



# Business Partnership Network NEWS

Volume 4, Number 1

Fall 2008

## Employers praise people with disabilities

Hiring people with disabilities is an asset, not a liability, business leaders said at an employment conference held recently in Columbia.

"It's the best thing you could ever do for your business," said John Rackus, general manager of Sodexo, which provides food service for the National Advocacy Center at the University of South Carolina.

Rackus was among several employers and employees who spoke at the conference titled "Helping South Carolina Business Grow—Profitability in Hiring People with disabilities."

He and a co-worker have hired more than 25 people with disabilities through a program called Work in Progress. Work in Progress collaborates with the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department and the S.C. Department of Mental Health.

"Our turnover was unbelievable—from 125 to 135 percent," he said. "Since we've had the group, only one or two have moved on. They do exactly what we need. They're very well trained and the job coaches work closely with them."

Rackus said the experience has made him look at people with disabilities differently.

"They're people working hard to make a dollar," he said. "They're not looking for a handout, they're putting their best foot forward."

Joe Willey, district manager for Walgreens in Columbia, said the drug chain's philosophy is to look



**Rackus**

beyond a physical or mental disability and bring about an employee's true potential.

"Six to 10 people we hire off the street don't make it because of a mismatch of talent," he said. "The VR (vocational rehabilitation) program does prescreening of skills and talents and the result is better fits for positions."

Willey said since Walgreens has been hiring people with disabilities,



**Willey**



**Thomas**

employee turnover has been reduced from 50 percent to 10 percent, saving a total of \$50,000 a year in training costs.

Leon Thomas came to the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department in 2003 after having a stroke in 2003.

"My attitude was shot," he said. "In fact, my attitude was more of a handicap than the disability."

Thomas said VR provided the spark that helped him turn his attitude around and become successfully employed.

"That's what life's all about," he said, "the ability to have a positive effect on the people around you."

Phillip Cobb, recruiting manager for Teleperformance, hired Thomas as a DSL business representative. The Columbia Teleperformance facility provides customer service for AT&T DSL customers.

Cobb said he looks for communication skills and "folks who are happy" when hiring because "you can't teach people to be nice."

Many of his employees are former VR clients because



**Cobb**

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# Welcome!

Welcome to our newest BPN members:

Anderson Hardwood Floors  
 ASCO Valve  
 Avery Dennison  
 Baldor Electric Company  
 City Market LLC Inc.  
 Competition Sales Inc.  
 DBW Fiber Corporation  
 Deeco Metals  
 Ebtron Inc.  
 Emcon Technologies  
 Fehrer Inc.  
 Fiber Source  
 Gexpro  
 Greater Lake City Chamber of  
 Commerce  
 Hill Construction  
 IHG-Irvin Hodson Group  
 Industrial Packaging Group  
 International Cotton LLC/  
 Logowear  
 ITW Angleboard  
 Kaydon Corporation  
 Little River Electric Cooperative  
 Palmetto Brick Co.  
 Perfection Hytest  
 Recyclogic  
 Select Staffing  
 Southeastern Wire  
 Webster University  
 ZF Commercial Suspension  
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 LLC



## Did you know?

- The benefits of your BPN membership can save you time and money.
- Members receive an invitation for a free employee training on understanding the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, supervising people with disabilities, and information on available tax credits available.
- Members are eligible for a complimentary Rehabilitation Technology assessment to assist in making your facility more accessible and possibly more productive.
- Members receive an invitation to the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Association's annual conference, which offers great training for your staff, networking with other employers, the latest in assistive technology information, special advertising available in the program, publicity in publications associated with the conference, and an up-close and personal look at the lives that have been changed by employers hiring people with disabilities.
- Annual membership dues are only \$25 per company. Call (803) 896-6668 and start enjoying BPN membership today!

## SCVRA conference dates announced

The S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Association will hold its annual conference March 1–3 at the Marriott Hotel in Columbia.

The association is for people who support the public vocational rehabilitation program, which focuses on services leading to competitive employment for people with disabilities.

Officers for the Business Partnership Network will be elected at the meeting. Anyone interested in becoming an officer or serving on the SCVRA Conference Committee, BPN Membership Committee or Event Planning Committee should call Brenda Williams at (803) 896-6668 or e-mail [dgraham@scvrd.state.sc.us](mailto:dgraham@scvrd.state.sc.us).

## Summit opens doors for people with disabilities

More than 250 leaders from businesses, non-profits, advocacy groups, academia, and federal, state and local agencies met in June for a summit on disability employment policy.

The summit, "Transforming the American Workplace: A 21st Century Vision," featured more than 30 speakers and presenters discussing current trends transforming the American workplace. It provided a

unique dialogue on how the trends can be leveraged to open doors of opportunity for people with disabilities.

