

## Brief Report

# Lessons learned by a rehabilitation counselor in corporate America

James Emmett

*Integrated Behavioral Systems, www.integratedbehavioralsystems.com, APSE: The Network on Employment, www.apse.org*

*Tel.: +1 574 808 9779; E-mail: jemmett@integratedbehavioralsystems.com*

## 1. Introduction

Walgreens is one of the largest retail chains in America and a brand name that is recognized and trusted across the country. Under the leadership of Randy Lewis, Walgreens Senior Vice President of Distribution, the company has created a national disability outreach effort initially focused on recruiting and hiring team members from the disability community into Walgreens Distribution Centers ([www.walgreensoutreach.com](http://www.walgreensoutreach.com)). The model program for this initiative is the new Distribution Center in Anderson, South Carolina which has hired over 150 team members from the disability community since its opening in October, 2006. It was my honor to serve as the initial Disability Program Manager for Walgreens in 2005 and 2006. My full-time role was to assist the company in research, development, planning, creation, and management of the disability outreach. The purpose of this report is to share some of the lessons that I learned about Corporate America during my time at Walgreens and provide some insight on how the field of Vocational Rehabilitation can better work with and in corporations across the country.

## 2. Description of lessons learned

The following is a description of some of the major lessons that I learned as a Rehabilitation Counselor working full-time in Corporate America.

### 1. Respect the Corporate Culture:

During my first month at Walgreens, I was very anxious to share everything I had learned in my training as a Rehabilitation Counselor and how this information could positively impact Walgreens. Yet, what became clear to me was that I needed to learn about Walgreens and its culture before my ideas could be utilized effectively. Walgreens is one of the best companies in America and in my role it was critical for me to step back and learn about the company's culture so I could figure out disability related strategies that best fit their culture.

### 2. Learn the Operations:

On my second day as a full-time employee at Walgreens, I traveled to the Distribution Center in Ohio with someone who had worked in operations for over 20 years. I spent three days observing and learning about different areas and jobs in the Walgreens Distribution Center. I was simply amazed by the operational complexity of the Distribution Center and how each team member was so important to the flow of products through the building. This overview of the operations side of Distribution/Logistics at Walgreens provided me with a foundation to build my ideas. During my time at Walgreens, there was always something new to learn about the operations of the Distribution Centers and I was only able to scratch the surface in terms of detailed understanding. How-

ever, the key was to work hard to learn as much as possible about the operations in order to build job training, job accommodation, and natural support strategies that worked.

3. **80/20 Listening to Talking:**

The key to the first two strategies was falling back on the counseling skills that I had learned as a Rehabilitation Counselor, particularly my listening skills. Walgreens hires the best of the best – people who are leaders in their fields. It was important for me to do a lot of listening, as these individuals gave me insight on the human resource, operational, management, information technology, and engineering sides of the Distribution Centers. During my time at Walgreens, I found myself frequently utilizing core counseling skills such as listening, reflecting, encouraging, and observing [2]. These skills helped me be more effective in implementing successful strategies in an already very successful corporate culture.

4. **Step Up the Game:**

One thing that was very difficult for me to change was my “social service thinking mode” to the “business thinking mode”. Sometimes in social service, the tendency is to put things off and roll with the flow. We are busy in the social service world, but often put some things aside if we need to accomplish others. At Walgreens, I was surrounded by fast thinkers, fast talkers, and incredibly hard workers. Expectations were always set high and the Walgreens team was continuously pushing each other to “do it better” [1]. I found it critical to follow through and work hard to deliver on every deadline. In the “business thinking mode” – time is truly money and as a Rehabilitation Counselor it is important to remember to be in the “business thinking mode” when working with corporations.

5. **“Overpromising” Can Be a Deal Breaker:**

As a Rehabilitation Counselor working as an employer, I had a different vantage point of how the Vocational Rehabilitation system partners with companies. Numerous companies shared their bad experiences with job placement specialists in the Vocational Rehabilitation system who “overpromise and under deliver”. On certain occasions, I found this to be true with some of the community based organizations and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. Some broken promises included not helping with follow-up on needed support information as originally offered, re-

questing to provide training that never happened, and bringing less qualified job candidates for screening than originally promised. However, at Walgreens, we also found a set of partners from the Vocational Rehabilitation system who were straightforward, supportive, and followed through on promises. These are the partners that Walgreens wanted to work with and is still partnering with today.

6. **Rehabilitation Counselors Bring High Value:**

Often, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors devalue the services they bring to a corporation and highlight the fact that these services are “free” to companies. Yet, to Walgreens and to other corporations, “free” typically equates to low quality services with corporate management thinking there must be a reason that services are “free”. I believe that I brought tremendous value to the team at Walgreens because of my training as a Rehabilitation Counselor. I provided a perspective on issues across the Distribution/Logistics Division that was often unique because of my experience in the disability community and as a Rehabilitation Counselor. My knowledge on accessibility, universal design, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), job analysis, job accommodations, natural supports, and social communication training came into play on a variety of issues across the Walgreens Distribution/Logistics Division. I believe that as the Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling field progresses, more and more Rehabilitation Counselors will find their way to critical roles in Corporate

America as long as we continue to emphasize the unique nature of the services we bring to the table.

7. **Partnering With the Vocational Rehabilitation System Makes Good Business Sense:**

The bottom line truth is that partnering with Vocational Rehabilitation made good sense for Walgreens and it makes good sense for other corporations as well. Walgreens partnered with the local and state Vocational Rehabilitation offices as well as the local county boards on developmental disabilities in Anderson, South Carolina. One result of the partnership was development of the Walgreens Training Center that recruits and trains workers on core jobs in the Walgreens Distribution Center. Job seekers with disabilities benefit from this training center by receiving targeted, supported training preparing them to be excellent team members in the Distribution Center.

