlay, OH</td>
<td>$7.70</td>
<td>$11.00</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Minimum Wage Laws in the States, retrieved from: http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/americ.htm; Lowe’s Statesville, Rockford, and Findlay RDCs

Table 6. Comparison of Annual Earnings of Lowe’s Outreach Team Member at Statesville, Rockford, and Findlay with Annual Earnings of Someone Making the Minimum Wage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lowe’s Regional Distribution Center</th>
<th>Annual Earnings at Minimum Hourly Wage</th>
<th>Annual Earnings of Outreach Employees</th>
<th>Earnings Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statesville, NC</td>
<td>$15,080</td>
<td>$21,424</td>
<td>$6,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockford, IL</td>
<td>$17,160</td>
<td>$23,878</td>
<td>$6,718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findlay, OH</td>
<td>$16,016</td>
<td>$22,880</td>
<td>$6,864</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Minimum Wage Laws in the States, retrieved from: http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/americ.htm; Lowe’s Statesville, Rockford, and Findlay RDCs
- Comprehensive health care;
- Life insurance;
- 401(k) and a stock purchase plan;
- Sick pay, short-term disability benefits, and long-term disability benefits; and
- Work/life benefits, such as child care referral service, wellness planning, and an employee assistance plan.


Because the Lowe’s jobs offer livable wages and health care benefits, they permit Outreach employees to over time reduce their reliance on public health care and income supports.

**Finding #11. NOD played a critical role in facilitating the Bridges to Business program and putting Lowe’s in a position to be able to hire people with disabilities.** Comments from Lowe’s management reflected a high regard for the role played by NOD in selecting service providers and in conducting training in disability awareness and etiquette issues. Those who attended the training felt it was well delivered and covered appropriate topics, with several mentioning finding an interactive exercise in which participants simulate the experience of having a particular disability, especially “eye-opening.” Most of those involved had not knowingly worked with individuals with disabilities previously.

As NOD intended when it set up the Bridges to Business model, after NOD’s initial heavy interaction with all stakeholders, after initial implementation, on a day-to-day basis, Lowe’s staff have far more interaction with the service provider and employment consultants than NOD staff. The service providers also commented positively on the expertise NOD was able to share with them.

**Finding #12. Lowe’s plans to sustain the Outreach program, though it will implement the program somewhat differently in the future.** In interviews, top-level management at the Lowe’s sites as well as stakeholders in the Outreach/Bridges to Business program said that Lowe’s is absolutely committed to continuing the program.

The final section of this report discusses how Lowe’s intends to modify the program and offers the Heldrich Center’s assessment of how these changes might affect the hiring of people with disabilities going forward.

**Finding #13. All stakeholders thought that Lowe’s attitude and commitment to making the program work were exemplary and represent a strong reason why the stakeholders thought the program was likely to be sustained.** Lowe’s top-down commitment to including people with disabilities in the workforce was mentioned several times as the rationale for making the Bridges to Business model work. It was mentioned as an aspect of Lowe’s commitment to diversity generally, and one Lowe’s staff member mentioned that other human resource managers from the area were envious of how well the model was working. Representatives from Lowe’s management expressed pride in working for a company that demonstrates this commitment to diversity, and at least one individual mentioned that the program was consistent with the company’s motto of PRIDE: Performance, Respect, Integrity, Diversity, Excellence. The corporate commitment to hiring people with disabilities, including determining how to support them and integrate them into the workforce, has resulted in excellent opportunities being available to individuals with disabilities, especially important in a difficult economy.
Lessons Learned

Lesson #1. Employer commitment to hiring people with disabilities is critical. In the absence of Lowe's corporate commitment to hiring people with disabilities, it is unlikely people with disabilities would be employed by the RDCs to the same extent that they currently are, especially in a difficult economy with many unemployed job seekers without disabilities. Having made the commitment, the management at individual RDCs have been successful at partnering with the NOD-selected service providers, and people with disabilities are proving to be a valuable source of new employees.

Lesson #2. Demand-driven strategies reflect meeting employers' needs, which likely contribute to employer satisfaction. Although it may not work as a strategy for all job seekers with disabilities, in particular for those with more significant disabilities, demand-driven strategies that start with and strive to meet the employers' existing hiring needs can be seen as providing a service to the employer, especially to an employer that values diversity, rather than being a charity initiative to help people with disabilities. The Bridges to Business model has won converts among many of the Lowe's staff who prior to the project would not have expected to be hiring people with disabilities. Other models sometimes emphasize a need to take an employer's job requirements and customize them to suit the particular skills of an individual with a disability. In this case, Lowe's has a set of explicit standards and performance requirements, and the company welcomes employees with disabilities who can deliver the necessary level of performance, even if certain reasonable accommodations and supports are needed. Good performance results that meet the employers' needs should add to the likelihood of the model being sustained.

Lesson #3. Having a business partner with which a firm that wants to hire people with disabilities can partner is critical to employers' ability to access appropriate job seekers with disabilities and to coordinate support services such as employment consultants, transportation, and others. The Bridges to Business model has the advantage of creating a business partner that works closely with the company. The business partner is needed to facilitate program implementation, conduct sensitivity training of staff that builds support within the company for hiring people with disabilities, and identify a competent service provider that can point out qualified job candidates. Without a designated service provider, the company human resources managers might not have a good system for reaching out to job seekers with disabilities, or a way of ensuring they receive the support they need to prepare for job interviews, complete applications properly, and manage on the job.

