

Workers with Disabilities Represent Deep Labor Pool for Call Centers

by Greg Levin

A non-traditional labor pool offers a solution to staffing challenges in the call center.

In survey after survey, call center professionals cite “finding qualified staff” as the biggest challenge they face. Many of these managers have tried to improve the situation by implementing alternative recruiting methods, including the use of the Web to find and attract qualified applicants. While such methods may be non-traditional, they are still directed at a traditional labor pool – a pool that is becoming more and more shallow as the industry expands.

It’s time for recruiters to start wading through different waters, say human resources and labor experts, many of whom point specifically to the underutilized pool of workers with disabilities. Nearly 54 million Americans have a significant disability, with more than two-thirds of this population being unemployed or underemployed, according to the Institute of Workplace Studies in Ithaca, N.Y.

This population represents a workforce that is not only untapped, but also capable of filling a wide variety of skilled positions, especially jobs in customer care, says Kelly Egan, president of HirePotential – a national consulting and employment firm based in Denver that helps corporations integrate and accommodate workers with disabilities. “These individuals are qualified, eager, and largely untouched by traditional recruiting efforts,” Egan says.

Companies that decide to begin actively recruiting from these ranks will find that they have a lot to gain, according to the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) for the U.S. Department of Labor. “Employers get employees who are as productive as any

other employees, with good attendance records and loyalty to the job and the company,” writes ODEP in one of its fact sheets about disabled workers. ODEP cites a study by Dupont involving more than 800 employees with disabilities, which revealed that 90 percent rated average or better in job performance, compared to 95 percent for employees without disabilities. The study also found that disabled workers are not absent any more than non-disabled employees. And another study, conducted by Pizza Hut, found that disabled employees had a 72 percent higher retention rate than their non-disabled counterparts.

Solid performance and attendance, along with a strong commitment to the company – these are the attributes that call centers need to help build and sustain customer relationships, says Dr. M.J. Willard, executive director of the National Telecommuting Institute (NTI) – a Boston-based non-profit organization that seeks employment for disabled individuals. “Call centers shouldn’t hire workers with disabilities solely because it’s the socially responsible thing to do,” explains Willard, “rather they should do it because it is a smart thing to do from a staffing perspective.”

Dispelling the Myths about Accommodation and Cost

While efforts by organizations like HirePotential and NTI – along with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (see box, right) in 1990 – have helped to expand job opportunities for disabled workers, few corporations have yet to truly tap into this viable labor pool. Why? The main roadblock comes in the form of misconceptions about the cost and complexity of accommodating employees with disabilities. Many companies fear that adapting the workplace

and implementing special technology for disabled workers will be prohibitively expensive.

But research findings tell a different story. According to The Job Accommodation Network – an international toll-free and online consulting service that provides information about the employability of people with disabilities – more than half of all workplace accommodations, including adjusting workstations, revamping doorways and implementing assistive office equipment, cost less than \$500. The National Organization on Disabilities reports that 15 percent of accommodations for disabled workers cost nothing, 51 percent cost between \$1 and \$500, 12 percent cost \$500 to \$1,000, with only 22 percent costing more than \$1,000.

Even when companies need to make some of the more expensive accommodations for disabled workers, those costs can often be alleviated via government grants or via business tax incentives aimed to encourage businesses to make workplaces

Summary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the nation has set its sights on removing all barriers that deny individuals with a disability equal opportunities in all aspects of life. Title I of the ADA prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with a disability in the workplace with regard to all terms, conditions and privileges of employment. Title II of the ADA mandates that public entities accommodate persons with disabilities to ensure their participation in services, programs and activities.

Source: *The National Center for State Courts* (www.ncsconline.org)

more accessible. Sometimes costs can even be averted entirely with the help of federally funded non-profit organizations that focus on disability issues.

Assistive Tools in the Center

In addition to being affordable, accommodating workers with disabilities in the call center is becoming easier and easier, thanks in large part to advances in assistive technology. For instance, there are several tools available that can help call center agents whose disability makes it difficult for them to control a mouse or to type. Such products include “sip and puff” systems, which enable agents to move their cursor by blowing into a device; infrared equipment where agents can control their cursor with body movements; and speech recognition technology, which allows agents to fill in data screens simply by speaking.

Effective and user-friendly solutions also exist for agents who are visually impaired or totally blind. Screen magnification tools, for example, can magnify text on visually impaired agents’ monitors from two to 20 times its normal size. To accommodate agents who are totally blind or almost totally blind, call centers can add speech software that not only reads screen text to agents out loud via their headset, but also reads whatever the agent types, as he or she types it, to eliminate input errors.