Walgreens benefits from the training center by receiving screened, qualified, and trained workers ready to be excellent team members. A second piece of the partnership is ongoing support, planning, and teaming that occurs for individuals across the recruiting, training, hiring, and job retention processes. As our field continues to cross more and more into Corporate America, there will be more creativity in terms of unique programs and projects that demonstrate bottom line business efficiency of partnering with Vocational Rehabilitation.

#### 8. **Building Trust is All Important:**

One common thread in the job development literature is that building trust with businesses is critical to long-term success. My experience at Walgreens dictates that this is absolutely true. One of my initial tasks at Walgreens was to gain the confidence and trust of the teams that I was supporting. I believe that all of us have biases and stigmas about the disability community. When working with companies I feel it is critical to build a trust level so any fears related to these biases and stigmas can be openly discussed and processed. This trust is not built after one conversation or one day. I worked hard at Walgreens to listen, ask questions, and learn the business so I could build trust. After a few months with the company, I believe I slowly gained this trust and that is when the true openness and problem solving began. Now the team at Walgreens has created a culture of inclusion encouraging questions and concerns.

#### 9. **Do Not Forget the Social Communication Skills:**

More and more research is demonstrating the importance of social and communication skills to the success of workers with disabilities. Walgreens differentiates the “hard skills” – the ability to do the job tasks from the “soft skills” – the ability to work successfully with others in the workplace. Walgreens proactively developed a social communication skills training program that job candidates can access in the Walgreens Training Center. This training program teaches skills and competencies necessary to be a successful Walgreens team member from a “soft skill” side. Deb Russell, Walgreens Manager Outreach & Employee Services, recently reiterated the importance of “soft skill” preparation and how it correlates with long-term success of team members.

#### 10. **Vocational Rehabilitation Strategies Are Universally Beneficial:**

It was amazing to me at Walgreens how the strategies we utilize for accessibility, accommodations, and natural supports can be utilized across the workplace. During preparation to open the Distribution Center in Anderson, South Carolina – the management team attended a one week long training at the University of North Carolina TEACCH Program ([www.teacch.com](http://www.teacch.com)). TEACCH is a program designed to help set the educational and work environment for success of individuals with disabilities. After the second day of training at TEACCH, Keith Scarbrough, Distribution Center Manager, commented that many of the TEACCH visual support strategies make sense for all team members, not just team members with disabilities. This has proven to be true in Walgreens and other corporate environments. Visual support strategies, social skill training, accessibility support, job analysis, job carving, job modification, structured interviews, behavioral observations – all of these concepts from the Vocational Rehabilitation world can have lasting impact in today’s workplace.

### 3. **Discussion and conclusion**

It is my perspective that a big part of the future of Vocational Rehabilitation will exist within corporations. Walgreens has just scratched the surface in terms of the potential benefits of partnering with Vocational Rehabilitation and the disability community. The disability initiative at Walgreens has begun to effect and will continue to impact store operations, customer relations, recruiting, training, marketing, diversity, worker’s compensation, information technology and community affairs. The potential of a Rehabilitation Counselor to positively impact the bottom line of a company is almost limitless. In my opinion, our skills and talents go way beyond hiring and accommodating – we can impact training, recruiting, diversity planning, supplier diversity projects, marketing, customer relations, workers’ compensation-return to work, service accessibility, web accessibility, incentive planning and community affairs. This not only holds true for large corporations like Walgreens, it also is true for small and mid-sized companies. Currently, I am working with Midway Moving & Storage – Illinois’ largest independent moving and storage company ([www.midwaymoving.com](http://www.midwaymoving.com)).

on a disability outreach project. This project focuses on job training, recruiting, and marketing within the disability community and is demonstrating the bottom line impact for a mid-sized company.

I believe the key for Rehabilitation Counselors is to remember a few important tips when building relationships with businesses:

1. Do not devalue the services that can be offered (do not hype up “free” even if your services are publicly supported).
2. Respect the specific Corporate Culture.
3. Take time to learn about the operational aspects of the company.
4. Build trust – don’t expect to have a trusting relationship after the first meeting.
5. Do a lot of listening.
6. Bring those other good counseling skills to the table – reflecting, encouraging, observing [2].
7. Do not overpromise – lean towards under promising and over delivering.
8. Step up your game with business people – always follow up and follow through.
9. Be creative and use your diverse skill set as a Rehab Counselor to customize ideas.
10. Provide specific examples of how disability outreach impact other companies (i.e. Walgreens).

One of the common themes about the strategies just listed is the need for time to successfully build business relationships. It can be difficult, in our quota based

world, to find the time to build these relationships. But, a few deeper business relationships will ultimately provide better outcomes than many surface relationships. Secondly, the ultimate business relationship is when a business hires a Rehabilitation Counselor to develop an internal disability unit or outreach project. As the Walgreens experience demonstrates, this initial investment will prove to have many positive returns and possibly impact the future of how that company does business.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to give thanks to Randy Lewis, Deb Russell, Keith Scarbrough, and the entire team at Walgreens. I want to thank Jerry Siegel, Martha Garibay, and the team at Midway Moving & Storage. I also wish to thank Bob Opperman and Rick Poole of the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department and Dale Thompson of the Anderson County Board on Developmental Disabilities.

### **References**

- [1] J. Collins, *Good to Great*: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: New York, 2001.
- [2] A. Ivey, *Intentional Interviewing And Counseling: Facilitating Client Development*, Brooks/Cole Publishing: Belmont, CA, 1988.