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Institute Brief: Employment Advisory Boards: The Ultimate Community Resource

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The Institute Brief

OPPORTUNITY
CHOICE
INTEGRATION

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Employment Advisory Boards: The Ultimate Community Resource

Developing job opportunities for individuals with disabilities requires a significant degree of familiarity with the business community and a strong relationship with prospective employers. Cold calling techniques used in job development are not nearly as effective as working through established networks. Making connections with employers and developing strategies to create and expand community links is key to your success.

Staff in your agency, along with consumers and their families and friends will have community connections which can provide a rich source of potential business links. When existing connections are inadequate, you have to develop your interactions with the business community further.

Employment Advisory Boards (EABs) are effective methods for establishing those vital links that can foster real employment opportunities in your community. Marshaling the strength of power brokers from your local economic/political/social community to develop strategies that lead to positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities describes the *ultimate* networking machine. It is important to remember, however, that it is not just the power and influence that you are after but the people who are "in the know" and who are respected in the community.

What Can An EAB Do For Your Agency?

The main purpose of an EAB is to help develop employment opportunities for the people with disabilities you serve. The EAB can identify and connect an agency with people and resources in your comunity, establishing vital community links that foster real employment for people with disabilities. In addition, it can help your agency develop connections that promote long-term support and inclusion of people with disabilities in the work place and community, and maximize the effectiveness of program resources through partnerships with others.

The following ideas are some of the many ways an EAB can be effective in the job development process. EAB members can:

- Link your agency with other business/political contacts in the community on an ongoing basis.
- Inform your agency of local economic trends and help you better customize presentations to fit a particular employer's needs.
- Participate in marketing presentations with staff to prospective employers.
- Conduct informational interviews (at their own businesses).
- Serve as role models by showing their own willingness to hire people with significant disabilities and advocate within their own companies to hire these people.

- Brainstorm how individual consumers can best use their skills in the local job market.
- Match individuals looking for jobs with business people both within and outside their company.

When Is It A Good Time To Develop An EAB?

Developing an EAB is not a process that should be rushed. It is best if your organization is established and already involved in community job development. New organizations should start the process of "getting established" before developing an EAB. The reason for this is simple. You have to truly know the business climate and culture in the particular community, before you can get a correct pulse on who is who. Finding people who can work effectively together and knowing people well enough to ask them to join in your EAB's efforts are key. To do it right will take careful planning, effort and time. It is best to start small and work with a core group of individuals. This approach helps ensure a positive and manageable start for your EAB.

Who Should Serve On The Board?

The most important ingredient of an effective EAB is identifying the right individuals. They should be people with connections and clout. Be careful how you determine what it means to have connections and clout. Often people with "positions" or "titles" are targeted to serve on such boards, but position alone is not enough. These individuals with "formal" clout must also have the time, motivation and willingness to use their positions to connect your agency with the business community. Make sure you do not overlook people with "informal" clout. Look to include people who make a living at knowing people and who make knowing lots of people a part of their business. People who sell insurance or cut hair, restaurant owners, servicers of fax and copy machines are often superb networkers. They need to be! Their businesses would not survive if they did not have these skills. As members of an EAB, they can apply these talents to job development.

Make a point to seek out people whose reputation in the community will lend instant respectability and credibility to the EAB. Members of the Chamber of Commerce, Board of Realtors, Economic Development Commission, the Mayor's office, local churches and proprietors of local businesses are examples of what might be found in your community. In rural communities, farming associations or cooperatives could be a source of support. The main

Composition Of Your

Employment Advisory Board

income producing resources in your community should become your prime targets for finding your allies.

On page 2 is an example of the make-up of an agency's successful EAB. Remember the membership needs to reflect your community but, in any case, the majority of members should represent the business community.

