



Employer Engagement and Outreach: How State Councils on Developmental Disabilities (DD Council) Can Open the Glass Door to Employment

A Resource for DD Councils and All Grantees

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About This Brief

Prior to joining the staff and then becoming Executive Director of the [Arkansas Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities](#), Jon Taylor was a retail field manager with a decade of successful experience in competitive, integrated employment. In this brief, Jon recounts his experiences and offers practical tips for how DD Councils can engage with employers to advance competitive, integrated employment and economic outcomes for people with disabilities.

I. Introduction

The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (DD Act) requires DD Councils to engage in “employment-related activities.”¹ Those activities include “advocacy, capacity building, and systemic change activities that result in individuals with developmental disabilities acquiring, retaining, or advancing in paid employment, including supported employment or self-employment, in integrated settings in a community.”¹ Those activities are at the core of a movement known as Employment First.

The philosophy of Employment First is that people with disabilities can and want to work. The jobs should be in the general workforce, where employees with disabilities are paid real wages for real work. And they are employed alongside peers without disabilities.

When people with disabilities want to enter the workforce, they do not have to do it alone! They have partners who can help them succeed. State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are there to provide job skills training and job placement assistance. Service provider organizations are there to offer supported employment services, like job development and on-site job coaches. These partners are there to help a job seeker with disabilities successfully transition into a job. But, despite these strong partners, people with disabilities struggle to enter the workforce.

¹ The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-402, 114 Stat. 1677 (2000). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/senate-bill/1809/text>.



According to the United States (U.S.) Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023 22.5 percent of people with disabilities were employed.² While the labor force participation rate for people with disabilities has been rising, the employment rate for people without a disability is 65.8 percent.³ Despite the best efforts of state VR agencies and service providers, there is still an employment gap of 43.3 percent for people with disabilities! DD Councils can work to make an impact on closing this gap.

It is important for DD Councils that engage in the hard work of bridging the employment gap to remember that buy-in from businesses is critical. People with disabilities can work with their state VR agencies and other supported employment professionals to develop the skills needed to be successful in the workplace. But without employers who understand the value of inclusive and integrated workplaces, and more importantly how to manage those workplaces, workers with disabilities will continue to have limited options.

Too often, qualified workers with disabilities struggle to find work because the organizations that support them are focused primarily on “them.” Equal focus must be placed on potential employers to prepare those employers to successfully source, onboard, and retain employees with disabilities. Without a network of employers willing and able to hire people with disabilities, those workers, and the organizations that support them, have nowhere to go.

DD Councils can engage with businesses to help them build inclusive and integrated workplaces where their employees with disabilities can thrive. DD Councils can partner with state VR agencies and service providers to help them more effectively work with business to hire people with disabilities. For that partnership to be successful, councils must have some understanding of the employer’s point of view.

II. An Employer’s Perspective: The Summer of *Tombstone*

Prior to my role as a DD Council Executive Director, I was a manager for a well-known chain retail store in Conway, Arkansas. In 2015 my store was participating in the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) grant program.⁴ The goal of PROMISE, was to improve the provision and coordination of services to promote education and employment outcomes resulting in long-term reductions in the child’s reliance on Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The participants were paid through the grant, but were treated as regular, part-time employees, subject to the same standards as other employees. Participants in PROMISE were selected by Arkansas Workforce Services (AWS) and placed with employers to learn fundamental job skills.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). *Employment–population ratio for people with a disability increases to series high in 2023*. TED: The Economics Daily. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/employment-population-ratio-for-people-with-a-disability-increases-to-series-high-in-2023.htm>.

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). *Disability employment statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>.

⁴ The PROMISE program was a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education (ED), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), and the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) to improve the educational and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and their families. The program operated in 11 states, including Arkansas. Visit the SSA website for more information: <https://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/promise.htm>.



While AWS explained the goal of the program to the entire store leadership team, all we heard was “free people and free payroll.” We only saw PROMISE as a state-funded summer work program. As the program began, we believed in many of the myths and misconceptions around employing people with disabilities. Specifically, we felt if someone needed a work coach, they were not ready to work. And if they needed accommodations to do the job, what was the point?

Over the course of that summer, thanks to the patient efforts of the AWS team, the job coaches, and participants themselves, we began to overcome those beliefs. We understood the value job coaches brought to their employees. We saw that when we looked dispassionately at everyone’s individual productivity, many of the employees with accommodations matched or outperformed their non-disabled peers. We were hardly a model employer of people with disabilities at that point, but we learned enough to participate in PROMISE the following summer. The summer after that, I moved to a different store, and brought PROMISE with me. Plus, I started working with Arkansas Rehabilitation Services (ARS), Arkansas’ state VR agency, to hire adults with disabilities.

