

Business Engagement: Strategies to Improve Employment Outcomes

Ellice Switzer, Director of Inclusive Workplaces; **Jeffrey Tamburo**, Training & Content Development Associate; **Elizabeth Juaniza Saso**, Transition Associate; **Jennifer Pawlewicz**, Business Outreach Specialist

Yang-Tan Institute on Disability and Employment, Cornell University's ILR School



ILR School

K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan
Institute on Employment and Disability

When I think about business engagement, one question or concern I have is...

Topics

- setting the stage for business engagement
- making the business case
- “demand-side” job development strategies
- business engagement for work-based learning
- managing and sustaining business relationships

Setting the stage for business engagement:

It matters what we think and what we say.

What do you think? (1 of 2)

Ultimately, the needs of the job seeker are more important than the needs of the employer because our services are person-centered.

☐ *True*

☒ *False*

What type of messages are we sending?

As
individuals?

As
organizations
and systems?

Language matters

Service Providers

Language: of program operations

Aim: to make “placements”

Discourse: of service provision

Jobseekers

Language: of equal treatment

Aim: to make a living

Discourse: of justice

Employers

Language: of value proposition

Aim: to make a profit or meet organizational goals

Discourse: of performance

Disability employment approaches

Old Focus

Segregated employment

Focus on barriers and needs

Altruistic/charity-based approaches

Limited occupational variety

Exclusion from middle skills occupations & training

New(er) Focus

Customized employment

Return on investment

Public/private partnerships

Robust talent pipelines

Business-led initiatives

Digital accessibility

Disability as diversity

Inclusive career pathways

What's the message? (1 of 2)

“There are employers out there who could carve a job out, and instead of giving one individual a specific task, they could make it two or three tasks for more people.

People with disabilities are wonderful, wonderful employees. They want to do the best that they can, they are hungry to work.”

-Buffalo News Article on ADA 25

What's the message? (2 of 2)

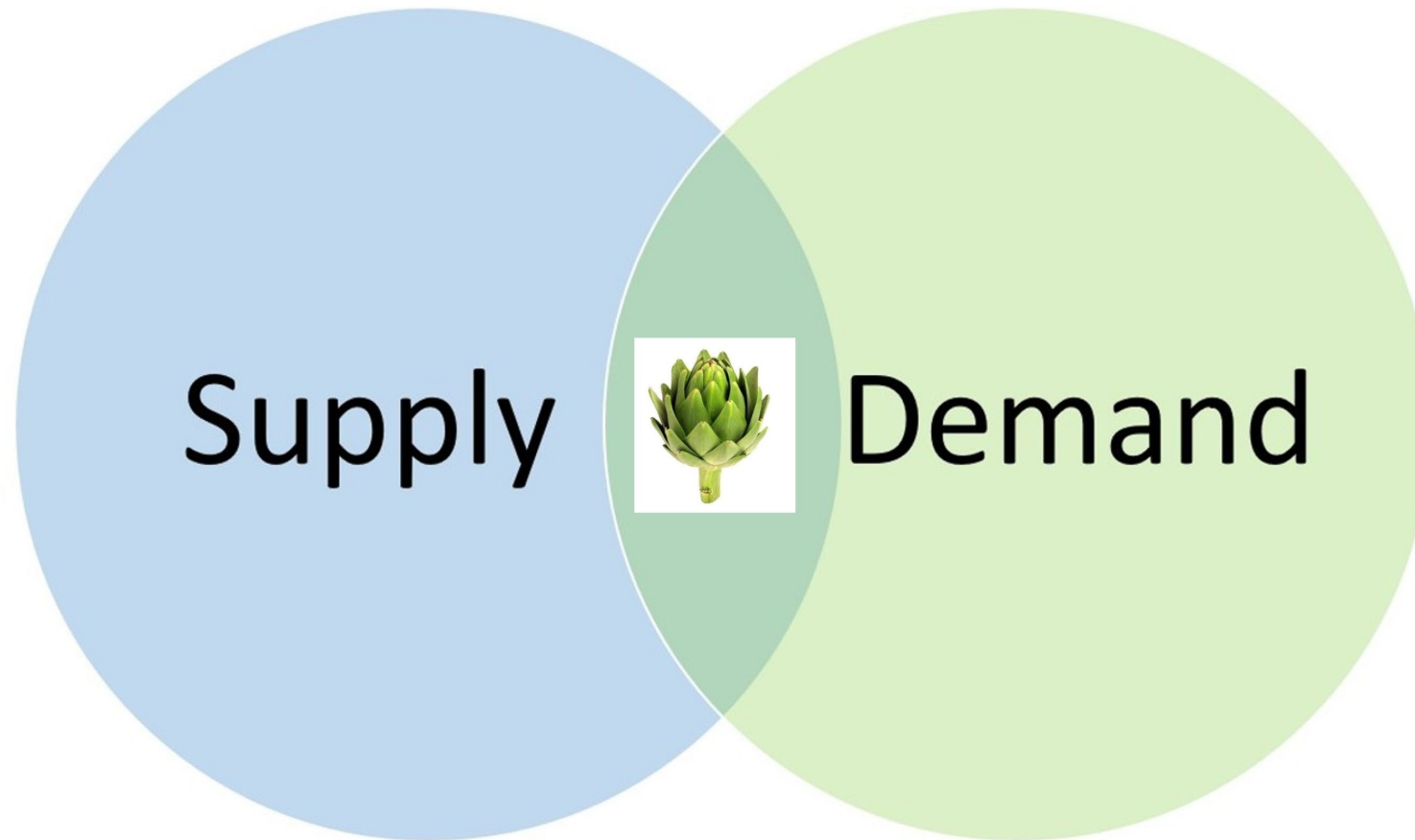
“Persons with disabilities present business and industry with unique opportunities in labor-force diversity and corporate culture, and they’re a large consumer market eager to know which businesses authentically support their goals and dreams. Leading companies are accelerating disability inclusion as the next frontier of corporate social responsibility and mission-driven investing.”

