

What Every Employer Needs to Know:

# Key Success Factors for Hiring People with Disabilities



## A RESEARCH STUDY

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## **THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT**

reflects “deeply held American ideals which treasure the contributions individuals can make when free from arbitrary, unjust, or outmoded societal attitudes and practices that prevent the realization of their potential.”<sup>1</sup>

## **THE HARTFORD’S ABILITY PHILOSOPHY**

is grounded in the belief that people are defined by what they can do, not by what they can’t. With the right support and resources, every person can navigate past obstacles in their daily lives to achieve personal and business goals. This spirit proudly defines our employees as we trailblaze the new landscape of disability employment.

## **THE MISSION OF THE KANSAS UNIVERSITY CENTER ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

is - through research, training, technical assistance, and community service activities - to enhance the quality of life, self-determination, and inclusion of Kansans with developmental disabilities and their families.

## **THE MISSION OF THE BEACH CENTER ON DISABILITY**

is to make a significant and sustainable positive difference in the quality of life of individuals and families affected by disability and the professionals who support them.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the changes in the ADAAA, awareness around the importance of – and requirements for – employing people with disabilities continues to grow, but the understanding of the opportunity has yet to take root across the business landscape. Myths and misconceptions remain among employers for whom this is still new and uncharted territory.

*Education, motivation and collaborative communication will be among the key factors in achieving employment success.*

In an attempt to discover and define the underlying patterns framing successful working environments for those with disabilities, The Hartford has partnered with the research team at the nationally recognized Beach Center on Disability and Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities at The University of Kansas (KU). The Beach Center on Disability and the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities are part of one of the largest and most highly regarded human development research centers in the country, the Life Span Institute (LSI), which was created in 1990 out of the 67-year-old Kansas Bureau of Child Research. The LSI is one of six official KU Centers, and houses more than 170 scientists based in 20 academic departments who are focused on the lifespan study of human development and disability. They bring together scientists of diverse disciplines including gerontology, psychology, psychiatry, speech pathology, sociology, education, biology, pharmacology, physiology and medicine. The LSI is comprised of 12 Research Centers with over 135 active programs and projects and attracts more federal, state, and private dollars than any other research center at KU. The research being done at the Beach Center on Disability and Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities at The University of Kansas is relevant to all ages, industries, and employers and provides the academic basis for why it is so important to hire and retain those with disabilities.

In addition, for this paper we interviewed a broad range of people representing multiple parts of the integrated employment spectrum, including employers, employees with disabilities, agencies, and those in the medical/education/rehabilitation fields. The results outlined here give a broad-based view of key elements necessary to the creation of a winning work environment for all concerned; by communicating these findings we hope to help to demystify the process.



**RESPOND TO CHANGING REQUIREMENTS**



**OVERCOME RESISTANCE; ADDRESS CONCERNS**



**FIND THE RIGHT FIT: OPTIMIZE HIRING, RETENTION AND REINTEGRATION**



**EMBRACE OPPORTUNITY**



**EDUCATE  
MOTIVATE  
COMMUNICATE  
COLLABORATE**

Having the facts and learning how best to navigate some of the challenges can help to increase success for both employers and employees. Additionally, when employers and employees have the tools and techniques they need to effectively address any concerns or questions that may arise, the chances of creating a successful placement – or rewarding reintegration – are enhanced.

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# MOVING THROUGH RESPONSIBILITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

## THEN...

Twenty-five years ago when President H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, the event represented an historical benchmark and a milestone in “America’s commitment to full and equal opportunity for all of its citizens.” This created the world’s first comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

When the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) went into effect on January 1, 2009, it brought five significant changes: a broadened definition of disability; a clarification of the definition of substantial limitations; an expanded list of major life activities; greater guidance for employers around what mitigating factors may not be considered in determining disability; and clarification around the entitlement to accommodation.

