

ABILITY

Blue Cross CA
Health Care Reform
with Leslie Margolin

Bonner Paddock
Rock Hardened

EEOC in Court
Bad Boys Exposed

Greener Pastures
Exploring Ireland

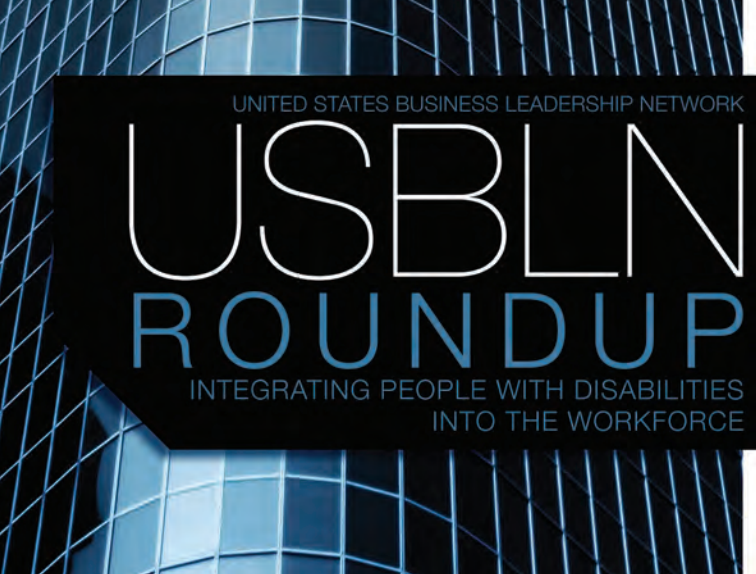
Twisted Mind
Artist Adam Lee

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surf therapy for autism



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ABILITY Magazine
VOLUME 2009
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Held at the Gaylord Convention Center in National Harbor, MD, and set against the backdrop of the Potomac River, the United States Business Leadership Network's (USBLN) 2009 conference convened with the theme "Connect the Dots." Sponsors of this year's conference included McDonald's, Walgreens, Merck and Starbucks—the last of which added a \$5 gift card and a packet of instant Starbucks coffee to each attendee's gift bag.

A host of new faces were invited to speak at this year's event, including Kathy Martinez, President Obama's Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), and Kareem Dale, a key White House advisor on disability policy. Dale holds the distinction of having the highest-ranking position a president has ever carved out for advancement of disability issues.

It would seem Dale and Martinez have their work cut out for them: a November 2008 report from ODEP found that only 19% of businesses surveyed reported hiring people with disabilities.

A national organization with 55 affiliates in more than 30 states, the USBLN uses a "business to business" approach by which its 40-plus corporate members work to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Despite the nation's weakened economy, most USBLN speakers agreed 2009 was a ripe time to bring more people with disabilities into the workforce.

Neil Romano, former assistant secretary of the Labor Department and current CEO of Creating Opportunities by Recognizing Abilities (CORA), explained that difficult times provide opportunities to redefine employment policies, particularly with respect to people with disabilities.

"Businesses care about profits, so you have to show them how you're going to make a difference to their bottom line," Romano said, emphasizing that many companies today base their views of employees with disabilities on old hiring models of charity and do-goodness. "It's not about hiring a few guys for the mailroom anymore," Romano said.

"What companies need to do," Romano asserted, "is understand that integrating people with disabilities into more productive roles in society is directly related to hiring, retention and promotion. Packaging, marketing and advertising for people with disabilities need also be considered," Romano said, "in ways that integrate, engage and involve all American business."

The current political discourse also worked its way into the forum, with Dale speaking on the topic of health care reform. Dale noted that the poverty level is still too high for people with disabilities, many of whom "cannot earn a true wage based on the parameters that are set up." Dale went on to explain that federal programs such as the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) could and should do more to help people with disabilities find employment.

"People with disabilities want to work," Dale said, "but the lack of health care has contributed in a great way to the high unemployment rate. In an effort to combat this," Dale added, "the White House's current health care reform proposal would allow people with disabilities and others to get access to affordable health care."