The individuals selected to serve on the board should collectively possess the following qualities:

- They should clearly understand the purpose and mission of the EAB and the expectations of membership. *(See a sample EAB Mission and Expectation Statement on page 7.)*
- Board members should be representative of the community's uniqueness and diversity. Many agencies cover large service delivery areas or districts and need to include people from all the areas.
- Board members should be connected to other power brokers in the community. Ask your board of directors to assist you in identifying potential EAB members. Boards of directors are often in positions to know the "movers" and "shakers" in their communities.
- Start with people you know and trust and build from this core group.
- Board members need to be able to work well together. There must be a sense of camaraderie that develops among board members. Many times getting a referral from the core group of EAB members already committed to the board is a great way to add compatible members.
- Try not to select people who are major competitors in the business community (unless they like each other) as this can shift the focus of the group's efforts to other hidden agendas.
- People on the board should be in the same range professionally. Generally, people of similar levels professionally work better together and people in higher places have more say in what happens at a company. However, do not overlook those individuals who may not have a "title", yet still exert considerable influence in the community.
- The board should include parents and family members of people with disabilities who are also employees/business people.
- Employers who have hired people from your agency's program who were satisfied and can "walk the talk" to other board members and prospective employers are a valued asset, as are employers who have disabilities themselves.
- Don't overload the board with too many Human Resource Development professionals. In general, they do not often have the real hiring "power".

Know Your Community

Each community, like each person, is unique with its own combination of economic, political and social characteristics. Understanding the culture of the community and learning how to work effectively within its framework is the best way to gain access to "people in the know". You do not have to live in the particular community in which you do job development to become an active participant in its affairs. Just like any good salesperson, one must spend the necessary time to become completely familiar with the values and the needs of your customer base. Know your community's professional organizations and community activities/committees and the people who participate in them; the "movers and shakers" in your community. The EAB should connect with these people.

Who Should Lead The Board? What Role Should Staff Play?

The EAB should be chaired by one of the members and not by a staff person of the agency. Active leadership encourages active participation from all members. This includes: developing the meeting agenda, facilitating the meeting, taking responsibility for setting priorities, objectives

and an action plan that leads to concrete results. If needed at the start, a staff person and a member can co-chair.

For the first meeting, the staff from the agency should go over the reason/mission for developing the board with clear statements on getting jobs for people in the community. After this has been done, leadership should be turned over to the appointed member(s). Although staff should not take a leadership position, they need to take an active role for the EAB to be a success. The staff that attend the EAB meetings should be a small core group that attend consistently. These people should be representative of key employment-focused parts of the agency. Too many staff should not attend; however, all staff should have access to board members and their connections. A specific staff liaison should be identified and staff should provide administrative support to the board.

Running A Productive Meeting

No matter how talented the group, a meeting will only be productive if it is run efficiently. There is a real danger in getting a group of very busy people together and not having a clear agenda and goal for the short time you have together. Don't waste time. The following suggestions are designed to help avoid some of the common pitfalls.

- Set specific start and end times and begin and close the meeting on time. This is important as a courtesy and as a sign that you are busy too.
- Have a written agenda developed by the chair or co-chair with staff support. Mail the agenda to all board members prior to the meeting, at least one week in advance.
- One of the staff involved with the EAB should call each member prior to the designated meeting to remind them of time and place and give them a friendly "nudge".
- Minutes from the previous meeting should be mailed out to each board member within a week of the last meeting.
- Meetings should take place in an attractive setting with good food. Board members may be able to host meetings in conference rooms at their companies.
- Start the meetings with accomplishments (positive results from EAB efforts such as new contacts, job leads, new hires) and give public recognition to EAB members who played a role.
- Have a specified time at each meeting for members to share connections and job leads. This helps reinforce the expectations that each member will be an active participant.
- Ask EAB members for assistance in brainstorming ideas for potential job leads and connections for consumers for whom you are having difficulty finding a job.
- Devote time to highlight a person who got a job through the assistance of the EAB.
- Board meetings should be results oriented. Every meeting should incorporate a measured result. When people walk away from a meeting they have a feeling of accomplishment. Every meeting should end with a next step built in to plan what should be accomplished next.
- The social component of each meeting should not be disregarded, but should not become the focus of the meeting. There should be efforts made for the board to socialize on occasion. Dinner parties, luncheons, cocktails after work are just some of the ways you might go about providing social time together.
- Meetings should not be just a presentation of the agency's activities to the board members. A minimum of time should be spent on updating members since this should be happening in between meetings. The agenda should be focused on the individuals that need work, their interests, and developing a plan of action for them and other projects with which the EAB may be involved.