*The ADA reflects a recognition that “the surest path to America’s continued vitality, strength and vibrancy is through the full realization of the contributions of all of its citizens.”<sup>3</sup>*

Additionally, on August 27, 2013, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Compliance Programs (OFCCP) announced a Final Rule making changes to the regulations implementing Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits employment discrimination against individuals based on disability by federal contractors and subcontractors. **It also requires that they actively recruit, employ, train and promote qualified individuals with disabilities.**<sup>4</sup>

## AND NOW...

Despite the landmark law/amendment’s intent and impact, many employers have not yet fully embraced or capitalized on the significant – and growing – opportunity represented by hiring people with disabilities.

The demographic experts and labor economists say that, as the baby boomers age and continue to retire in their 60’s, the economy eventually will face labor shortages. **Increasingly it will be smart business, as well as the right thing to do, to hire those with disabilities.**<sup>5</sup>

“...[B]oth the unemployment rate of working age individuals with disabilities and the percentage of working age individuals with disabilities that are not in the labor force remain significantly higher than for those without disabilities. A substantial disparity in the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities continues to persist despite years of technological advances that have made it possible for people with disabilities, sometimes severe, to apply for and successfully perform a broad array of jobs.”<sup>6</sup>

“About 70 percent of adults with physical or mental disabilities, such as autism or brain damage, are unemployed,” said Margaret Li, executive director of Minnesota Business Leadership Network, a coalition of employers that are committed to doing more. “They want to work, but they can’t find employers who will hire them. Taxpayers have an interest, too. Because the more people with disabilities who are hired and can support themselves, the less we pay in (Social Security disability income and other public programs).”<sup>7</sup>

“A contributing factor to the high unemployment rate for people with disabilities are the low expectations that many people place on those of us with disabilities,” said Mark Perriello, President and CEO of American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). “While times are changing, we need more employers to give people with disabilities the same chance that they would give other applicants. Only then will the unemployment numbers truly move in a positive direction.”

## OPPORTUNITY IN HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

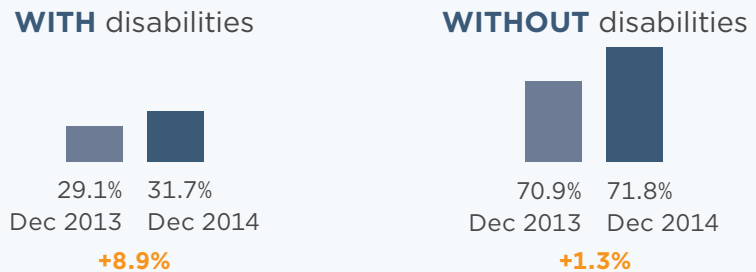
“People with disabilities are a vital part of the federal workforce, as we are better able to serve the American people because of the talents and experience they bring to the table,” said OPM Director Katherine Archuleta.

— John Marble, *OPM.gov Press Release*, December 19, 2013:

**“OPM DETAILS GREAT STRIDES IN HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES - SHARE OF NEW HIRES IS HIGHEST IN 32 YEARS”<sup>10</sup>**

Additionally, misperceptions remain among employers about the percentage of interested, qualified potential employees within this population segment. However, the **Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Jobs Report** (released January 9, 2014) shows the labor force participation rate for working-age people with disabilities **increased 8.9 percent** – up from 29.1 percent in December 2013 to 31.7 percent in December 2014. In comparison, the labor force participation rate for people without disabilities increased only slightly – from 70.9 percent in December 2013 to 71.8 percent in December 2014 (+ 1.3 percent).<sup>8</sup> The labor force participation rate measures the percentage of the population that is working or actively looking for work.