Tools that enable telecommuting represent another important breed of technology for call center agents with disabilities, says NTT’s Willard. She points out that such tools open employment doors for individuals with severe disabilities, those who live in remote rural areas, or other disabled individuals who are unable to travel to the call center. Willard adds that today’s telecommuting technology is comprehensive and highly reliable, enabling workers not only to provide seamless service to customers from home, but also to maintain a close connection with the call center itself.

(*Note:* For more information on assistive products, visit ABLEDATA at www.abledata.com.)

Help with Recruiting and Training

Technology isn’t the only thing paving the way for call centers interested

How Do I Know if My Worksite Is Accessible?

Not sure if your call center is physically accessible to employees with disabilities? The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) recommends that you answer the following questions to find out:

- Are there designated parking spaces for persons with disabilities that are close to the entrance of the worksite?
- Is there a pathway without abrupt level changes or steps that leads from the parking area to the entrance?
- If ramps are used to provide access, are they appropriately graded and are handrails provided?
- Are doors wide enough (36 inches) for people using wheelchairs? Are they easy to open (e.g., not excessively heavy, with easily grasped handles, or automatic)?
- Is the personnel office in an accessible location?
- Are pathways to the bathroom, water fountain, and public telephone accessible? Can people with disabilities use them?
- Are elevators accessible to all persons with disabilities (e.g., control panels lower than 54 inches from the floor, raised symbols or numbers on the control panels)?
- Does the emergency warning system include both audible and visual alarms?

For more information, visit the ODEP Web site at www.dol.gov/dol/odep. Other good sources of information include the Job Accommodation Network (www.jan.vwu.edu), and the Access Board (www.access-board.gov).

in employing people with disabilities. Several organizations (including Hire-Potential and NTI) and resources exist that can help companies effectively recruit and train disabled workers for specific positions.

One of the best ways to find qualified applicants, according to ODEP, is to contact the local Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) office in your area. In addition to providing assistance with job placement and training, VR personnel often help with employee accommodation as well as provide follow-up services for both the employer and the person with a disability.

Other resources that can aid call centers looking to tap into the large pool of workers with disabilities include:

■ **Employment Assistance Referral Network (EARN).** This is a free, contracted service of ODEP. Employers provide specific job vacancy information to EARN staff, who survey local disability-related employment organizations to locate providers who have qualified candidates. EARN then passes its findings along to the employer, who contacts the providers directly. EARN can be contacted at 866-EARN NOW or www.earnworks.com.

■ **Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities (WRP).** Another service of ODEP, WRP is a free

nationwide database of pre-screened, qualified college students and recent graduates with disabilities who are available for permanent and temporary employment. Employers can search the database by state or job category, then contact viable candidates for interviews. Find out more about WRP by calling 202-376-6200.

■ **disAbility.gov** (www.disability.gov) The “Employers’ Resource” section of this very practical Web site provides information on interviewing, recruiting and hiring individuals with disabilities. It also contains links to sites where disabled job seekers post their resumes.

One organization – Goodwill Toronto – has even set up a program specifically designed to provide call centers with qualified agents who are disabled. The Call Centre Training Program for Persons with Disabilities, launched in 1998, features 12 weeks of classroom training covering such topics as customer service and sales techniques, computer skills, effective listening, and handling aggravated callers. Following the classroom training portion of the program, all trainees participate in on-the-job internships at a pre-assigned call center in the area. Most internships lead to full-time employment for trainees.

“It’s a win-win situation,” says Sharon Myatt, manager of business and

call center training for Goodwill Toronto. “[People with disabilities] get training for a career, and call centers get trained, highly motivated workers.”

Creating a Disability-Friendly Corporate Culture

Effectively tapping the huge pool of workers with disabilities to enhance call center staffing goes beyond merely offering the jobs and making the workplace accessible, say experts on disability employment issues. It’s up to managers to create a culture where employees with disabilities feel comfortable and valued, not pitied or patronized.

One way to accomplish this is by providing non-disabled workers with disabil-

ity awareness training, says Egan of Hire-Potential, who points out that such training increases understanding and reduces fears of saying or doing the “wrong” thing when interacting with disabled coworkers. “We have training geared to coworkers, who might, for instance, wonder if they have a blind worker with a seeing-eye dog, ‘Do I pet the dog or leave it alone?’”

Including employees with disabilities in all development and advancement programs within the company is another way to incorporate them into the workplace, according to advocates at ODEP. “Employers who ‘talk the talk and walk the walk’ of disability employment promote qualified workers to upper-management positions,” writes

ODEP in its white paper “Disability Friendly Strategies for the Workplace.”

Not to Be Ignored

Companies that take the time to recruit and accommodate workers with disabilities can increase the number of candidates in the available labor pool a thousand-fold, and significantly increase employee retention. Call centers can ill afford to ignore the numbers. Most centers are struggling to find qualified and eager agents. A large pool of qualified and eager individuals with disabilities is struggling to find jobs. It appears we have a match. 