Why the Summer of *Tombstone*?

Because I “got it,” my reactions to the behaviors of my employees with disabilities changed. During the third summer, one of my supervisors informed me that one of the PROMISE participants stomped at her and said, “I’ll fight you right now!” She wanted me to fire him on the spot. When we went to see the participant, he was in the middle of an animated discussion with his work coach. When he saw me, the participant said, “Why Johnny Tyler, you madcap, where are you going with that shotgun?” The supervisor said, “You see, he’s threatening to shoot you! He has to go!”

His comments were not appropriate, but his physical mannerisms did not match his words. He was calm and smiling. After a moment, I realized why. He was quoting the movie [*Tombstone*](#)! I responded with a *Tombstone* quote of my own: “I’m your Huckleberry.”

The participant smiled, nodded, and went back to work. Once I explained to his supervisor and job coach what was happening, the situation resolved itself. The only other action I took was a follow up conversation with the job coach about appropriate movies to discuss at work.

At the beginning of PROMISE, I would have probably fired the participant. But by that third summer, which after that day my team referred to as the Summer of *Tombstone*, I learned to respond differently. I “got it.”

That third summer was a turning point for me. Over the course of three years, I went from being reluctant to hiring people with disabilities in year one, to understanding the benefits of inclusive hiring in year two, to fully adopting the employment of people with disabilities in year three. Competitive integrated employment was preferred staffing strategy. I finally “got it.”

Reflecting on those three years, I did not spontaneously develop best practices around supported employment. AWS and ARS already knew them, but they gave me the support, space, and quite frankly grace, to figure them out for myself. Which was their strategy all along.

A. What Matters to Employers: The Big Four

A DD Council’s approach to business engagement is different from those who provide services. DD Councils advocate to employers to hire people with disabilities and to partner with state VR agencies, job developers, and other supported employment professionals. Doing that successfully



requires DD Councils to have an “employer first” mindset. Employers want to know what’s in it for them. What is their payoff for hiring people with disabilities?

We cannot expect prospective employer partners to simply take our word for it that hiring people with disabilities is a smart business decision. Councils have to help employers understand the business advantage of hiring people with disabilities. Here are the “big four” employer benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

1. Retention

People with disabilities who stay in a job for more than one year have a 15 percent attrition rate.⁵ Attrition in the retail industry averages at or above 60 percent.⁶ Attrition is expensive and this is a significant issue to employers.

For example, say a retail store started and ended its year with 20 employees, and had an industry average of 60 percent attrition. During that year, the store lost more than half of its staff – 12 people. To end the year back at 20 people, it hired 12 new employees.

The cost of replacing those lost workers adds up when you factor in the advertising and marketing costs of posting the open job, the time it takes for the employer to interview the new worker, and the effort expended in training them in their new role. When DD Councils explain to employers that workers with disabilities stay in their roles 85 percent of the time, they can see the cost savings through retention.⁵ That is a benefit.

2. Productivity

Employees with disabilities work in the same productivity range as their non-disabled peers.⁷ Despite multiple studies that have proven this, “there is still reluctance to employ people with disabilities because of worries about mental, emotional, and communication stability.”⁷ DD Councils can work with employers to help them understand that with or without reasonable accommodations, people with disabilities can get the job done to the standards required for that job.

3. Morale

Employers who successfully integrate people with disabilities into their workforce routinely report high levels of employee satisfaction.^{8,9} That satisfaction extends beyond internal employees –

⁵ Unger, D. D. (2002). Employers’ Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities in the Workforce: Myths or Realities? *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 17(1), 2–10. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/108835760201700101>.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). *Job Openings and Labor Turnover - January 2022*. Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/jolts_03092022.pdf.

⁷ Hindle, K., Noble, J., & Philips, B. (1999). The productivity of workers with a disability: Evidence dispels past myth; Entrepreneurship plans future reality.

⁸ Swiegers, G., & Toohey, K. (2013). Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve business performance. Deloitte. Retrieved from <https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/human-capital/deloitte-au-hc-diversity-inclusion-soup-0513.pdf>.