Keeping The Board Active And Strong

There are a few things to keep in mind for the EAB to be successful and achieve its many goals:

- Learn and utilize the specific talents and skills that each person you recruit for the board has. Do not ask people to do a task they are clearly not good at, for this will prove to be a waste of the board's time and effort.
- Commitment and high expectation should be the norm for board members. Regular attendance is crucial to the enthusiasm, motivation and focus of the board. There need to be clear attendance/resignation policies and procedures.
- Terms should be time limited (though renewable), because there is always a need for fresh ideas and new connections. There should also be a mechanism for people to leave gracefully (for whatever reason) and having limited terms allows for this change. (But obviously if people love serving on the board and are doing great things, they should be encouraged and allowed to stay.)
- There should be a full agency "buy in" and support from the executive director on down. There also needs to be a clear connection between the advisory board and the board of directors.
- Give members of the EAB something to control. A sense of control and purpose will foster more initiative among board members. Projects with tangible results might include such things as developing marketing materials, hosting an open house for employers or having control over a small budget. This can give the needed sense of concrete results for time and effort that was spent.
- Although board meetings may not be frequent (they are often only bimonthly or quarterly), in the first two or three months it will be necessary to meet more often, perhaps once a month. After the core group of members begins to coalesce (approximately two or three meetings), use sub-committees to get things done. Board members should be available and continually used as resources between meetings for contacts, advice, etc. Some examples of this could be getting EAB members to: provide input on someone's career direction, accompany agency staff on a marketing presentation, or call other area employers on a consumer's behalf.
- Use personal touches with all board members. Birthday and holiday cards are two simple ways to further agency relationships with board members.
- Don't "sugar coat" the failures and struggles that the organization is going through. If there is no perceived weakness, the board will not feel as compelled to work hard to improve the current situation.
- Make sure recognition and rewards are built into the process to thank board members for their contributions. In addition to recognition at the meetings, things such as plaques, award dinners, thank you notes, and articles in the local press about positive outcomes of the board's activity are key nourishment for the growth and mission of the board.
- If a member of the board is not producing, replace him or her. As an alternative, establish associate members who can support your program behind the scenes, i.e., provide contacts or conduct informational interviews.
- Mission and purpose should be revisited on an annual basis to ensure that both EAB members and the agency remain clear on the board's purpose, activities and vision. This also provides an opportunity to change direction based on the needs of the agency and the changing make-up of the board.

Taking The Next Step

When you are successful in your efforts with your Employment Advisory Board, board members will give you access to new contacts within the business community. Here are some pointers to keep in mind as you begin to establish relationships within the corporate world. ***(Adapted from: Supported Employment in a Corporate Environment. Our House, 1994.)***

✔ Remember that you're an outsider. Always remember that you are an outsider, in effect a "guest". While you may not always

agree with how the corporation or the people within it do things, keep such opinions to yourself. You need them more than they need you. As a courtesy, understand and abide by their culture and norms. Learn what the company's jargon is and use it. Avoid using your agency's or supported employment jargon.

✔ ***Be positive.*** Always be as positive as possible. Even when you feel the corporation has not followed through on commitments, or not been particularly cooperative, in talking about such situations be careful of the language you use. The best strategy is to always shift the blame to yourself ("I guess I didn't make that clear...We should have done more training...I should have explored the issues involved more closely"...etc.), without creating a negative impression of your agency.

✔ ***Keep developing contacts.*** Develop as many and as wide a range of contacts as possible. Never let an opportunity go by to introduce yourself to someone new, and let them know about supported employment. The more people you know, the more internal advocates you have, and the more people you can call on for assistance.

✔ ***Use your contacts.*** When concerns and issues arise, discuss how to handle them with your "confidants" within the corporation. They may be able to advocate on your behalf, or find out what the "real" issue is. As an employee of the company, this person may have much more success in resolving an issue than you would as an outsider.