– Ted Kennedy, Jr., Disabilities Rights Attorney, Connecticut State Senator and Board Chair, American Association of People with Disabilities

Everyone is responsible for the messages conveyed to the business community:

- services personnel across the entire community (including school-based transition personnel)
- agency executives/district and building leaders
- boards of directors
- *PR/marketing/development personnel!*

The Dual-Customer Model



Making the business case:

The business benefits of disability inclusion in the workforce.

What Do You Think? (2 of 2)

An introductory meeting with a potential business partner should start with a description of the history of your organization and the array of services you offer.

☐ *True*

☒ *False*

Meeting talent needs

- In 2024, 71% of U.S. companies (of all sizes) surveyed reported talent shortages.
- The shortages were consistent across many industries, including information technology, industrial and materials, and consumer goods and services.
- Businesses can't meet workforce needs without sourcing from "non-traditional" talent pools.

Manpower Group (October 2024) 2025 Global Talent Shortage.

<https://go.manpowergroup.com/talent-shortage>

The impact of disability inclusion

- Nearly a million people (age 21 to 64) with disabilities are not working but actively looking for work.
- A 1% increase in the employment rate of people with disabilities = \$25 billion dollar boost to GDP (as of 2018).

Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S. (2025). Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI). Retrieved from Cornell University Disability Statistics website: www.disabilitystatistics.org

Accenture. (2018). Getting to equal: The disability inclusion advantage.
<https://www.accenture.com/content/dam/accenture/final/accenture-com/document-2/Disability-Inclusion-Report-Business-Imperative.pdf#zoom=40>

Businesses want partnerships that:

- ✓ create a return on their investment
- ✓ save time or money by improving business operations
- ✓ provide evidence of value gained from the relationship
- ✓ address specific business needs



Simonsen, M., Fabian, E., Buchanan, L., & Luecking, R. (2011). Strategies used by employment service providers in the job development process: Are they consistent with what employers want?

<https://issuelab.org/resources/6076/6076.pdf>

Are there business benefits?

Research and reports from businesses have shown:

- ✓ improved innovation and financial performance in disability-inclusive organizations
- ✓ improved productivity within entire workgroup
- ✓ improved brand reputation
- ✓ attracts other workers committed to diverse workplaces
- ✓ increases in market share

But we offer them:

- information about programs and procedures
- a sales pitch for hiring people with disabilities
- tax incentive information
- a charity-based partnership pitch (pleas for help)

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Demand-side job development strategies:

What does it mean to use “employer-first” strategies?

