

by Allen Anderson

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## The Problem and the Solution

### Approaches to Job Development

In developing jobs for people with disabilities, the key question is how to get employers to seriously consider people with disabilities as potential employees? Representing persons with disabilities as the same as everyone else is a method often used. They are no different than any other person. Addressing hiring anxiety by promises of candidate excellence and long-term support to outweigh the negativity associated with the disability is also often used. A bit of the diamond-in-the-rough approach.

These approaches problems are not the approaches themselves. In fact both are quite true. Both will, in a perfect world, add value to the employer. The problem is the world is not perfect and these approaches as incorrectly used produce a restrained negativity that hurts our employment outcomes. These approaches by their delivery can highlight, in stark relief, that people with disabilities are less able and more costly than other candidates rather than the reverse.

### Problems with the Common Approaches

The “same as everyone else” approach, although correct, can be perceived as a misleading falsehood when the employer realises there is a disability involved. The candidate’s disability makes them different even if they are presented as the same. The sameness approach by its evident contradiction generates more disbelief and distrust than welcome. Pre-existing negative

perceptions are reinforced and the trust between job developer and employer is not constructed

The “excellent candidate and tons of support” approach ensures the employer has doubts about the candidate. Why the support if the candidate is excellent (or even just good). So how “tons of support” is presented is important. Support presented as compensation for the disability or to make the candidate appear a great bargain—actually brings the candidate under greater negative scrutiny (and in my opinion worsens the situation). This type of “tons of support” approach encourages the search for candidate negatives rather than highlighting the positives the employer gets from the support.

The more an approach focuses on the disability itself, the more anxiety is inserted into the hiring decision. We need an approach that relegates the disability to the irrelevance it deserves by focusing on something that makes the disability unimportant.

### The Switch

To ensure maximum flexibility, rationality and hope in the hiring decision, we must make a basic switch in how we gather employer’s needs information. This switch will determine how the candidate and we are perceived and renders the disability a non-issue.

I start with the premise that all hiring is based in employer perceptions, around post hiring benefits and costs. The employer’s negative perception of the disability, not the disability itself thwarts the



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hiring. Hiring or not hiring has nothing to do with the actual disability but rather with perception of the disability and the associated future costs.

Job developers create the positive or negative employer perceptions of the person with the visible disability. Job developers have the pre-hiring discussion with the employer not the candidate. People with visible disabilities representing themselves to employers have had a difficult time creating the positive perceptions needed to get hired. Third party representatives, like job developers, have found it easier.

Yet even though job developers have more success than the candidates themselves they have not been overwhelmingly great at creating the positive perception. Commonly, the job developer's contribution to a negative perception in pre-hiring employer interactions is enormous. Job developers do not seem to recognize their contribution to this negative perception. They blame the employer's negative perception on innate negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and dismiss their role in creating this negative perception.

One would guess that the candidate representing himself or herself is best able to present the positive perception to the employer. I hope and pray that this will someday be true. Unfortunately, at present our experience shows that it is not. Why it is not, I am not sure. Yet people with disabilities unemployment rate testifies to the lack of success that the direct candidate representation approach has had. This may change over time, but for the present I will concentrate more on a "done right" direct selling

strategy by the job developer to get the positive perceptions and the outcomes we need.

### **The Needs—A New Look**

If a positive perception is the key to hiring, then ensuring we can manufacture this perception with the greatest breadth is significant to our success. The approach used to engage the employer about hiring needs—how the needs are defined, prioritized and formulated—determines readiness to accept hiring people with disabilities as a new solution to hiring needs.

The point at which a job developer engages the employer over describing their employment needs I call the "needs analysis". There is a key needs analysis mindset, which increases employer flexibility on new ideas and helps us a lot in securing the jobs we need. We need to ensure in the needs analysis that the employer foremost talks about the work to be done and the incumbent problems doing this work. We do not want a focus on the description of solution to these problems the employer wants to hire. We direct the focus to the actual problems themselves, and away from the hiring solution.

Talking about the work problems means describing the actual work or tasks to be done—identifying and describing key areas, elements and problems of that task. This outlines the problem the employer wants handled, not the solution they believe is the best way to handle this problem.

