

**Stuart-O'Hara Inc.  
Knowledge Management Services**

**CLOSING THE GAP**

**REPORT ON  
EMPLOYER FORUM**

**SEPTEMBER 2005**

## Highlights of the Employer Forum

### ***Introduction***

The Closing the Gap Employer's Forum was held at the Ontario Bar Association Conference Centre in Toronto on September 7 and 8th, 2005.

The purpose of the forum was to develop creative approaches and innovative solutions with the goal of improving the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Forum participants included a cross-section of employers, agencies and members of the advisory panel – most of who had participated in the research work leading up to the forum. Participants were invited to attend specific sessions according to their expertise and experience. None of the sessions included exactly the same group of participants.

### **The forum included three distinct half-day workshops:**

- A. Making the match: aligning competencies through effective recruitment
- B. Making it work: sustainable employment practices
- C. Building for the future: creating strategic partnerships

Each session began with an overview of the project. Then input from speakers with experience on the topic, or a review of the work of the previous session was presented. Participants subsequently used decision technology to ordinate the group's opinions. At the end of each session participants focused on creative approaches and innovative solutions to improve the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Detailed proceedings of the forum are appended.

## ***Emerging themes***

### **Stakeholder actions**

1. Develop a coordinated resource centre (one-stop shop) for employers.
  - a. Resource information would be comprehensive, practical and easy-to-use for employers who want to hire, or have hired persons with disability.
  - b. A centralized recruitment agency will be provided for employers when they want to hire persons with disability.
  - c. Certain resource components would be tailored to small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) that do not have the same systems or capacities as large businesses.
2. Launch an employment awareness campaign focusing on ability, not disability.
3. Create practical ways to support an employee with disability to develop their career successfully.
  - a. Develop career planning and preparation starting at the high school level
  - b. Promote Internships and co-op opportunities
  - c. Set up mentoring opportunities
4. Establish a Business Leader's Network to work with both peers and persons with disability.
5. Develop partnerships that will have a positive impact on the employment of persons with disability.

### **Other success factors**

1. Include persons with disability in all decision-making processes.
2. Understand that persons with disability are not all the same and "one size for all" does not work.
3. All parties should work from a business perspective to achieve the maximum impact.
  - a. Employers want recruiters or placement agencies to have a high level of understanding of the company's business. Several cultures operate around this issue – the business culture, the agency culture, the government culture and that of the persons with disability.
4. Political commitment on an ongoing basis is needed to shift the focus from research and pilot programs to investing in services.
5. Reliable transportation is a key issue for persons with disability.

### ***Next steps for stakeholders:***

1. Encourage government and corporate investment in:
  - Public awareness campaigns
  - Mentoring, internship and co-op placement programs
  - Employer/Agency partnerships
  - Sensitivity and awareness training for business at all levels
  - Reliable transportation
2. Establish a one-stop shop – coordinated resource centre for employers to access information about persons with disability and to access potential employees. Begin as a web site and then grow according to employers needs.
3. Work with Provincial government ministries to bring educational institutions to the table to deal with the issues of preparing students with disability more effectively for the workplace.

### ***Session A - Making the match: aligning competencies through effective recruitment***

The discussion focused on:

- a. What are employers looking for from a recruiter?
- b. When should a person disclose their disability to an employer?

#### **KEY FINDINGS:**

A. Employers want recruiters or placement agencies to have a high level understanding of the company's business/organization, environment, culture and needs.

Employers expect recruiters to:

- Pre-screen and filter candidates
- Provide candidates who have the requisite skills, experience and credentials
- Work with employers on both long and short-term employment needs
- Provide follow-up and support to ensure the hiree is successful
- Prepare the candidate for the culture of the organization
- Know the candidate well enough to know what information needs to be disclosed to the employer and when to do that

## Closing the Gap

B. Disclosure of one's disability depends on many factors. There is a perception that disclosure will negatively affect the hiring prospects. The Forum made the following comments:

1. If accommodation is needed for the interview process, the disability will need to be disclosed so that necessary accommodation can be made. Employers felt it best to avoid shock factor and disclose before interview (in event of an obvious disability).
2. Companies need to know before the person starts work if an accommodation is needed on the job - i.e. when it relates to requirements of the job. Alternatively, it is at the moment when the employee has rapport with the employer and sees that there is a benefit to the employer.
3. As an employee, do significant research to learn if a company has special targets to reach in terms of persons with disability. This may make it advantageous to disclose earlier than later. It may move an application to the top of the pile.
4. The company expects that the employee or the agency will be able to identify the requirements and provide ideas and consulting on the accommodation to ensure a smooth transition/ integration. They will want to assess the time it may take to get persons with disability up and running. Companies must be aware of the legal implications that govern disclosure of a disability (e. g. Ont. Human Rights Code)

The onus is on the employee to disclose. The size of company and resources available affect a company's ability to deal with the issue. Small & medium companies do not have the resources that larger companies do. There has to be a benefit for employer i.e. a cost benefit analysis that comes up positive.