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE FOR WORKING-AGE PEOPLE<sup>8</sup>



**This is starting to show signs of a positive shift.** “... [F]or the first time since September 2013, we are seeing an increase in the labor participation rate. People with disabilities are reentering the labor market. We’ll be watching the numbers closely and we are hopeful that the positive upswing will continue in 2015,” according to John O’Neill, Ph.D., director of employment and disability research at Kessler Foundation.<sup>9</sup>

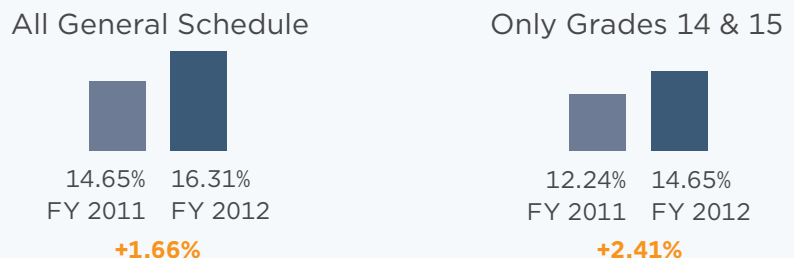
## FACTS AND STATS

On July 26, 2010, President Obama issued Executive Order 13548 - Increasing Federal Employment of Individuals with Disabilities, in which he stated that the federal government must become a model for the employment of individuals with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

According to the “Report on the Employment of Individuals with Disabilities in the Federal Executive Branch” report, in FY 2012:

- federal employees with disabilities represented 11.89 percent of the overall workforce, including veterans who are 30 percent or more disabled.
- 16.31 percent of new hires in FY 2012 were people with disabilities (up from 14.65 percent in FY 2011).
- Additionally, 14.65 percent of General Schedule grade 14 and 15 new hires in FY 2012 were people with disabilities (up from 12.24 percent in FY 2011).<sup>12</sup>

### NUMBER OF NEWLY HIRED FEDERAL EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES<sup>12</sup>



# HOW EMPLOYERS CAN ACHIEVE POSITIVE OUTCOMES

## IN THE NEWS

In August [2014], Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton directed state agencies to hire more employees with disabilities, seeking to reverse a decline in the state's hiring of disabled people.

Dayton's goal: to increase employment of people with disabilities to 7 percent by 2018, up from 3.2 percent in 2013.

"We think this will make a huge difference at the state level, and hopefully spread to other companies and businesses," said Alan Parnes, a member of the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans.

- His is one of about eight state councils and advocacy groups that helped craft the executive order.
- Advocates say such initiatives help employers get beyond any "roadblocks" to hiring people with disabilities, including perceived reliability or transportation issues.<sup>13</sup>

## START AT THE TOP

As Steve Pemberton, Chief Diversity Officer at Walgreens explains, "We are an employer who already had a well-established history of hiring people with disabilities. The changes created by these laws really were just a matter of process and post-offer information gathering for us, but it hasn't changed the way we do business. It was already part of the way we do business. We didn't set out with the intention of being a global pioneer, but that's what we've been, and we're certainly proud of that."

As Greg Wasson, CEO of Walgreens, has told his peers, Walgreens employs people with disabilities as a business decision. At Walgreens' distribution facilities in Connecticut and South Carolina, approximately half of the employees have disabilities. And those two centers perform as well as, if not better than, any other facility in the Walgreens supply chain.<sup>14</sup>

**This focus on top-down leadership is one of the critical components to creating a workplace that is truly supportive of and committed to achieving diversity.** US Bank's Vice President of Human Resources Sandi Boller explains, "We've always had an inclusive culture. It's always been our philosophy. It starts with our senior management; they feel strongly about the importance of inclusion and diversity, and set the tone for the entire company. It translates down through our entire HR group. We make sure this philosophy is not only implemented and carried through, but also that it is communicated to all employees - so that all of our employees understand this is our perspective, and our commitment."

This is vital - employers offer the greatest opportunities for diversity success when the company demonstrates a culture of commitment.

