

Two organizations partner to train disabled workers for call-center work.

Developing a Talent Pipeline in a High-Attrition Field

BY KATHY BERNHARDT

Companies across the country struggle with finding and retaining qualified employees. At the same time, individuals with disabilities experience an unemployment rate double that of their nondisabled peers. These intersecting realities are what prompted disability services organization Tangram



to form a consulting arm, Tangram Business Resourcing, to provide disability inclusion training and consultation to businesses in need of qualified employees.

Tangram Business Resourcing offered consulting to businesses in its home state of Indiana before securing a contract with a national retailer, which enabled the consulting business to expand to five additional states. Tangram Business Resourcing built more than 220 partnerships with disability services organizations and schools, including GateWay Community College in Arizona, as part of its sustainability plan in working with the national retail chain. GateWay Community College has three campuses in Phoenix, and is a division of the Maricopa County Community College District, which is one of the largest community college districts in the United States.

Opportunity

One consistent barrier encountered by Tangram's consulting team as it worked with the large-scale retailer is the high turnover rates experienced in the retailer's call centers—a problem shared almost universally by companies with call centers. This high turnover rate was so persistent that an innovative, cost-effective solution was necessary.

Call centers, once largely outsourced due to perceived cost reduction, are beginning to make a comeback in America. Companies are finding that, in the long term, outsourcing is not cost-effective, and in many cases can damage a company's bottom line—a result of language barriers, soft-skills gaps, and the high price of overseas contracts.

Now, with the resurgence of call centers in America, companies are facing a new problem: high attrition rates.



THE PROJECT EXPERIENCED SUCCESS ABOVE AND BEYOND THE ORIGINAL PURPOSES OF THE COURSE.

Solution

Tangram Business Resourcing and GateWay Community College each brought expertise in matching businesses to individuals seeking employment and were poised to offer a solution that would allow the partners to work collaboratively in favor of achieving better, more sustainable employment opportunities for unemployed and under-employed populations, as well as lower turnover for businesses operating call centers.

In Arizona, Tangram and GateWay found all the puzzle pieces needed to form their solution: businesses in need of qualified employees, a pipeline of candidates, and two organizations with demonstrated success in working with both of these groups. This was the perfect time and place to unite these groups with the goal of addressing key issues.

Tangram had already planned to develop a pretraining module, focused on people with disabilities, as part of its project with the national retailer. Tangram sought GateWay's help; due to its expertise and the fact that it already offered a contact-center management course, GateWay was a natural fit for the partnership. Additionally, having an educational partner added to the viability of the project. To this end, Tangram approached GateWay with the idea of developing a pretraining class targeted at individuals with disabilities, including both visible and hidden disabilities—the minority with the highest unemployment rate.

Process

Prior to partnering with Tangram, GateWay already offered a customer

service class that provided training in call-center employment. This became the jumping-off point for creating a new curriculum. Cynthia Rochester of GateWay Community College worked intensively with businesses to review the current curriculum, which was intended for a six-month course. Rochester provided companies with a list of all the competencies included in the curriculum and asked them to identify which competencies were most important to them.

Rochester then identified the core competencies and distilled the curriculum down to a two-week course, with input and guidance from the retailer's call-center management. The course places an emphasis on soft skills, but also ensures that the students secure the technical skills needed to be successful in the call-center environment.

Companies made it clear that, from a workforce development standpoint, meeting competencies is most important. This pretraining course is really a bridge between the academic and the corporate. It takes into account—and places emphasis on—the factors that businesses look for in their workforce. It equips students with all the tools needed to be a call-center employee and to become a call-center professional, in recognition that call centers are no longer a dead-end job but a starting point on the path up the corporate ladder. This is a departure from the common practice of placing individuals with disabilities in positions that do not readily provide opportunities for career advancement, making it appealing for the individuals as well as the businesses.

Developing the course was approximately a six-month process, though Tangram and GateWay had been actively working together and formulating ideas prior to that. The first class included 22 students at two different campuses. Tangram and GateWay used their wide network of partners to advertise the class to disability service providers and schools, which then promoted the class to their clients.

GateWay worked with all the students to enroll them in the course. After students complete it, they are given a unique opportunity to tour the call-center facility and meet with hiring managers. They are encouraged to ask questions so they fully understand all aspects of the position. Students are then supported by GateWay through the application process. At this point, the company takes over.

Results

The results of the pilot class were outstanding. Three of the students were hired by the national retail chain for which the project was conceived. However, the project experienced success above and beyond the original purposes of the course in that other students were hired by different companies with call centers based in Arizona. One of the strengths of the course is that it can be customized easily depending on the needs of different companies. Now that the curriculum has been developed and the process has been formulated, it can be readily replicated and customized for other companies with an interest in pursuing quality employees.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this course was built to address the needs of both the businesses and students. When a business

is able to hire a qualified employee, this is a success for both parties. It is also a success for the entire community. When businesses and individuals thrive, it leads to economic stability. In a geographic region that has such a high concentration of call centers, this solution, though simple, could end up positively affecting the local economy and the country's economy in the long term.

Lessons learned

As with any pilot, there is room for improvement, but the course itself has proved to be a valuable tool with the potential for far-reaching outcomes. Moving forward, Tangram and GateWay have identified the need to strengthen the partnerships between local community organizations and companies. Tangram and GateWay also have learned that there are gaps in how people with disabilities perceive job descriptions and what businesses are really looking for.

Finally, breaking barriers has been a large component of this project. Tangram and GateWay have learned that breaking down the walls of perception, belief, and thought about what individuals with disabilities are capable of will always be an element of our work, at least in the near future. By educating businesses on the bottom-line benefits of hiring a diverse workforce, we can build a bridge between individuals and businesses, giving each party the tools to be successful with the support of the other.

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