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October 23, 2009

Springboard for Special Needs Diversity

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By the author of DIVE IN, Springboard into the Productivity, Profitability and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce.

How many employees who have a disability or a child or other dependent with special needs does the average company employ? Two percent? Five percent? Think again. It's actually 15%. In fact, the disability community is now the largest and fastest growing minority market in the world, in the U.S., surpassing the Hispanic population by 5%.

Supporting these employees, whether through formal accommodations or informal tools and resources is the foundation to becoming an employer of choice for this large, loyal segment of the population.

Recognized as the recipient of the 2008 Disability Matters Work Life Award, KPMG has gone beyond the basic foundational support and in 2007, established a network for employees who either have a disability or who have a child or other dependent with special needs which now connects more than 400 partners and employees. The network provides resources, information and education through interactive webcasts, local chapter meetings and more. The network positively impacts KPMG's business on many levels but extends to the larger disability community, striving to raise awareness about the unique needs and talents of people with disabilities.

When forming these employee resource groups, Springboard wants company's to understand that connecting the group's mission to broader business goals and objectives is critical to its sustainability and overall success of the group. No one wants to feel like the resource group is just a corporate sponsored support group. It is also important to keep in mind the importance of having an appropriate balance between activities and initiatives for employees with disabilities and employees who have dependents with special needs. Springboard works closely with organizations on the successful strategy, implementation and execution of these groups on a global basis.

Walgreens, another Disability Matters Award winner and employer of choice for this community, focuses heavily on recruiting people with disabilities. Their level of support begins with training. Managers are educated, not only regarding legal requirements, but in disability etiquette and awareness and are given the opportunity to observe and interact with successfully employed individuals at the company's distribution center in Anderson, S.C.

Considering that almost 40% of the complaints to the EEOC on the part of employees with disabilities are due to Harassment, the delivery of disability etiquette and awareness training is critical. While training on the many legal issues such as knowledge about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and American's with Disabilities Amendment Act (ADAAA) is important, Springboard recommends this training be delivered from a social justice perspective rather than a legal one. It's about eliminating the "fear factor" when it comes to communicating with someone from the disability community. For example, when speaking with someone who uses a wheelchair, is it most appropriate to sit, stand or kneel during the conversation? The answer is to be seated but the key is to understand the reasons why.

Other "best practices" involve providing comprehensive information and resources on a company's intranet set, emergency preparedness planning, the development of a reasonable accommodation committee known as a RAC, on-site celebrations of National Disability Awareness Month (October) and The Day of the Disabled (December 3rd) and much more.

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