*"I want employers to know that people with disabilities can succeed on the job like anyone else, and we should be considered for employment, just like anyone else," said Perriello. "You should be looking to find the most qualified person to fill any position. Don't exclude someone with a disability simply because of the disability - giving us a chance is really, really critical."*

Without that top-down direction of determination and support, the direct supervisory level will remain challenged to achieve companies' inclusion goals.

## DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Employers can affect positive outcomes for people with disabilities and often it requires just a willingness to be open, whether that means taking a person back at less than full capacity or making certain modifications. But lingering myths and fears continue to create resistance, especially at the direct supervisory level. Supervisors may need help with understanding the specifics of how this translates into the day-to-day work that needs to be accomplished. Additionally, they may have other concerns, about how to handle issues that may come up after hiring, or returning an employee to work after an absence.

“Employers often raise concerns about their ability to fire under-performing employees with disabilities,” said Perriello. “On the contrary, **people with disabilities should live up to the same standards set for all employees, and if we don’t meet those standards, then appropriate action can and should be taken.**”

## FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS

### RETURNING TO PRODUCTIVITY – HELPING EMPLOYEES GET BACK ON THE JOB

As Boller explains, “We are a large company but many supervisors have a small world. Any time a supervisor is looking at bringing someone back to work, and there’s some sort of limitation that means the employee can’t hit the ground running, it can cause any manager to have concerns. However, we have a process in place to evaluate limitations and accommodations when any employee is coming back from leave. Many times it is resolved simply or easily. In the cases of more advanced limitations or if there’s any push-back from the supervisor, HR gets involved. In those cases, our HR business partner from the specific line of business and I would meet and have some good, open communication with the supervisor to understand and address any concerns. Usually it’s just a matter of helping everybody understand how this can work.”

Dr. Alyse Sicklick, Medical Director, Inpatient Rehabilitation, Gaylord Hospital (Specialty: Acquired Brain Injury) often is called upon to assess the role of the employee/patient – in order to do that, she and her team need a complete job description and a detailed understanding of the physical and cognitive demands of the position to compare with the patient’s current deficits. She explains, “We combine role playing and the assessments we do with all of our physical, occupational and speech therapies, so that the whole team can figure out what the potential areas of difficulty would be and make recommendations about potential modifications to accommodate a successful return to work.”

**Additionally, it’s critically important for employers to remain open and willing to consider the modifications or accommodations being recommended.**

For example, one of the simplest – and the most frequently requested – modification need is also one of the most challenged by employers: the request for modified or reduced hours. “That’s always the biggest issue. It’s truly the exception that I would clear somebody to go back to work full-time. I mean, that almost never happens,” said Dr. Sicklick. “Invariably, I want them to be on very restricted hours to see how they respond from a conditioning and endurance perspective. However, it’s not unheard of that we’ll have an employer who will say, ‘It’s all or nothing.’ It can be a deal-breaker.”

Oswald (Oz) Mondejar, Senior Vice President, Mission and Advocacy, Spaulding Rehabilitation Network and Partners Continuing Care, Inc. (“PCC”), offers this perspective, “Many managers have limited interviewing skills with applicants from any population. An applicant with visible differences may present particular challenges or create anxiety for an inexperienced manager,” says Mondejar. “However, the key to a successful interview is the same regardless of the applicant’s situation – the hiring manager should begin by outlining the fundamental parts of the job. What are the core needs in this particular role and what skills are needed to perform them? Transparency and a direct approach are the best methods for both applicants and the employer to find good fits.”

Address both sides’ concerns in a professional way by focusing on the job points and talking about how the work gets done. Keep the discussion focused on the professional, and weave in any accommodation elements that might be required.



## VALUE TO THE EMPLOYER

“As with any employee, recruiting people with disability is about hiring people for their abilities. Yes, there are challenges, but there are also significant upsides. Many disabled people bring a positive outlook on life that benefits morale in an organization. More particularly, though, they can bring particular aptitudes that benefit the goals of their employer.”