## **Session B – Making it work: sustainable employment practices**

Once a person was employed, what are the keys to retaining the employee. This session answered the following questions:

- What resources & tools do you need access to in order to facilitate accommodation?
- What are the keys to long term, sustainable employment of a person with disability?

### **What resources & tools do you need access to in order to facilitate accommodation?**

- Expert advice & assistance. e.g. technology folks
- Interpreters for hearing impaired people
- Accommodation for people with mental health issues
- Access to funding for vocational assessments
- Transportation - especially to outlying locations

### **What are the keys to long term, sustainable employment of persons with disability?**

1. Reliable transportation and easy parking
  2. Career development path that provides opportunities for upward mobility
  3. Choosing a company that has an inclusive culture
  4. Open communication & feedback with staff and supervisors
  5. Good initial match between employer/job and employee
  6. Effective and timely accommodation
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1. Reliable transportation and easy parking. Public transit, as in Wheel-Trans is often late and their schedules change. This is incredibly frustrating for an employee and makes it difficult to sustain employment.
  2. A career development path that provides opportunities for upward mobility. The advancement opportunities and environment for growth and development are essential for any employee. The availability for continuous training and education is part of creating this environment. Access to cost sharing for training and education from the government can support this focus.
  3. Working in a company that has an inclusive culture that seamlessly integrates persons with disability into the team. There is recognition of the person's strengths. This culture is one of dignity and respect through understanding and dialogue. Accessibility is considered in all aspects of workplace (e.g., training employees, holding meetings) and is a "natural " part of doing business. There is an ongoing effort to maintain the inclusiveness of the workplace. This removal of attitudinal barriers makes a person with disability a part of the team – treated exactly as everyone else is.

## Closing the Gap

4. Open communication and feedback between employee and employer/manager on needs, changes, accommodation, disclosure etc. is part of the inclusive environment. It creates the environment where the employee knows they have ongoing access to the support they require to do their job well. This support comes from the Supervisor and Manager as well as from external support services
5. Good initial match between employer/job and employee is a critical first step. It is important for the employer to focus on the employee's abilities, experience and performance rather than their disability.
6. Effective and timely accommodation - i.e. technology and tools that will allow the employee to successfully do the job. This requires both being aware of the current adaptive technology as it keeps pace with changing business technology. It also enables a quick implementation of the accommodation so time is not lost on the employer side, and so the employee is trained in the job using the new accommodation technology. It is important to involve all the stakeholders in the process of accommodation (e.g., persons with disability, manager, experts, and other employees)

For the employer, some of the keys are:

- Solid business case
- Good initial match between employer/job and employee
- Creating an inclusive culture that fosters open communication & feedback
- Effective and timely accommodation
- Reliable attendance

### **What are some creative approaches and innovative solutions that can help to improve the sustainable employment of persons with disability in the workforce?**

The participants brainstormed to the question and the ideas were rated separately from the employers' perspective and from the agency's perspective (See chart on following page).

1. Awareness/Sensitivity training to front line and hiring managers re: the value of hiring persons with disability. There are many different ways to accomplish this. Some include:
  - "Lunch and Learn" awareness sessions with employees who have disabilities
  - Training the leadership team on the business value of employing persons with disability
  - Sponsorship from Executives
2. Establish an employee mentoring program or internship program for potential hires.

## Closing the Gap

3. Establish an open line of communication for on-going support (mentor, human resources) Training for line managers may be required. Each new relationship would need to be monitored through HR on a regular basis.
4. Continuous training & opportunity for advancement. Elements of a successful program include:
  - Identification of appropriate training material
  - Closed-loop process to review career progression
  - Employer provides funds for the training
5. Create and support more internships and co-op placements.
6. Create public awareness campaigns regarding the employment for persons with disabilities.
7. Improving support systems so that current employees who acquire disabilities can stay on the job. Obtaining the insurance industry decision to make this a priority is key.
8. A Business Leadership Network to share best practices and employment opportunities.
9. Effective accommodations begins right from the hiring process.

## Priority Given to the Creative Approaches by Companies and by Agencies

<b>Top 9 Creative Approaches as Ordered by Each Group</b>	
<b>Employer</b>	<b>Agency</b>
Awareness/Sensitivity training to front line and hiring managers re. value of hiring persons with disability	More internships and co-op placements
Establishing an employee Mentoring program	Establishing an employee Mentoring program
Establishing an open line of communication for on-going support (mentor, human resources)	Improving support systems so that current employees who acquire disabilities can stay on the job
Continuous training & opportunity for advancement	Awareness/Sensitivity training to front line and hiring managers re. value of hiring persons with disability
More internships and co-op placements	Business Leadership Network
Public awareness campaigns regarding the employment for persons with disabilities	Public awareness campaigns regarding the employment for persons with disabilities
Business Leadership Network	Leveraging a one-stop job bank / or employment centre to identify and place candidates based on skill and capability
Leveraging a one-stop job bank / or employment centre to identify and place candidates based on skill and capability	Increased accessibility to public transit.
Increased accessibility to public transit.	Establishing an open line of communication for on-going support (mentor, human resources)