How have labor and the economy changed (opportunities)?



more flexibility for workers



technology improves accessibility



skills gap creates opportunities in middle skills occupations
(retraining)



low unemployment makes employers more open to workforce
partnerships

Demand-side strategies

- Lead with business value.
- Leverage existing community partnerships.
- Find employers with affirmative action obligations and “place-bound” jobs.
- Include people with disabilities in existing career pathways and technical education programs.
- Prioritize the development of business and industry expertise in frontline personnel.
- Make relationship-building activities central to the work of job developers and employment specialists.

Using labor market information (LMI)

- Understand how labor markets change to predict job growth and opportunities.
- Use LMI to “target” employers with industry growth that exceeds available workforce (especially place-bound).
- LMI can come from multiple sources: planning board meetings, workforce development boards/committees, traditional data sources, economic development corporations, newspapers/newsletters, etc.

Partnerships – Tips from employers (1 of 2)



- ✓ Work with leaders from different industries.
- ✓ Build relationships based on labor market trends.
- ✓ Establish connections with many people within one business.
- ✓ Create industry specialists - speak the language of the industry and the employer.

Partnerships – Tips from employers (2 of 2)



- ✓ Lead with talent (not hiring incentives or disability information).
- ✓ Leverage other partners to meet the employers' demand for talent.
- ✓ Start with high turnover positions (but don't get stuck at entry level).
- ✓ Work together to improve programmatic and physical accessibility of education and training programs as well as businesses.

Addressing Business Concerns

- Can I discipline or fire a person with a disability?
 - *Yes, there are no differing performance standards for employees with disabilities.*
- Will a workforce that includes people with disabilities increase my costs?
 - *No. Research has consistently shown that employees with disabilities don't cost more.*
- Overcoming Objections: *Feel, Felt, Found...*

“We don’t allow job coaches in the work area. It’s in our policy and procedure manual.”

Feel (acknowledge their concern):

“I completely understand how you feel. Policies and procedures are in place for good reasons, and it’s important to maintain consistency and order in the workplace.”

Felt (relate their concern to others):

“Other employers I’ve spoken with have felt the same way. They were concerned that allowing a job coach in the work area might conflict with their policies or disrupt their workplace operations.”

Found (statement of fact, positive outcome):

“What they found is that under the ADA a job coach is considered a reasonable accommodation, like providing a wheelchair ramp. Allowing a job coach ensures that the employee can perform the job effectively and to your standards. Many employers found that this approach not only complies with ADA guidelines but also helps to create a more productive work environment.”

What employers told us about working with community-based agencies...

“We would rather pay a lot for something we know is going to be good, than get a bad time-waster for free.” - Human Resource Executive

What does this mean?

You may need to work hard to build trust and establish relationships

Managing and sustaining business relationships

Moving from “transactional” to “transformative”
relationships.

Build your network



Only 20-30% of available jobs get posted publicly and made available on job sites.