Other speakers used the conference to illustrate various successes their companies have had with employees who have disabilities. Randy Lewis, Walgreens' Senior Vice President of Distribution and Logistics, noted that 40% of the workforce at the retailer's highest-producing distribution center has some sort of disability. The center, which Lewis oversees in Anderson, SC, also boasts low employee turn-over and low accident rates.

"There's a sense of purpose and teamwork there that that don't exist at any other of Walgreens' many plants," Lewis said, noting that the company also has centers in Connecticut and Texas which are currently specifically seeking people with disabilities. "Many of these employees," Lewis said, "are recruited through vocational rehab agencies." The retailer's goal, according to Lewis, is to hire 1,000 people with disabilities by 2010 and 2,000 by 2018. At present, the Anderson facility has 670 employees with disabilities.

Roy Flora, group president of Microtel Inns & Suites, took the floor to explain how his company has been wooing—and wowing—its guests with disabilities for many years. The budget hotel chain offers three ADA-room designs: a single queen, double queen and a suite. Microtel rooms also include removable showerheads, roll-under sinks, and low-positioned peepholes in doors. For Little People—those who are 4'10" and under—Microtel provides Short Stature Accessibility Kits at every hotel. The kit includes items such as a stepstool with a handle, an ergonomic reach-grabber, door latch and closet rod adapters.

Travelers with disabilities have \$250 billion in discretionary income, according to the Society for Accessible

Travel and Hospitality, for which Microtel serves as a sponsor. "This is a huge, burgeoning market," Flora said. "We want to be the preferred hotel chain for people with disabilities."

The USBLN's event also included vendors and non-profits throughout much of the expo hall, many of which are dedicated to providing resources through which companies can find qualified employees with disabilities. AbiliCorp promoted its student career summits, while Hire Vets First provided pamphlets promoting the hiring of war veterans.

ABILITYJobs.com, the oldest and largest stand-alone resume bank for people with disabilities, was also present to share information about its database.

Two assistive technology consultancies, AbleData and Job Accommodation Network, were on-hand to discuss their technology database and consulting services—while *ABILITY Magazine* provided complimentary copies of its publication to all conference attendees.

The primary draw, however, was the line-up of speakers, who collectively held more than a dozen breakout sessions. These sessions included a forum on reaching people with disabilities through social media (led by Debra Ruh, CEO of TecAccess, a disability consultancy); an overview of the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work Program; a discussion of ways in which companies can integrate disability into their brands; and methods for inclusion of disability-owned businesses in supply chains.

The USBLN event also featured the announcement of a new program that will certify disability-owned business enterprises. The program, called DOBE, is the only national program with the goal of bringing more diverse small businesses into corporate supply chains. "In order to qualify for inclusion in DOBE, a disability-owned business must be at least 51% owned and operated by a person with a disability," said John Kemp, the USBLN's executive director.

The conference, which ran from September 15-18, had a few surprise entertainers as well. Josh Sundquist, a Paralympics skier turned inspirational speaker, tickled the crowd with his stories of life on one leg. Sundquist, who lost his leg to cancer as a teenager, addressed the advantages to finding humor in the face of adversity. The high-energy speaker amused the crowd with a story of how he successfully donned a pair of sweatpants and snuck a liter of soda in the "empty" pants leg in order to avoid paying for a cup of soda at the movie theater.

Not to be outdone, actor Robert David Hall topped off Thursday evening's events, relaying his tale of a car accident and how it gave him newfound purpose. Hall, who plays coroner Albert Robbins on the hit show *CSI*, unveiled the Campaign for Disability Employment, which was launched on September 17 by a consortium of organizations, including the USBLN and the American Association of People with Disabilities. The ambitious campaign includes a public service announcement which stars seven people with disabilities who implore businesses to hire them for their talents.

Though high unemployment rates for people with disabilities are no doubt a harsh reality, nothing could dampen the applause from the crowd at this year's USBLN gathering, nor quell the realization that hiring people with disabilities is an idea whose time has come. ■ **ABILITY**

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