⁹ Moore, J., Hanson, W. R., Maxey, E. C., & Kraemer, L. (2015). Fully Integrated Inclusive Organization: Beyond Accommodations. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2015(1), 15503. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2015.15503abstract>.



customers prefer to do business with companies that hire people with disabilities. A 2022 survey published by Kelly Services found that three out of four Americans are more likely to support a business committed to breaking down barriers to work, and 71 percent of Americans indicate that they are more likely to support a business that makes employment opportunities available to individuals on the autism spectrum.¹⁰

4. Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)

The WOTC is a federal tax credit available to employers for hiring and employing individuals from certain targeted groups who face significant barriers to employment.¹² A DD Council does not need to know every detail of the WOTC, but helping employers understand this underutilized resource can go a long way in getting them to adopt inclusive hiring.

A Powerful Financial Incentive

In 2023 the U.S. Department of Labor reported 1,982,858 certifications for the WOTC were processed.¹¹ If those were all filed, at the average credit of \$2,400, over \$4.7 billion would have been paid out to employers!

Here are the basics of the WOTC:

- It is a one-time tax credit an employer can receive for employing a targeted group.
- The credit ranges from \$1,200 to \$9,600, with an average of \$2,400.
- There are nine targeted groups - one of which is a VR Referral.
- The employee must work 400 hours for the employer to receive the credit.
- It is filed through Internal Revenue Service (IRS) form 8850.
- The form is filed at the state level through a WOTC Workforce Coordinator.

The WOTC is a powerful financial incentive for employers to hire people with disabilities!

B. Practical Tips to Help Employers With Their Initial Employment First Worker

When DD Councils focus on the “big four” business benefits of hiring people with disabilities, employers will listen. But it can be a challenge to get in front of decision makers to explain your case. Here are some tips on how to build effective relationships with employers.

Tip #1: Research the Employer Before the Initial Contact

- Many employers have Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) statements – but they often don’t focus on disability. It is not for a DD Council to critique their statement or comment on their organizational values – at least not at the beginning of the relationship.

¹⁰ Kelly Services. (2022). Job Seekers More Likely to Apply to Companies That Prioritize Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Survey Shows [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.kellyservices.com/press-releases/job-seekers-more-likely-to-apply-to-companies-that-prioritize-diversity-equity-inclusion-survey-shows/>.

¹¹ Employment and Training Administration. (2023). *WOTC Performance*. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wotc/performance>.

¹² Internal Revenue Service. (2015). *Work Opportunity Tax Credit*. Retrieved from: <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit>.



- While organizations have DEI statements, leaders in the field (outside of a corporate headquarters) may not have any experience making DEI real, especially with disabilities.
 - For example, in 2022 a popular brand’s distribution center in Little Rock, Arkansas worked with ARS. The local leadership wanted to be an inclusive employer but did not know how to do it well for people with disabilities. But they were willing to learn. ARS initially placed four workers as a test, then hosted a job fair that placed 40 workers at the company.
- Understand that all organizations have periods where they will be far less likely to engage with you. There is a rhythm to their workflow. For example, many retailers staff up for the year-end holidays beginning in October. A visit to them in mid-November will have a lower chance of success than a visit in March or April. But a visit to an accountant in April would probably not be well received. Do a little research first!
- Remember that DD Councils are uniquely suited for reaching out and building employer relationships. We can move through the worlds of service providers, state agencies (like VR), and employers in a way those other groups cannot. We can act as connectors and facilitators of relationships that support our common goals. The title alone can open doors – nothing beats “Executive Director of the State DD Council.”

Tip #2: Position Your DD Council as a Staffing Partner

- While DD Councils are not service providers, they must adopt an “employer first” mindset when approaching prospective employers. DD Councils should be focused on helping employers hire and retain talent. The approach cannot be charity-based. When approaching potential employers, focus on the “big four” benefits. Broad discussions around the dignity of risk, dignity of work, and human rights, while important, are not the focus at the beginning of the relationship.
- In addition to the “big four” benefits, DD Councils can introduce employers to the vital partners in the Employment First movement: VR agencies and service providers. Showing employers that they are not doing this alone alleviates some concerns they may have about the process. Whenever possible, involve as many leaders in an organization as possible. When an employer has buy-in from its leadership team, the effort to embrace inclusive hiring has a much higher chance to succeed. The more leaders who understand the goal, the better.

The relationship takes time, but the payoff is that the DD Council will be viewed as a trusted partner who helped make the employer’s disability hiring strategy a success.