We need to move the employer's focus from the solution they have in mind—the person they will



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hire—back on to the actual problem they are trying to solve. Finding the actual problem—its size, its flow, how critical and how crucial it is—is the key to defocusing off the disability. It will get the employer to switch from a preconceived employee solution to considering an alternative one—our person with the disability.

Most job developers think they are finding the problem when they ask the simple question of “What are your hiring needs” or “What are you looking for in this job”. They typically get the job title as the answer. “I need a dishwasher, or a vocational counsellor”.

The job developer proceeds to then expand on this request by asking for that “What do you want” to be described in greater detail. Questions like “What does a good dishwasher look like, what qualifications does a vocational counselor have?” follow. “What did a great past employee have that made them great”? What does a great employee look like? Qualifications or skill sets identification becomes the needs analysis.

Questions like this, although better than nothing in the needs arena, actually divert from the real topic we should be after. We should be figuring out the work problem but instead end up focusing on the employer’s subjective description of the potential candidate, the employer’s potential solution. This idea of describing the likely candidate is solution-focused and not problem revealing. It leads to looking for a candidate to match what the employer desires not accept a solution the employer may not have previously considered.

The employer’s work problem is important to us. Duplicating and selling to the employer’s image of an effective candidate, only with a visible disability will be difficult. We want to change the game so we can bring in new players, our candidates with all levels of visible disabilities. We want to move the employer to be more objective and abandon subjectively generated solutions and open up to any solution that works perspective.

Focusing on the solution and accepting the job order based on that description solidifies and narrows in the employer’s mind their hiring expectations. We need to broaden the employer’s willingness to make new choices by reframing the job order through the lens of the problem itself and not through the lens of the preconceived solution.

### **The Problem Not The Solution**

Asking for a description and an outline of the problem itself objectifies the process of seeking a solution. Arriving at a place where the employer is willing to look at any solution that will work, rather than the specific old one they had in the past, opens the arena for people with disabilities. It makes their ability to solve the problem the key to hiring, not their resemblance to the typical solution the employer sees as acceptable.

Take the employer’s attention off describing the candidate (solution) and put it on describing the depth and breadth of the problem. We increase choice flexibility by opening the employer up to how we can solve their problem, not match their requested hiring solution.



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### Focus On Problems Helps JD Capacity

The long-term relationship between the employer and the job developer is absolutely crucial to us. We need it for increasing job market penetration and increased job developer capacity.

Our hour's rate for a job developer, working with new employers for candidates with visible barriers but skills, is approximately (based on experience) 40 hours per job. This is with employers the job developer does not know. It will take us, on average, 40 hours to find and fill one job.

Over time, as the employer and job developer get to know each other, the hours needed per placement with repeat employers drops like a stone. We no longer need 40 hours per job as with an unknown employer, but can often get away with five hours or less per job. This increases the job developer's capacity eight-fold. It means generating a repeat business strategy is the best strategy for job developers and candidates.

### Repeat Business

One of the quickest ways to a strong repeat business strategy is to increase the employer's trust and belief in the job developer. This ensures that the employer is willing to transfer more hiring to the job developer, rather than doing it themselves. This happens when the employer believes he/she has an effective resource that truly knows his/her needs/problems in hiring. The employer transfers the hiring task rather than doing it himself/herself, to save herself/himself the work involved in hiring.

We want the job developer to become this

resource and create a trust bond with the employer to generate on-going business. Focusing on the employer's stated solution via a description of the candidate he/she is looking for, then delivering someone the employer may not have been expecting, will not get us to the trust and bond we are working towards.

So our focus in an employer needs analysis is to get to the root and primary problem for the employer. Flesh this out to open employer's willingness for new choices and accept someone that will solve the problem, even though they do not look like a typical solution. Knowing the employer's problems intimately, and being seen to know them, will create trust faster than almost anything else.

You actually know what I (the employer) need to solve my problem. Therefore, I trust you and am willing to move ahead on your (job developer) word to select a recommended candidate with a disability I would not have selected in the past.

Gathering this information about the crucial problem areas can be handled with questions like those supplied next. Feel free to convert these questions to your own way of asking questions, but getting the same types and pieces of information.