— Chris Barrigar, *Huffington Post*  
June 3, 2014

**“A HIGH MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB:  
FINDING EMPLOYMENT FOR  
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  
AND SPECIAL NEEDS”**

Mondejar provided an example: “Let’s say the interview is for an administrative assistant position and the applicant has only one hand. The manager needs enough information to make a decision based on ability and facts rather than perception. The manager might ask, ‘Producing many accurate final documents in an expedited fashion is an important responsibility of this role. Tell me, how you would accomplish this?’ On the applicant side, the disclosure is very personal – the best approach is to simply describe how the work will get done: ‘I would use voice recognition software to accomplish this. And, I have a track record and writing samples I’m happy to show you that demonstrate the quality of my work.’ The more comfortable the applicant is in the process, the more comfortable the interviewer will be in the process.”

“Historically, the corporate culture in many industries necessitated that the issue of disability be avoided altogether, but this is changing,” added Mondejar. “Employers interested in increasing the diversity of their workforce would be wise to reach out to and then stay connected on an ongoing basis to their colleagues in vocational rehabilitation services. The focus should be simply on the requirements of the position to be filled and the skills that this applicant brings. By allowing yourself, as the employer, to start from the perspective of what talents and skills an applicant potentially brings to your organization, you’ll be best able to grow and diversify your talent pool.”

*“...start from the perspective of what talents and skills an applicant potentially brings to your organization...”*

*– Oz Mondejar*

## RESEARCH REVEALS:

### ENGAGING EMPLOYEES - THE RELEVANCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE VALUE OF FACILITATORS

Being receptive and open to employees with disabilities who express and pursue their interest in returning to work is one part of the equation. However, employers should consider initiating discussions with the employee and their medical professionals around what modifications could or should be made, and act more as a facilitator. This is an area where currently most employers are not “putting out the welcome mat” and making it clear that the employee is encouraged to return. By being more proactive and reaching out, employers will more quickly connect with and engage their self-determined employees, and also will encourage and support those employees who are finding it more challenging to recover or envision a new version of the future.

**EMPLOYERS SHOULD CONSIDER INITIATING DISCUSSIONS WITH THE EMPLOYEE AND THEIR MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS AROUND WHAT MODIFICATIONS COULD OR SHOULD BE MADE, AND ACT MORE AS A FACILITATOR.**

“Systematically teaching and creating supports for self-determination is key to enabling productivity and meaningful contributions of people with disabilities.”

– Shogren and Wehmeyer,  
University of Kansas

*“Having done this for more than two decades, I can count on one hand the number of times that I’ve been contacted by an employer trying to advocate and be creative about what they could do to get one of my patients back to work.”*

– Dr. Alyse Sicklick

Currently, successful return-to-work efforts frequently are initiated primarily by motivated and self-determined employees – people who were driven to succeed before becoming disabled, and who continue to be driven post-event. “Most of my experience has really been dictated by the eagerness and willingness of the patient to be their own advocates, given the fact that a lot of the employers – at least on my end, in my experience – have really not been part of the whole process. We are very, very rarely contacted by employers trying to figure out what we can do to help get their employees back to work,” said Dr. Sicklick.

The importance of supporting motivation and self-determination cannot be underscored enough. “In the disability field, self-determination has received significant attention since the early 1990s as an important outcome for people with disabilities, as well as a causal predictor of success in employment...,” according to researchers from the University of Kansas.<sup>15</sup> Researchers at the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities and the Beach Center on Disability at KU have become national leaders in developing definitional frameworks for self-determination, as well as interventions and assessments to promote its development. This work is ongoing, with funding and support from The Hartford, and other sources.