Tip #3: Careful Consideration of the Pilot Hire

- The first employee that gets placed will set the tone for all future employee placements. Many employers are still working off myths and misconceptions about people with disabilities. Those employers, when discussing people with disabilities, may call to mind a stereotypical image of someone with the most severe disability they have ever seen or heard about. And that image, real or not, may become the template all people with disabilities are measured against.



- The goal of that first hire, the pilot, is to show the employer that people with disabilities can and want to work. The DD Council and its staffing partners must work to ensure the new hire is a good fit for the employer, and that they are well supported. That support is for the employee and employer.
- Before the first employee with a disability is hired, the employer and the team that will work with that new employee must all go through disability etiquette training. Ideally, that training will be conducted by a person with a disability. Any job coaches should be introduced at this point as well.

Tip #4: Follow Up

- The DD Council should continue to meet with the employer to monitor the progress of their inclusive hiring efforts. Employee specific feedback may be delivered to VR counselors and job coaches, but the employer may not be able to give specific feedback on employees to the DD Council. Employees have privacy rights that must be respected! Follow-ups from the DD Council should focus on the overall employment effort. Asking about the effectiveness of disability etiquette, how the employee onboarding process is working, and general employee training are all areas of focus. And whenever possible, align your follow ups with benchmarks in the employee lifespan: 30-, 60-, and 90-day check-ins align with most new hire development plans.
- After the initial period, keep checking in. Let the employer know how much the DD Council appreciates their efforts. Figure 1 shows Follow-up Do's and Don'ts.

Figure 1. Follow-up Do's and Don'ts

DO ask questions about performance and productivity	DON'T ask questions focused primarily on social dynamics
"Are they achieving their goals?"	"Are they making friends?"
"Are they working well with their team?"	"Are people nice to them?"
"How is the schedule working?"	"Who sits with them at lunch?"

- If an issue comes up, ensure the appropriate staffing partners are involved. Job coaches and other supported employment professionals are there to support the person. The DD Council is there to support the overall hiring program.

Follow these four tips and you and your employment partners can build a solid staffing pipeline that benefits people with disabilities and the organizations that hire them. As you continue to build your relationships, you can also build a community of employer champions.

C. Building a Community of Employer Champions

This network of organizations and business leaders can be leveraged to expand the number of disability inclusive employers in your state. One of the best things about employers who have adopted disability inclusive hiring is that they “get it.” They understand the “big four” benefits of hiring people with disabilities. And more importantly, when they are at the “get it” stage, they can speak the language of their peers and act as a champion for inclusive hiring.



For example, if you asked an employer champion for a referral to an organization you want to work with, and they know somebody there, they will be far more likely to explain the benefits of hiring people with disabilities in a way that works for their needs.

Many organizations are struggling with retention. If a trusted peer tells you that hiring people with disabilities will drive down your attrition numbers (and I know lots of managers who have improving attrition as part of their review), you are probably going to listen. Employer champions can open doors you do not have connections to, have the time for, or even knew existed. And when they do, you have to do more than just say thank you.

Look for ways to celebrate the successes of your partnerships. You can:

- Write a letter to their superiors. Describe how collaborative the relationship is and how their organization is a role model for disability inclusive employment. An email is nice, and so are phone calls, but letters are very formal, and make a strong impression.
- Does the organization have a newsletter you can contribute to? It does not have to be an essay, just a few paragraphs about how the employee, the employer, and your coalition came together to form a successful partnership. And if the employer does not have a newsletter, and you do, write a short article, and give a copy to the employer. Do not forget pictures! This also extends to internal promotional videos as well, noting that there may be a need to get permission for that organizationally.
- Invite employer champions to your DD Council meetings and introduce them to other champions. Create spaces where your champions can network with other employers. Let them share what they've learned, so they can help other employers "get it" like they do. And whenever possible, invite their employees with disabilities to share their stories as well.
- Honor them with an award. ARS presents an award every year at their Business Inclusion Summit. I won it in 2018 – it sits beside me in my office. Whether someone is in the public or private sector, profit or non-profit, it is nice to be recognized. And when you recognize an employer publicly, people notice.
- Nominate them to serve on a board. If you have an employer who has done everything that you have asked them to, a board position (like a State Rehabilitation Council or Workforce Board) gives them a more visible stage to champion employing people with disabilities. And they can talk about the work done by you and your organization.
- Many organizations have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Also known as corporate citizenship, some companies are conscious of the kind of impact they have on the community around them. In many cases, CSR programs are left up to individual business units. Hiring people with disabilities can be a CSR activity that your DD Council can directly help them with.
- Make champions an important part of Awareness Months. Invite them to any employment activities during Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month (DDAM) in March. And they should be a critical part of any National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) activities in October, too. Their stories of how they built disability inclusive workspaces (with DD Council support) are powerful, real-world testimonies that are hard to refute.



