



A Collaboration Story – Part 1

Leanne Rexford, Director of Partner Relations, The Able Trust

It all started when Courtney, the recruiting manager at The JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort, realized that she had to start thinking outside the box when trying to fill her ever-increasing number of open positions.

Coincidentally, she received one of The Able Trust's newsletters inviting her to the Southwest Regional Manufacturers Association seminar "The Hidden Solution to Filling Your Talent Pipeline!" It was at the seminar where Courtney shared the challenges she was facing, received real-time guidance and participated in an open conversation about hiring people with disabilities. By stepping out of her comfort zone, Courtney proved that thinking outside the box starts with taking a chance, like going to a seminar in an unrelated field – because she knew it was unlikely that she was the only one struggling to find talent.

A few months after the seminar, Courtney and Leanne, Director of Partner Relations got together to discuss her specific needs and timeline. From there, Leanne explained a potential path forward to accomplish Courtney's recruitment goals by hiring people with disabilities. The first step was getting her leadership team on board, then identifying a pilot department – because starting small, failing fast and scaling up is a proven methodology for success. Leanne and Courtney also discussed the business case and cultural shifts that occur when individuals with disabilities are considered as a viable talent source.

Courtney worked swiftly, gaining her leadership's buy-in, then identifying a pilot department as well as a champion within that department to spearhead the project.

During the planning stage, Leanne recommended educating her pilot department on the ins and outs of disability employment – what many providers refer to as sensitivity training. Courtney agreed that this was the perfect place to begin. The objective for the sensitivity training is to not only ensure all individuals hired through this initiative are set up for success but, just as importantly, to provide a safe space for her staff and the department leaders to ask difficult questions that may come across as impolite but are valid and should be addressed.

Now that Courtney had done her part, it was time for Leanne to run with the ball.

Historically, providers of Vocational Rehabilitation have viewed one another as competitors, generally doing the same work, but in their individual silos. We at The Able Trust have prioritized dismantling this thought process with two strategies: One, providers working collaboratively to deliver a deeper well of qualified talent to employers; and two, becoming employer-centric. Rather than starting with each individual client and their specific wants and needs, we are encouraging providers to refocus their efforts on building strong relationships with employers and their needs, followed by backfilling those opportunities with individuals from their own organization as well as their partner organizations. By collaborating with other providers, a more robust candidate pool will become available for the employers, and they will continue returning to that well as their needs dictate.

Courtney and two employment specialists from partnering employment service provider organizations are working in harmony to address the JW's labor shortage. This approach to disability employment is a new and unique one, but creating a more accessible, streamlined infrastructure for employers, providers, and Floridians with disabilities to connect with one another is a mutually beneficial path forward for all involved.

Stay tuned for more accounts of this continuing initiative.