The KU Research team has determined that when work supports are provided or removed (e.g. a job coach or job restructuring) the impact on self-determination and employment outcomes can be assessed. They have modified an intervention they originally developed for use with students to aid in the promotion of self-regulated problem solving and goal attainment – the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) – and developed a version called the Self-Determined Career Development Model (SDCDM). The SDCDM is specifically designed for use by adolescents and adults with disabilities, to support job and career-related goal setting and attainment and promote more positive employment and career development outcomes. The SDCDM enhances the capacity of state and community employment support providers, to enable people with disabilities to set goals and go after the careers and jobs they want.<sup>16</sup>

*Self-directed learning is the foundation.*

Self-directed learning means that the person with the disability is supported to play a meaningful role in the following steps:

- 1) setting his or her own career and job-related goals;
- 2) participating in decisions related to developing a plan of action to meet goals;
- 3) implementing the action plan;
- 4) evaluating his or her actions; and
- 5) modifying actions or goals to achieve the desired outcome.

In other words, the person with a disability takes a meaningful and active role in each and all parts of the learning process.”<sup>17</sup>

## SELF-DETERMINATION IS A

“...dispositional characteristic manifested as acting as the causal agent in one’s life. Self-determined people (i.e., causal agents) act in service to freely chosen goals. Self-determined actions function to enable a person to be the causal agent in his or her life.”

– *Shogren and Wehmeyer, University of Kansas*

“...[I]t’s more of an advantage if you can point out what the hiring people’s concerns might be – show them that you’re aware of some of the challenges that you face – make them feel more comfortable with the fact that you’re willing not only to overcome those challenges but to be successful despite those challenges.”<sup>21</sup>

– *Jeremy (Opie) Lade  
Three-time U.S. Paralympian  
(2004, 2008, 2012),  
Wheelchair Basketball,  
and Head Coach, Men’s  
Wheelchair Basketball;  
Director of Wheelchair  
Athletics, University of  
Wisconsin-Whitewater*

# FOCUS ON FACILITATION

## THE VALUE OF EMPLOYER SUPPORT

Extrapolating from these findings into the work setting, it not only becomes the foundation for things such as job assessments but it also translates directly into ways HR/employers can work in collaboration with employees with disabilities to outline strategies to achieve job goals in a way that is workable for each party.

As Boller explains, “We have an official ‘Reasonable Accommodations’ policy, which states: ‘We provide reasonable accommodations so employees who have disabilities may participate fully in employment opportunities. This may include specific workplace modifications for pregnancy-related disabilities depending on state law (such as in California, Connecticut or Maryland). If a workplace modification is needed because of a health condition, please contact your manager or Human Resources business partner to discuss your situation. Appropriate and effective workplace modifications will be identified through a conversation known as the ‘interactive process,’ which will evaluate your job, condition and possible workplace solutions.” Boller said, “We have made many ADA/AAA accommodations, and each request was reviewed on a case-by-case basis to determine the appropriate outcome.”

It’s this spirit of collaboration and partnership with employees that helps facilitate successful placements and returns from leave. **As the University of Kansas researchers note, “Even though self-directed learning is the foundation for the model, a facilitator is integral to model implementation. It is critical for people with disabilities to be able to communicate about their needed accommodations, but also to have employers who are willing to work collaboratively and in partnership.”**<sup>18</sup>

*“Our research focuses on developing interventions to promote self-determination that enhance outcomes.”*

– *Shogren and Wehmeyer, University of Kansas*

Research studies conducted by the KU team have found that adolescents and adults made progress toward each of their goals when receiving support through the Self-Determined Career Development Model (SDCDM). The researchers noted the impact of intervention on goal attainment was most impressive. Participants set and worked toward more than 70 total goals, with 80 percent of those goals achieved at an acceptable level or higher. **Sixty percent – more than half – achieved their goals at the “exceeded expectations” level.** This is especially remarkable given that the participants in this particular study were identified specifically because of their previous difficulty with job placement or career development through traditional services.<sup>19</sup>

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE SDLMI/SDCDM AND SUPPORTS MODEL

## SELF-DETERMINED LEARNING MODEL OF INSTRUCTION (SDLMI) AND SELF-DETERMINED CAREER DEVELOPMENT MODEL (SDCDM)



### DEVELOPMENT OF THE SDLMI/SDCDM

Model was developed from research-based principles of self-determination and self-directed learning.