All of this takes time, some of it requires some advance planning, and some of it costs money. But the investment pays off. This community of champions, that you built, will show up when you need them to. Because now they “get it.” And now, for them, hiring people with disabilities is more than just a strategic staffing plan, or one sub-goal of their DEI Statement, or an aspect of their CSR program. Because of your investment in them, you made them subject matter experts on hiring people with disabilities in their corner of their organization. It takes time, sometimes years with the first one, but it pays off.

D. Long-Term Engagement

As stated in the introduction, DD Councils all work in the disability employment sphere. Most DD Councils have employment as a goal, objective, or activity on our five-year plan. Building a group of employer champions who have an Employment First mindset and practical experience in competitive, integrated employment helps us achieve our employment goal through capacity building in the broader employer community. Champions can also be incredibly useful in systems change efforts when legislative testimonials are needed.

Building and sustaining that community is an investment, and long-term engagement between you and your employer champions is critical. Successful long-term engagement is about disciplined relationship management:

- Assign a point person for employer champion engagement to stay in regular contact. Even if a champion is not employing someone with disabilities at the time, touching base with them is still important. People get promoted or leave jobs all the time. Stay in touch.
- If your champion leaves, they are highly likely to take your relationship with them to their new job.
- New leaders are always coming up through the ranks. Regular contact lets you meet them and explain what you do. And you can start building a new champion!
- If you leave, let your contacts know who the new point of contact is on your side. If you get a promotion within your organization, let your employer contacts know who the new “you” is. If you can introduce them around, that’s even better.
- Build relationships with the main disability employment organizations in your area, specifically:
 - Your state VR agency
 - Your State Rehabilitation Council
 - Offices of Employment First
 - Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) Chapters
 - Disability: IN Chapters, formerly the United States Business Leadership Network (USBLN)



III. Opening the Glass Door to Employment

A core mission of DD Councils is barrier elimination. Employment barriers facing people with disabilities fall into three broad categories: physical, mental, and systemic.

- **Physical barriers** represent accessibility within the workplace. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) addresses the bare minimum of what businesses need to do to ensure their facilities are physically accessible to people with disabilities.¹³
- **Mental barriers** include unconscious bias, outdated and harmful perceptions about people with disabilities, and in some cases, blatant discrimination.
- **Systemic barriers** include inaccessible application process, overly generic job descriptions, and outdated policies and procedures.

When combined, these obstacles to employment make a barrier made of glass. But not a glass ceiling. A glass ceiling is bad enough, as those standing on it are looking down on everyone beneath them. But there is still a fair amount of space between the floor and the ceiling. Those on the floor must find a way to reach up, bridge the gap, and break the glass. It's worse than that. It's a glass door.

A glass door is worse because both sides can see each other—up close. People on each side of the door can almost reach each other, but they are separated by a thin pane of glass. People with disabilities on the outside can see what everyone on the inside has – and they want that too. And it's not just the job, it's everything that comes along with a job. The paycheck and the financial security that comes with it is great. But a having a job opens up an entirely separate social universe, too.

The average American spends one-third of their life at work – roughly 90,000 hours.¹⁴ A significant portion of the social connections and interactions made in the lifetime of a U.S. citizen comes from their workplace. Many employees spend so much time in their jobs that they say they have a “work spouse.”

And for many people, their sense of identity comes largely from their job. When we meet new people, one of the most common questions is “What do you do?” If that new person is outside of the “standard” working age range of 18-64, and they respond, “I don't work,” no judgment is passed. But, if they are in that range, and they give the same answer, in my experience, judgment is passed. In the U.S., if you are not working, you better have a good reason. And unfortunately, for too many people, having a disability is viewed as a good reason.

The social connections and interactions made in the workplace represent a significant portion of our life and identity. Leaving people with disabilities out of the workforce denies them access to this critical aspect of life.

¹³ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. *Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act*. ADA.gov. Retrieved from: <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). American Time Use Survey – 2022 Results. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf>.



People with disabilities don't expect for a job to be simply handed to them. They want to come through the glass door and work alongside everyone else. They want to earn their job, just like everyone else. When DD Councils engage with employers, we are able to show them how to open the glass door. And when employers finally "get it" they do not look back.