Start with a broad-based question that concentrates on tasks and not qualifications like:

1. Tell me about the job—what does the person actually have to do?
2. What are the tasks involved in this job and which ones take the most time and demand the most attention?



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Then move to more specific task identification and areas of task difficulties:

1. What tasks, of the ones you listed, are the most important tasks?
2. What task done or problem solved would make the biggest difference to success in this job?
3. What key tasks tell you the difference between great performance and average or mediocre performance? Talk about those problems some more.
4. List the tasks in their order of performance and then their order of importance.
5. What are the make or break tasks?
6. If you had to decide on two things that needed to be done in this job that were must haves, what would they be?
7. What tasks are causing the biggest problems and why?
8. What task's proper completion makes the biggest difference in a good job being done?
9. How important are these tasks to other jobs in the organization?
10. What difficulties will arise if these tasks are not taken care of?
11. What tells you that you think someone can do these tasks?

Pull out the important tasks and the depth of difficulty created by poor or non- completion. The bigger the issue the employer has experienced with poor performance, the more flexible the employer will be to new ideas.

More concretely and clearly the job developer can demonstrate they truly understand the employer's real problems the more the employer will be willing to give the job developer's solution a shot.

Let me give you an example on "finding the problems rather than describing the solution":

**Employer**—"We want a dishwasher for our restaurant and we will take anyone as long as they are breathing."

**Analysis**—We could find someone for this request. Yet is finding this solution as the employer has described it—"a breathing anyone" really helpful to us? The problem is image and sustainability. The employer will perceive this as a low-value hire—not asking for much and maybe not getting much. The job developer and candidates with disabilities are not seen as adding much value to this equation. The job developer should take this request far deeper into the problem itself.

Without a deeper problem analysis, the employer may not offer the job developer more jobs. If a "breathing" candidate is presented and has any problems, the employer can dump this candidate without much remorse but with a reinforced doubt about people with disabilities because they could not even make it at this level.

We want the employer to give us more jobs and to see hiring the dishwasher as our serious investment in trying to solve dishwashing problems. If it works we will be heroes and if it fails we will be the resource that understands and tried hard.





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**Job developer**—“Listen, I can give you a breathing applicant, but let me see if I can aim a little higher. I know a dishwasher has to be able to wash dishes, but from an insider’s perspective, in washing dishes, what is the most important task that a dishwasher should be able to do? If they could do it well, how big a difference does it make to your establishment?” (We are looking for a primary task to try to solve and the task focus from which to present my candidate with a disability.)

**Employer**—“Well now that you ask, the key function in dishwashing in our place is to be able to judge how busy we are, which dishes should be washed first, etc. At the lunch rush we are always short of plates and if the dishwasher sees lots of plates coming in, he/she should know to wash those first and leave others for when there is a gap. If he/she can do this, it saves the assistant manager from running back to the dish room to tell the dishwasher which dishes to wash first and heads off customer complaints about waiting.”

**Job developer**—“So if I could give you a person with some training who already knew or could be taught how to do that type of sorting, that would interest you, would that be correct?”

First, we have now gone from a simple dishwasher, easily replaced, to the potential of a new solution, no matter what they look like, who can now, or eventually, solve the problem of

which dishes to wash first. We have moved the focus off the “breathing anyone” to someone who can solve the problem. This minimizes the disability, as the focus is on how they can solve the problem, not do they look like the solution I requested.

Second, I can tell, if a candidate could learn to sort dishwashing times that they could probably learn to do a lot more. The employer may have a retention problem as they have tried to address the sorting problem in the past with people who readily leave.

How I propose solving this problem will depend on the candidates I have available. Still, I have two key issues from the employer—sorting dishes and potentially staying in the job.

This will give me the employer’s trust to try to find solutions to these problems no matter what the solutions may look like as long as they work. By focusing on the problem not the requested solution I gain respect, trust and openness for my candidates as potential workers and myself as the job developer. I have found several potential routes to optional solutions that would not have arisen if we had merely asked for a description of the acceptable candidate.

A major key for us in job development is to focus on the employers’ problems, not their requested solutions. Focus this way and we will have much greater opportunities for people with disabilities.