Primary emphasis is to enable people to apply a self-regulated, problem-solving process to attain goals and self-direct learning.

Model has **3 phases** that can be applied to any domain (school, employment, health, personal development):



Each Phase has **3 components**:



## SUPPORTS MODEL



# CASE STUDY, EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SANDI BOLLER/US BANK

*An employee of ours was recently successfully returned to work as an Onboarding Specialist following a serious auto accident in December, 2013. She was placed on medical leave through June, 2014 while she underwent several surgeries and months of rehab. She first progressed to a wheelchair, and then to a walker. Due to the legal/compliance issues handled through her position, remote work was not an option, so finding solutions for her to return to the office became the primary focus. In order to make her return to work possible, several accommodations were needed, and provided.*

### **As Boller explained:**

Her manager was in constant communication. The employee was already very self-motivated and determined to get back to work. She set personal goals to be able to come back to work in June (based on discussions with her doctors/therapists, as well as with other patients who had gone through similar situations). The employee said she was even more motivated knowing how much she was missed and encouraged by her department to “get better,” knowing that her job was waiting for her.

As her return-to-work date approached, the employee communicated her limitations and things she would need. Her department had a team working on those issues, as well as how to ensure that she was going to be safe and successful once back on the job. The team included: the HR business partner; her manager and the Operations manager (who worked through employee and facility/building issues). They also received ongoing input from the employee. Working together, they were able to review the various issues and discuss possible options.

Once the employee returned from leave, several accommodations were provided, including: a raised toilet in the restroom; an assigned parking spot next to the elevator, with immediate access to her desk; a device on her desk that raised and/or lowered her keyboard and computer so she could continuously change from standing to sitting and back throughout the day; and a “buddy” to assist her, since she was returning with the use of a walker. This buddy would also help in case of emergency situations, or handle any other issues where she might need assistance.

The biggest expense was a manageable one – that of having the toilet raised – and it could/does benefit other employees as well. The cost of the computer/keyboard device was \$325, and is now being reviewed for a bigger audience who might benefit from this device for a variety of reasons. The manager said his goal was not on the cost: it was focused on ensuring a “win-win.”

Since her return, the employee has successfully progressed from walker, to a cane, to walking completely on her own more often at this time. Her department is thrilled that she is back at work and doing so well.

Both the manager and the employee maintained ongoing communication throughout the process, staying open to suggestions and discussions as to how this could work. Both played an important role in ensuring a successful conclusion.

### **Some of the key things that helped make her return to work extremely successful:**

- **Mutual respect**
- **Open dialogue**
- **Focus on individualized, specific solutions**
- **Shared goal of successful return to work**

# CASE STUDY, EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENT RASMUSSEN

*Captain of his college baseball team and academic honors student at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Brent Rasmussen was at the top of his game and on top of the world after making the NCC All-Conference team his senior year, becoming a free agent with the Kansas City Royals, and playing for the Gulf Coast Royals. Then, on a snowy night in February, 2002 while traveling on business between Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, he stopped to help a car driver who slid off the road. He was almost immediately struck by another vehicle sliding off the road, resulting in the amputation of his left foot, a shattered right ankle, and a right femur broken in three places. Learning that his dreams of being a professional baseball player were over could have devastated his life. However, with the help of a great support system including his family, church, work and community, Brent developed the hope, attitude, and resiliency it took to regain his physical independence and chart a new path in life, becoming a successful U.S. Paralympic Athlete and U.S. Men's Sitting Volleyball Captain, husband, father, nationally recognized professional speaker, and small business president who devotes his work and volunteer efforts to helping others.<sup>20,21</sup>*

### As Brent explained:

"I spent 14 hours in surgery that first night; I went through about ten other surgeries after that. I spent about 30 days in the hospital, in order for everything to heal. After that I was bedridden at home for about four months. Having been a strong athlete prior to the accident, I'd been through many stages of physical activity and working out. I was in pretty good shape and I understood what it took to get back and be active again. I knew what it was like to struggle through pain and issues. At first the doctors weren't sure I'd be able to walk again, but that became my big motivation - I was fighting to heal, fighting to get back to a 'normal' life, a walking life, a working life.

