

Are Ontario Businesses Missing Out on a Valuable Labour Source?

Part Three: Best Practices in Employment Services

Throughout my years of promoting disability in the workplace I have often heard employers complain; “I don’t understand the services for people with disabilities and how they work” or make statements like: “why can’t there just be one service where I can find all the candidates who have a disability and all the services I need”. Personally, I’m not a proponent of this ‘one-stop shopping’ concept. I think this would quickly lead to mediocrity. People don’t make similar statements about the myriad of car manufacturers, models, number of dealers, etc. or the number of stationary and computer suppliers. Businesses tend to make their purchase decisions based on an assessment of value – price, quality, reliability, customer service and so on.

Perhaps the real question is; “how do I make this kind of value assessment of an employment agency representing people who have a disability” given there are some unique qualities to these services. Hopefully this article will help take some of the mystery out of this question.

What To Look For

In many respects employment agencies representing people who have a disability should be viewed like any other placement agency (with a specialty niche). Employers need to do their homework, shop around, check references, etc. There are, however, some indicators to watch for.

The agency representative or job developer should do some research before they make their first call. Do they know something about your business, your operations and the type of workforce you need? In the first few meetings do they dig for information about your labour needs – skill shortages, high turnover, problem areas, etc? Ultimately they should be striving to achieve a win-win relationship where you get the employees and supports you need and their clientele get good jobs. And, if they follow this up with quality customer service they establish a relationship with the prospect of repeat business. If it’s only about their needs or the needs of their clientele, you can rightfully be wary.

Supported Employment

Many employment agencies follow the supported employment model. This is a model where the agency provides supports to both the employer and the person who has a disability. Agencies may provide many, and sometimes all, of the services below.

Supports for employers include: pre-screening candidates to ensure a good match for the job; initial on-the-job training and orientation for the new employee, supervisors and co-workers; information about workplace modifications if needed; re-training when job changes occur; trouble shooting and on-going support as needed; and, information about government programs and wage subsidies. And, while employment agencies generally don’t use the term out-placement, many will assist their clientele find a new job if things don’t work out.

Supports for people who have a disability include: pre-employment preparation such as career exploration, understanding workplace responsibilities, punctuality, etiquette, etc; resume writing;

job search assistance; and, personal assistance with things like finances, transit, family support and so on. While some of these services are not strictly work-related they often affect the person's success on the job. Over the years I've had employers ask if similar services could be made available to their non-disabled workers as well.

When an employment agency comes calling, ask them to review their services with you to ensure you know what type of support is available for you and your new employee.

Employers Beware

Not all employment agencies are equal and there are some poor practices as well – practices I refer to as 'desperate measures'.

Voluntarism: Some types of unpaid work are okay: volunteering in traditional places – food banks, Scouts and Guides, hospital auxiliaries, etc; and, short-term work experiences like school co-ops. Short-term, time limited placements that are closely supervised by the agency to assess skills and interests are valuable and appropriate.

What's not appropriate is when people who have a disability work in long term positions in the private sector without a wage or for wages that are less than that established by law. Employers, that permit this, risk costly law suits and back wages should the individual in question get tired of working for nothing and lodges a complaint with the Ministry of Labour.

The Charity Case: It's easy to see how people just want to 'do the right thing' but the right thing has to be right for everyone. The employee who has a disability must be contributing to your business objectives through their performance and the other assets they bring to the job – greater dependability, enhanced staff morale, positive customer relations, corporate PR, etc. Hiring strictly as an act of charity rarely works out longer term. Co-workers become resentful that they are being paid at a similar rate to someone who doesn't contribute as much; supervisors and managers get frustrated by having an employee on their team that isn't fully contributing; and, ultimately, when business takes a downturn these employees are the first to be let go.

Job Coach Dependency: Job coaches can be a terrific asset when integrating a new employee into your workplace. They can orient supervisors and co-workers to understand the disability and help develop strategies to get the most from that employee. However, there are job coaches who feel they are the 'only' one who can adequately train and support the employee with a disability and these coaches tend to overstay their welcome. A good job coach will always have an exit strategy. They should not create a dependency on themselves. This coach can become a barrier between you and the employee thereby limiting the more natural interactions between you and the benefits you will derive from those interactions. After the job coach is no longer on site they should be available on an on-call basis if needed.

The Author

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