✔ ***Keep learning about the company.*** Learn everything you can about how the corporation operates. Is it centralized or decentralized? What do various departments do? How do departments operate? What do the various titles within the departments mean? Corporations tend to be very complex entities. The more you learn about the corporation and the areas within it, the better you can identify opportunities for supported employment, and resources that you can use.

✔ ***Stay informed on company issues.*** Keep up to date on issues and trends within the corporation. By doing so you will be able to "talk the talk" of the corporation, to identify additional supported employment opportunities, and be pro-active in addressing any issues that may have an adverse affect on any of your placements.

✔ ***Respect people's time.*** Always be respectful of corporate staff's time constraints. Remember the people you deal with have their "real" job to do. People in the corporate world, particularly in this day and age, are under enormous pressures to produce. Look for cues that you are intruding on an individual's time and respond to those cues.

✔ ***Keep it simple.*** Always keep things as uncomplicated as possible from the corporation's perspective. Do anything you can to assist them.

✔ ***Always get permission.*** Always ask, never assume. Things you may have very casually done with a small employer, you may need permission for with a large employer. An example: using their name in publicity. Don't take the rules of a corporation lightly.

✔ ***Take advantage of available resources.*** At the same time, don't be afraid to ask for things. Corporate employers have a lot more resources than small employers, and may be willing to share resources much more readily. Time your requests carefully, and don't ask for everything at once.

✔ ***Keep communicating.*** As with any supported employment placement, keep the lines of communication open. Be responsive and professional in meeting the needs of the employer at all times.

Employment Advisory Committee
Mission and Expectation Statement
(Sample)

Purpose: The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to assist "agency" in obtaining jobs in Massachusetts for people with disabilities. Our measure of success will be the number of people we place in jobs.

Expectations of Committee Members: It is expected that each Committee Member will make a minimum of one employer contact per month. An "employer contact" consists of an actual appointment at a local business, set up for the agency staff person by the Committee Member. By the 15th of each month, the Committee Member will contact the agency liaison and provide that staff member with the name and telephone number of the business contact, along with possible appointment times and dates.

The Advisory Committee will meet six times per year, on the third Wednesday of the month in which a meeting is scheduled. Meetings will be held from 8:00-9:30 a.m. at Committee Member job sites. The scheduled meetings for 1994-1995 are:

October 19, 1994
December 21, 1994
February 15, 1995
April 19, 1995
June 21, 1995
August 16, 1995

At each meeting members will report on all employer contacts made during the two previous months. Minutes will be taken by alternating Committee Members, then forwarded to an agency staff person for duplication and distribution within the week following the meeting. Agenda items should be forwarded to one of the co-chairs a week in advance.

Subcommittees of the Committee: Subcommittees will be necessary in order to make broader employment opportunities in the community available, i.e., organizing an event for employers. Subcommittees will allow us to work together on the employment needs of specific consumers. Subcommittee formation will form naturally around particular tasks and issues, dissolving when work is completed.

Recruitment to and Resignation from the Committee: Committee members are encouraged to suggest names for new members; however, membership should not exceed 15 members. Committee members are expected to serve one-year, renewable terms. Resignation can be done by letter to a co-chair.

Summary

It has been clearly demonstrated that people with severe and multiple disabilities can work in the community. However, many agencies struggle with finding good jobs.

The suggestions offered for developing an EAB: setting the mission and goals, selecting members, conducting the meeting, and keeping the board going, are based on ICI staff's involvement in both the development of our own EAB and with agencies that have successfully used EABs to develop jobs for individuals with disabilities.

EABs are a great tool to help agencies get beyond the roadblocks and connect with people who have influence and respect in the communities in which the people we are supporting live. Furthermore, we must enlist these same people to join in our efforts to create linkages and networks that lead to employment for people with disabilities. Developing an EAB or revitalizing your current board is an excellent way to improve your efforts in finding quality jobs. For when the process is done carefully, with a lot of planning and effort, an Employment Advisory Board is the ultimate community resource.

For More Information

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The mission of the Institute for Community Inclusion is to work to create and preserve a quality life for people with disabilities and their families through training, research, information sharing, and service with and for individuals with disabilities and their family members, community members, service providers, and policy makers. For further information, please contact:

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