I was only 24 and I had just started working - I was three months into my job when this happened.

Since I had been traveling for business, this was covered as a Worker's Compensation claim. I was super-lucky and blessed to have that, because all of my medical bills were covered, the costs of my doctors' appointments and my prosthetic legs were covered; it took an enormous amount of stress off my plate.

I didn't have to worry about how I was going to pay for all those things I now needed.

**Also, my employer – a small mortgage company – was very accommodating with what needed to happen to make it possible for me to return to work.** I started back on partial days with flexible hours. The first month or two I worked from home. This benefitted my employer too, because they wanted to grow and have branches throughout the company; they needed to figure out the remote-work/secure connectivity so eventually they could have other employees work from home. Having a VPN/remote desktop connection wasn't as common back then as it is now, and this was a small company, so I was one of the first; I was the guinea pig.

I really wanted to get back to the normal camaraderie of the guys I worked with; it was something that I needed to do. I was back at work by that June/July following the accident. It was great to be back at work - it was really busy and took my mind off other things that I was going through. I worked at my employer for three years after the accident. What I learned there eventually allowed me to start my own mortgage company."

## CONCLUSION

### BEYOND REQUIREMENTS TO REWARDS - THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

Increasingly, it will be smart business to hire those with disabilities. This segment of the population is only growing; the percentage of those willing and able to work continues to rise. Removing employment barriers will start with a top-down leadership commitment to diversity and inclusion, and to creating modifications or accommodations where required. Support for the supervisory level will be key to overcoming resistance or fears at the direct hiring level. However, it will be critical to develop the role of the employer as facilitator in initiating a successful return after a disabling event, to help engage self-motivated individuals and to encourage and support those who can be taught self-motivational skills.

The benefits to the employer include positive hiring and retention outcomes as well as corporate social responsibility impacts. The benefits to the individual employees with disabilities include a return to productive livelihood in a supportive, welcoming environment which values and appreciates their contributions.

*"It's a win-win any way you look at it - everything from hiring to bringing people back from leaves of absence."*

*- Sandi Boller, US BANK*

## APPENDIX 1:

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## APPENDIX 2:

# FOOTNOTES

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<sup>5</sup> St. Anthony, Neal. “Some With Disabilities Need Help Finding Work.” *The Detroit News* 12 Oct. 2014. The Detroit News. Web. 19 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/2014/10/12/jobs-people-disabilities/17174809/>>.

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<sup>10</sup> “NEWS RELEASE: OPM Details Great Strides in Hiring People with Disabilities.” *U.S. Office of Personnel Management*. OPM.GOV, 19 Dec. 2013. Web. 19 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.opm.gov/news/releases/2013/12/opm-details-great-strides-in-hiring-people-with-disabilities/>>.

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<sup>16</sup> *Defining Self-Determination and Developing Evidence-Based Assessments and Interventions*, Beach Center on Disability at The University of Kansas, Pages 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> *Defining Self-Determination and Developing Evidence-Based Assessments and Interventions*, Beach Center on Disability at The University of Kansas, Page 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Defining Self-Determination and Developing Evidence-Based Assessments and Interventions*, Beach Center on Disability at The University of Kansas, Page 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Defining Self-Determination and Developing Evidence-Based Assessments and Interventions*, Beach Center on Disability at The University of Kansas, Page 7.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremy (Opie) Lade and Brent Rasmussen are sponsored athletes of The Hartford.

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