Lesson #4. Having a nationally recognized disability employment expert such as NOD select a capable service provider reduced the risk for Lowe's and helped establish both the model and the necessary relationships to support it. Because NOD is familiar with demand-driven strategies and has a wealth of experience in disability employment initiatives, NOD was well suited to identifying service providers in each area that would be likely to be successful. NOD was also able to help broker the partnership between the company and the service provider, provide foundational training around working with people with disabilities, and help oversee the implementation of the model.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1. Although the screening process used by the service providers appears to produce successful results overall, the screening and quality of referrals could be improved minimally. Criticism was raised by several Lowe's staff that a couple of the Outreach referrals were clearly not capable of performing the required tasks of a team member. Perhaps because of latent concerns
about the ability of people with disabilities in general, the level of scrutiny regarding referrals may be especially high.

**Recommendation #2. Further clarify the roles of the actors.** However the model evolves in Statesville, Rockford, and Findlay based on changes coming from Lowe’s corporate management, it is important that all involved have a clear understanding of who is an Outreach employee’s direct supervisor.

**Recommendation #3. Expand opportunities for training and professional development regarding the employment of people with disabilities.** Throughout the program, NOD provided sensitivity training to over 375 managers and staff members. Several Lowe’s staff mentioned they were new to working with people with disabilities. One suggested that additional training on an occasional basis would help them develop their own understanding of other issues related to disability and accommodation. Another suggested that such training would be useful not just for managers but also for co-workers and other team members as well. NOD could also expand this training to include discussion of the role of employment consultants, so that the employer’s personnel have a better understanding of their roles.

**The Future of the Outreach/Bridges to Business Program at Lowe’s**

In interviews, top-level management at Statesville and Rockford as well as stakeholders outside of Lowe’s said that the company is absolutely committed to continuing the program.

Now that NOD’s involvement in the project is winding down, Lowe’s has recently hired a coordinator who will oversee the implementation of the Outreach program at all of the company’s RDCs. Based on interviews with Lowe’s staff and other stakeholders, it appears that the decision to alter the model was made to standardize the approach being used to recruit and hire people with disabilities. This in no way reflects negatively on the performance of NOD, which, everyone interviewed agreed, had done excellent work to help all three RDCs launch and implement the program. Although it is unclear why Lowe’s is making this change, it is possible that it is doing so for financial reasons, because it will take advantage of services from local Vocational Rehabilitation offices, which are available without charge to Lowe’s.

Moving forward, the way that Lowe’s will implement the program will change in three significant ways. First, rather than working with the service providers that NOD has identified to serve as Lowe’s primary liaison to the disability community, Lowe’s will switch to working with the local Vocational Rehabilitation office. In the case of Statesville, because NOD selected the local Vocational Rehabilitation office as Lowe’s liaison, this aspect of the program will not change. In the cases of Rockford and Findlay, however, where Lowe’s has been working well with Illinois Growth Enterprises and Blanchard Valley Services, respectively, this will result in significant change.

Second, the job coaching model will also change significantly. Whereas during NOD’s involvement, a single organization provided job coaching to all of the Outreach clients, in the future, the local Vocational Rehabilitation office will select the job coach whom it thinks is the most appropriate for each Outreach client, meaning that job coaches from many different organizations will provide job coaching support for Outreach employees.

Third, in interviews, several stakeholders mentioned that Lowe’s was looking to hire more people with less severe disabilities, including individuals with disabilities who do not need support from a job coach.
Based on the Heldrich Center’s observations of the Outreach/Bridges to Business program at the three sites for this evaluation, each of the three planned changes could have drawbacks. First, one of the greatest strengths of the Outreach/Bridges to Business program is that NOD used its expertise in disability issues to select, as liaisons to the disability community, the most capable service provider in the local area. These service providers referred qualified job candidates and provided effective job coaches to support Outreach employees with disabilities on the job. Moving to a model based on a presumptive deliverer of services such as the Vocational Rehabilitation office, rather than allowing the RDCs and an external consultant such as NOD the flexibility to ascertain which service providers are best suited to the task in each local area, comes with potential risks and could impede or even reverse future progress in the hiring of individuals with disabilities at Lowe’s. Moreover, where good working relationships have been established with competent service providers (as in Rockford and Findlay), it is difficult to make the case for shifting to the new model.

Second, there are significant advantages to having a single organization provide the job coaching for all of the Outreach employees. Namely, one job coach, by virtue of devoting all of his or her time to supporting individuals employed at Lowe’s, can better learn the job tasks, get a better feel for the organizational culture, and develop closer relationships with Lowe’s staff. All of these factors should enable the single job coach to provide better support to their Outreach employees than a job coach who is in the building much less frequently, because he or she must also visit other work sites to work with other clients. Moreover, when the job coach is in the building consistently, he or she is available to immediately address concerns that either Lowe’s staff may have with the employee or that the employee may have performing the job. If the job coach does not visit the building regularly, however, the issue may not get addressed until later, possibly allowing it to escalate. The advantage of transition-

Third, although as a for-profit business, Lowe’s has a responsibility to ensure that it maximizes its productivity, it would be unfortunate if Lowe’s were to limit the hiring of Outreach employees only to individuals with mild disabilities. To date, Lowe’s has hired a number of people with significant disabilities who have been able to complete the job tasks required of a Lowe’s team member. It is hoped that the company will continue to on-board individuals with a wide range of disabilities.