For more information, go to [www.odepsummit.org](http://www.odepsummit.org).

# VR clients dispel disability stereotypes

Rick Rivers was skeptical four years ago the first time someone from the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department approached him about working together.

All the stereotypes about people with disabilities came to the surface and Rivers, plant manager at EBTRON Inc. in Loris, said "I didn't know what to think."

"Quality is my number one priority," he said, and he wasn't going to jeopardize that.

But Michael Johnson, an SCVRD career planning and employment specialist, persisted.

"He was very kind and respectful," Rivers said. "I trusted him, so I agreed to look at a couple of things."

EBTRON makes thermal dispersion airflow measurement products. Cables are inserted into the HVAC system to measure the airflow and the temperature to ensure healthy indoor air quality and pressurize the building and reduce humidity.

Rivers needed someone to make those cables at a reasonable price. He agreed to give clients at the SCVRD's Conway Work Training Center a chance and was pleasantly surprised.

In the last year, eight clients have participated in community-based

evaluations and on the job training at the plant.

With on-the-job training, "we can show them how we do it here and they can take it back to the training center," he said.

Rivers said he's hired three clients.

He said he's also been very impressed with his employees' acceptance of former clients.

One client came to work after his water had been shut off. He had used water from the toilet tank to shave that morning.

"My employees raised \$170 to get the water turned back on," he said. "It's really nice to see them reach out to somebody they



*A Conway VR client works on an EBTRON component*

hardly know."

Steve Suggs, an SCVRD production associate has taken over supervision of the contract and Rivers said he has built on what Johnson started.

"I get the quantity and quality I need and your clients get (the real-work experience) they need," he said.

## VR takes Pirelli tires to the races

Clients at SCVRD's Beaufort Work Training Center came to the rescue recently when local employer Bob Woodman of Bob Woodman Tires needed to apply the Pirelli racing tire logo to 982 racing tires by hand.

The tires were used in the Ferrari Challenge Series and the Porsche Club of America racing events. They only last about 200 miles under high-powered road racing conditions.

More than 10 clients worked on the contract and earned stipends totaling \$1600 over a 12-week

period.

A former VR client is working at the tire store balancing tires.



*A client at the Beaufort Work Training Center demonstrates how the Pirelli logo is applied to the tires.*

*Business Partnership Network News* is published by the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department, 1410 Boston Ave., P.O. Box 15, West Columbia, SC 29171-0015.

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# Opportunity blossoms into partnership

When an international auto parts company came to town last year, SCVRD staff members at the Lancaster Work Training Center saw an opportunity.

They invited officials from ZF Commercial Suspension Systems and Components, LLC, for a tour of the training center and roped off a vacant area that could be dedicated to the ZF contract.

It worked and the relationship has blossomed.

The company assembles front-end suspensions for trucks, buses and farm equipment. Clients at the center do inventory control

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*"It changed my perspective on hiring people with disabilities."*

*—Melissa Roberts,  
Human Resources,  
ZF Commercial Suspension  
Systems and Components*

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of imported supplies and reduce large quantities of parts into smaller batches to be used on the production line.

They also do sub-assembly of component parts, inspect products and remove rust from metal components.

Melissa Roberts, human resources generalist for the company, was introduced to VR several months ago.

"Initially, I just did not know what to expect," said Roberts, who had toured the center previously with another organization but wasn't quite clear about the benefits of a partnership.

An SCVRD business partner urged her to talk with Tina Stuber, business development specialist, and Darlene Jones, center manager, about the possible use of VR clients as temporary employees.

"I got to see first-hand what VR is already doing for us," Roberts said. "It changed my perspective on hiring people with disabilities."

Since the initial startup in March 2007, more than 151 VR clients have worked on the contract, gaining valuable work skills while the company benefits from additional floor space and quality work.

"We have had tremendous results from the work already being done there," Roberts said. "We are expanding that and expect to receive the same great results."

She added that VR clients are in line to fill the next temporary positions that come open at the company.

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## Conference

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they've "gone through something that has given them an appreciation of an opportunity," he said.

Participants at the conference also heard William H. Floyd III of the Nexsen Pruet law firm discuss employment-related amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act that will go into effect Jan. 1.



***A client at SCVRD's Lancaster Work Training Center removes rust from parts for the ZF Commercial Suspension Systems and Components contract.***



***A Lancaster client takes inventory of parts for the ZF contract.***

The conference was sponsored by SCVRD, the S.C. Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, the S.C. Employment Security Commission, the S.C. Developmental Disabilities Council, Office of the Governor, the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, the Center for Disability Resources and the S.C. Department of Health and Human Services.