## **Session C – Building for the future: creating strategic partnerships**

The third session focused on creating strategic partnerships that would build a new future. The key questions answered were:

- What are the benefits of establishing strategic partnerships that lead to sustainable employment of persons with disabilities?
- What are some of the obstacles, challenges, problems in creating and maintaining strategic partnerships that would lead to sustainable employment of persons with disability?
- What are some creative approaches and innovative solutions to addressing these issues?

### **What are the reasons, payoffs, benefits of establishing strategic partnerships that lead to sustainable employment of persons with disabilities?”**

The key benefits for strategic partnerships in this area are:

1. Create a learning environment. Agencies will understand what companies require and be better able to place potential employees. Employers will understand the challenges and resources available to them.
2. Share resources and risk so more can be accomplished with the resources currently available.
3. Better access to the pool of unemployed persons with disability.
4. Effectiveness - better outcomes, more payoffs
5. Develop networks that support the long-term goal. The networks bring both communication and creativity in effectively solving emerging problems.
6. Power in numbers. With more people involved, more people take notes and more funding becomes available.

### **What are some of the obstacles, challenges, problems in creating and maintaining strategic partnerships that would lead to sustainable employment of persons with disability?**

1. There is a significant difference between the way employers, agencies and the government understand partnerships and how partnerships can help achieve their goals. There is a lack of understanding of the employer’s or business needs.

## Closing the Gap

2. Have the right people working in the partnership on an ongoing basis. All parties need a decision maker/champion who can make the decisions and keep the work moving forward. The staff turnover that often happens in a partnership hampers the process as knowledge gained during the process is seldom transferred. Thus partnerships often seem to start over with each new person.
3. Funding for agencies is set up on a client basis instead of a partnership/program basis.
4. No coordinated resource that links all agencies together therefore employers are challenged to understand the players and the resources that exist to provide employment services for persons with disability.

## ***Creative approaches and innovative solutions***

### **What are some creative approaches and innovative solutions addressing these issues?**

1. Develop a coordinated resource centre for employers to be a quick comprehensive source of practical information for employers who want to hire or have hired persons with disability. Best be done by business for business.
2. The resource center may initially be a website that includes resources for employers to contact when they want to hire persons with disability, best practices and success stories, mainstream recruiting channels to use to target people with disabilities (i.e. job boards). The ease of access for employers will result in a greater number of right fits in the hiring process.
3. Create a centralized placement point for employers to contact when they want to hire persons with disability.
4. Employers would have a single contact person -- i.e. relationship or "account" manager representing all agencies and their clients – to make the system work for the employer. A coordinated placement service would set up the link between the employee with a disability and the employer and would be:
  - Job posting area for employers
  - Centralized consortium of disability agencies that scan postings and forward resumes of available candidates in response to employers vacancies
  - Candidates that are represented on basis of skills and ability / suitability for job
  - Forwarding agency that remains anonymous
5. Educate employers on persons with disability and the reasons for employing them. An ongoing education process could involve a wide range of persons with disability including visible and invisible disabilities, the labour movement, and representatives from different sectors. A group of community disability agencies could collaborate to develop a workshop series of disability sensitivity training for employers.

## Closing the Gap

6. Create a public education campaign of the employment abilities of people with disabilities.. Show the abilities of people with disabilities using real success stories of people who find work on their own and others who are assisted by an agency.
7. Educate Agencies to be more business oriented and have a good understanding of the company's corporate culture/work environment.
8. Develop skill sets of persons with disability for conducting any of the above education efforts would go a long way in developing the community and reducing isolation. This approach would help to alleviate the "charity" approach to assisting people with disabilities, and would more likely focus on issues in the community that bar access.
9. Create a tool to enhance shared understanding of what a strategic partnership is:
  - Gather information from previous successful partnerships
  - Establish template and guidelines to define strategic partnership (terms of references, documentation, to keep records, manual etc.)
  - Business community to help the agencies become more business oriented
  - Develop standard operating procedures. (to ensure knowledge is not lost)
  - Share best practices and innovative approaches to partnerships
10. Create a business leadership network that would lead in championing employment of persons with disability with employers in their sector. (See Session A#8 and Session B#8)
11. Partnerships with employers and educational / vocational preparers to better enhance the skills and abilities of persons with disability entering the labour market . (See Session A – Approach #4). Develop ways to recognize and mobilize action on employment of persons with disability (similar to other programs such as Responsible Care in the chemical industry, or recognition programs that exist for business-education partnerships)Involve people with disabilities in the decision making process.