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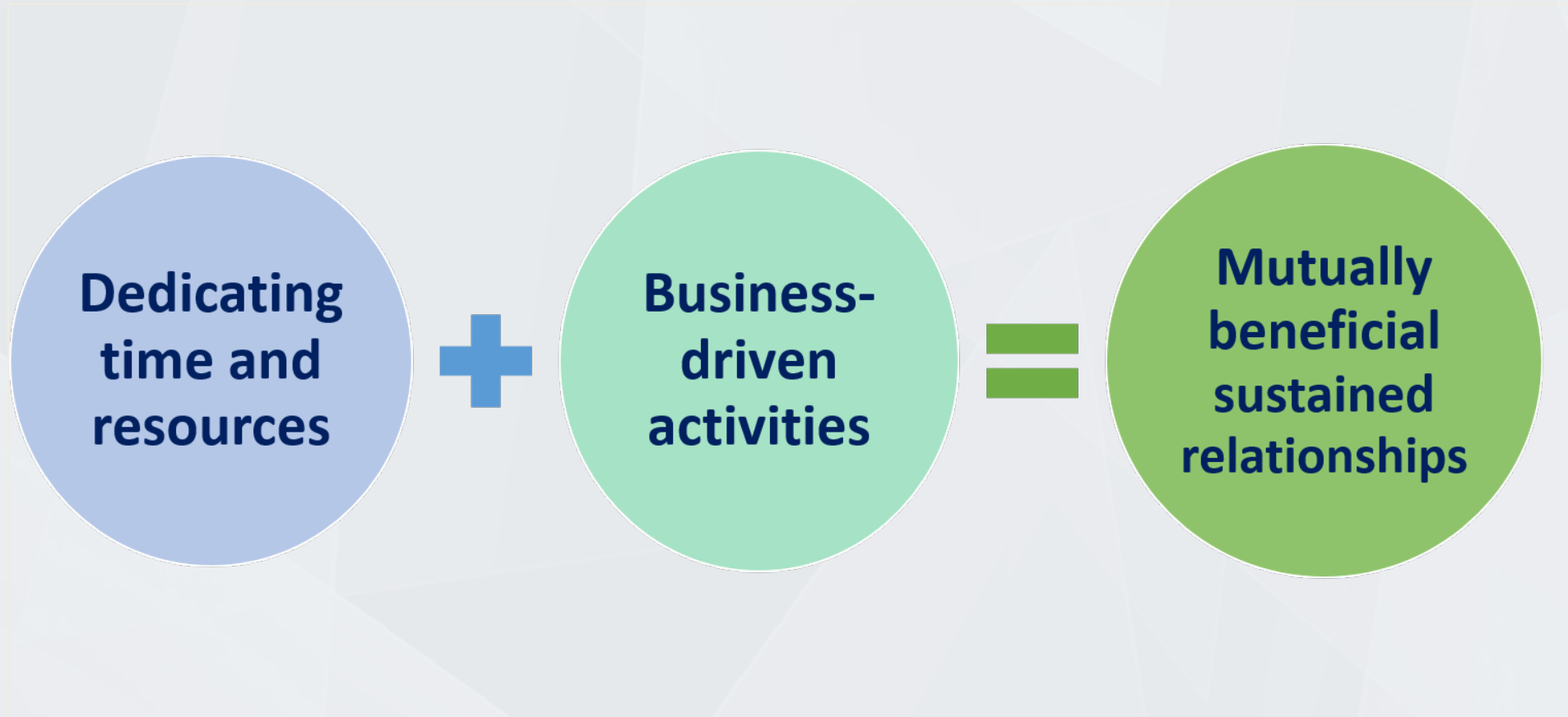
Communication is KEY

- ✓ Research and personalize.
- ✓ Lead with business benefits.
- ✓ Use a multi-channel approach.
- ✓ Offer value first.
- ✓ Leverage success stories.
- ✓ Make it easy for employers.
- ✓ Be authentic.
- ✓ Call to action.
- ✓ Follow up consistently.

How else can partners help each other AND meet business needs?

- Support employers with customized training and consultation.
- Be creative! (internships, mentorships, co-facilitated training programs, etc.).
- Use partners to think through systems barriers.
- Use business to attract more business.
- Find existing partnerships and workforce initiatives – infuse disability considerations.

Moving toward “integrative”



Job Development for Work-Based Learning

The Benefits of Work-Based Learning Experience (WBLE)

Work-based learning:

- provides authentic real-world experiences;
- cultivates talent for tomorrow's workforce;
- supports students in exploring their interests in a meaningful way;
- aligns career interest to experiences; and
- can mutually meet the needs of the student and the business.

Why Partner Early?

Direct access to find talented job seekers and future employees

Businesses benefit from a diverse and innovative labor pool

Short term experiences allow for the right fit between the student and the business

Early partnerships allow employers to support foundational skill development needed in the workplace.

Moving forward

- Lead with “value.”
- Adopt a “relationship-first” approach to employer engagement.
- Leaders – make sure staff have time and resources to dedicate to business engagement.
- A bad match can undermine value and relationships – choose wisely and evaluate job fit.
- Reach out to other organizations doing similar work and look for ways to coordinate and collaborate – everyone is working toward the same goal.

Activity: Ask it Basket

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Thank You!

Ellice Switzer

es656@cornell.edu

Jennifer Pawlewicz

jenniferp@cornell.edu



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