**Speaking Business: Communications Strategies for Engaging Employers in RETAIN**

# Highlights from the RETAIN TA Community of Practice Dialogue – September 11, 2019

# Overview

On September 11, 2019, the RETAIN Technical Assistance (TA) Team hosted the first live Community of Practice (CoP) in its “Communications Exchange” series, which is designed tohelp RETAIN awardees maximize the potential of their state demonstration projects through effective communication.

The session was titled “**Speaking Business: Communications Strategies for Engaging Employers in RETAIN,”** and presenters included Rebecca Skipper and Diana Zeitzer, communications specialists from Concepts, Inc. (which is the American Institutes for Research’s RETAIN TA communications partner).

This document captures key content from the presenters as well as highlights from the information-sharing dialogue.

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# Tune In to “WII-FM”

Much of what you say to employers and how you say it depends upon the structure of your demonstration project and the types of employer engagement you desire. Some RETAIN teams are approaching employers broadly, asking multiple businesses if they have any recently injured or ill employees who want to be part of their pilot. Others are finding participants through health care providers. In those cases, the participant’s employer is pre-determined, and your task is to loop the employer into the project. Further, some teams may be seeking new employers to provide jobs to pilot participants who may not want or be able to return to their previous employer.

Clearly, each of these scenarios requires a different type of message. However, no matter what your “ask” or message is, the common thread in all of them is “WII-FM”—the so called “radio station” that all your target audiences are tuned into. That acronym stands for “What’s In It For Me?” And to catch an employer’s “frequency,” you need to present the *benefits* of the RETAIN program, and the reasons why it pays to retain employees facing illness or injury rather than having them leave the workforce.

# Dual-Customer Approach

With many employers, the key to engaging them is to broaden the definition of who is being served, respecting and responding to the business’s needs in tandem with those of individuals participating in your RETAIN demonstration project. In other words, you need to consider that you actually have *two* customers: injured and ill individuals *and* employers. This dual-customer approach necessitates talking with and, most importantly, *listening to* businesses about their expectations. Key strategies are to:

* View businesses as customers.
* Take steps to understand their needs.
* Adjust products and services to meet those needs.
* Understand that decisions are made based on business needs, not rehabilitation needs.

# Speaking “Business”

Successful partnerships with employers require service providers to speak to business interests. Ultimately, a positive cost-benefit ratio is what drives the hiring process, so articulating how RETAIN can save employers time and money is far more persuasive than describing the rehabilitation process. A few examples of nuances in language include:

***Employer vs. Business.***While often used interchangeably, businesses do not typically define themselves primarily as an “employer.” Rather, they produce products or services that are sold in the marketplace. That purpose, and not providing employment, is their reason for being. So, it’s best to not singularly focus on their role in employment. By doing so, you may limit opportunities to engage on more issues, overlooking strategic opportunities to provide support to businesses on other dimensions, such as staff training and workplace accessibility.

***Business Development vs.* *Job Placement.*** This nuance may be important to RETAIN teams that may be helping people return to work, but with a different employer. Historically, service providers have focused on the goal of “job placement,” that is, the development of a single job or employment opportunity. In contrast, “business development” focuses on creating and sustaining long-term relationships with businesses to produce multiple outcomes. While job placements certainly count as one such outcome, they are not the only outcomes possible. Other examples include employee and supervisor training, assistance with accommodations, workplace accessibility assessments, and job coaching. Moving toward a “business development” perspective sets the stage for sustainable success, for both individuals with disabilities and employers. The key is to think about the organization as a whole and how you can help it.

***Accommodation vs. Productivity Enhancement.***Some employers mistakenly think that it costs more to hire an individual with a disability (or bring one back on board after injury or illness) because he or she might require an accommodation. However, research from the Job Accommodation Network debunks this myth, showing that more than half of accommodations cost nothing (59%), while the rest typically cost only $500. According to some employers, the root of this concern is the word “accommodation” itself, because it is legal in context and doesn’t really speak to what accommodations actually do, which is increase productivity. Thus, speaking in these terms—for example, “productivity enhancements” or “productivity tools”—when referring to accommodations may assist in allaying misguided fears.

# What to Say to Employers & How to Say It

## Key RETAIN Messaging to Emphasize with Employers

Participants in the *Speaking Business* CoP dialogue agreed that employer messaging needs to lead with the *benefits* that RETAIN will offer their business. Examples of such messages include the following:

* When a valued employee experiences an injury or illness, **it makes good business sense** to work collaboratively with them and their health care provider on early stay-at-work/return-to-work (SAW/RTW) practices.
* The goal of RETAIN is to help your injured or ill worker(s) get better and back to work as soon as possible so that *they* maintain their personal and financial stability, and ***you* retain your valuable employees while saving your business time, money, and effort.**
* To do this, **RETAIN can serve as your trusted guide.** We’ll work directly with you and your employee on a customized RTW plan that will benefit the worker, and your business.
* **Benefits of participating** may include:
* Reduced workers’ compensation costs and lower insurance premiums.
* Increased efficiencies stemming from the use of workplace accommodations and productivity enhancements.
* Cost savings associated with talent retention versus having to hire a replacement.
  + On average, it can cost up to one-third of a new hire’s annual salary to replace an existing employee. Further, it can take up to 13 months for a new employee to become efficient at their job.
* Enhanced employee morale and a positive corporate image. Internal and external audiences will consider you a supportive, flexible, and inclusive employer.
* The satisfaction that comes from retaining your valuable employee(s) and helping them maintain financial and personal stability.
* Participation is **free of charge**.
* Employers of all sizes can participate in RETAIN, and **small businesses** may find the experience particularly valuable. After all, the smaller your staff, the more detrimental it can be when a valued employee needs to leave work, and many small businesses lack experience in SAW/RTW practices. RETAIN will be there to provide you with the education and guidance you need.
* Helping people with acquired illnesses or injuries get back to work typically involves **common sense strategies** that can benefit all workers. These include part-time hours, modified job duties, telecommuting, temporary re-assignment to another job, and reasonable accommodations to the workstation.
* Remember that **workplace accommodations are really just “productivity enhancements”** that help someone do their job better—and they aren’t often difficult to implement. According to the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), many workplace accommodations are low cost or no cost. JAN’s annual survey of employers consistently indicates that a high percentage (59%) of accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest have a typical cost of only $500.

## Communications and Outreach Tactics Targeting Employers

Participants in the CoP mentioned a number of materials and tactics that they are using, or plan to use, to educate and engage employer audiences. Examples cited by participants and presenters include:

* Materials development
  + Fact sheets
  + Brochures
  + Handbooks
  + Flyers
  + Infographics
  + Newsletters
  + Toolkits
  + Training modules
  + Websites
  + Videos
  + Success stories
* Email marketing
* Paid advertising
* Social media campaigns
* Speeches, presentations, and trainings

# Channels for Identifying and Reaching Employers

When it comes to recruiting employer partners and targeting them with key messaging about RETAIN, there are a number of business and workforce organizations that can serve as key channels. Some recommendations from CoP presenters include the following:

* **Business Intermediary Organizations**
* [Disability:IN affiliates](https://disabilityin.org/who-we-are/affiliates/)
* [National Business & Disability Council (NBDC)](https://www.viscardicenter.org/services/natl-business-disability-council/)
* [National Organization on Disability (NOD)](https://www.nod.org/services/council/)
* [State Chambers of Commerce](https://smallbusiness.findlaw.com/starting-a-business/state-guide-chambers-of-commerce.html) and Local Chambers of Commerce
* [Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) state chapters](https://www.shrm.org/membership/communities/chapters/pages/default.aspx)
* [State Workforce Development Boards](https://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/WorkforceDevelopment/find-workforce-development-boards.aspx)
* [Regional Industry Liaison Groups](http://www.nationalilg.org/)
* Local service organizations, such as Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions Clubs
* **State and Local Resources** 
  + [State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies](http://www.askearn.org/state-vocational-rehabilitation-agencies/): These agencies work with job seekers with disabilities to help them find job training and employment opportunities, so they are likely to be well connected with disability-inclusive employers in your area. Of note is the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation’s (CSAVR) [National Employment Team](https://www.csavr.org/the-net) (NET), a nationwide network of business consultants that serve as employers’ points of contact for VR agencies.
  + [American Job Centers](https://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/service-locator.aspx)(AJCs): These centers located in communities throughout the country share job postings with anyone looking for a job, including people with disabilities and veterans with disabilities. They also help local businesses recruit and hire qualified people with disabilities.
  + [Centers for Independent Living](https://www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory): These community-based nonprofit agencies are run for and by people with disabilities. They provide a variety of services, including job coaching, training, and information on disability in the workplace. ILCs can also provide referrals to support services available from local agencies and may have information on employers in your area who actively recruit people with disabilities.

# Additional Reading Recommended During the CoP

* “[Engaging Employers: A Guide for Disability and Workforce Development Service Providers](http://www.askearn.org/engaging-employers-a-guide-for-disability-and-workforce-development-service-providers/).” This resource from the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) examines how disability and workforce development service providers can build effective relationships with employers based on the “dual-customer approach.”
* “[Tackling Workplace Discrimination Against People with Disabilities](https://bit.ly/1zecqIK).” This policy brief developed by the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School draws on studies and focus group research conducted by Peter Cappelli, director of Wharton’s Center For Human Resources, on large companies with a demonstrated interest in hiring disabled workers. As discussed during the CoP, it breaks down how to think about employers’ experience with disability in terms of three categories: “Choir,” “Inclusive” and “Uninitiated.”
* "[Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage](https://accntu.re/2Kve7vE).” This Accenture report produced jointly with the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and Disability:IN offers research and data to support the “business case” for disability inclusion.