

Could YOU Get Reference Quotes From the Firms That Use YOUR Services?

By Larry Robbin

The highest compliment a businessperson can give an organization is to publicly state how impressed they are with the services they receive. Business people are careful about making these statements because their reputation goes with the organization they are supporting. Endorsement quotes are good marketing for their business if the other organization is a high-quality enterprise.

On the flip side, in order to receive these types of compliments, an organization – such as a supported employment agency – must perform at *exceptional* levels. Not *OK* services, not *good* or even *very good* services – they have to be *excellent* to trigger a public statement. Ask yourself: How many businesses that have hired some of your job-seeking clients would provide YOU with quotes about your services that YOU could use in your marketing materials?

Ask First

Ask your company contact for a quote(s) and for permission to use the quote(s) in the marketing materials you offer to businesses. The incentive is free publicity for their business. However, you may be surprised that the businessperson who said your services were “good,” now waffles at the idea of providing a quote. They may honestly not have the time. If this is the case, you might offer to write a draft they can approve.

Bear in mind, though, that the businessperson might say he/she will get back to you, but no follow-up takes place. Why not? Why wouldn't they want their name associated with yours? Not providing you with a quote equals some dissatisfaction with your services that is keeping you from being included in the “excellent” category.

What Went Wrong?

Why doesn't the business consider your supported employment agency exceptional? What went wrong? In addition to the reasons cited in the first article in this series, there is another possibility that is keeping your services from being thought of as “excellent.” That is: *How well is the person hired by the business performing on the job?* Supported employment professionals often gauge performance by the *work output* of the persons we place – but that is only *one* way an employer will evaluate them.

Those of us in our profession like to say that the individual is working in an integrated setting because non-disabled employees are present. But consider: Is *real* integration taking place, and at the levels experienced by employees *without* disabilities? A person with disabilities working alongside non-disabled co-workers may – or may not – be truly integrated into the workplace. The other employees may have a level of bonding that the worker with disabilities may not experience.

True Integration May Not Occur

A lack of integration can be due to co-workers' prejudice, fear, and ignorance about disabilities. Co-workers may relate well enough to the referral to get the work done, but is the individual being included in coffee breaks, lunches, or in after-work activities? *The referral may be integrated in performing the work, but segregated in social aspects of the job.*

Certainly, people with disabilities are not the only persons that experience this phenomenon. A lack of on-the-job integration is something that other minorities in workplaces may

undergo as well. Many persons with disabilities are pioneers in integrating workplaces, but it isn't easy to do.

In addition to co-worker attitudes, the disability itself can make integration difficult. Certain disabilities make it challenging for individuals to understand the dynamics involved in social interactions – while other disabilities may make even basic communication a challenge. Integration problems can also result from persons who are shy or who do not want to be part of a group.

The question is: *Is the supported employment agency addressing the issue of how employees with disabilities can overcome workplace-related social isolation – provided the worker with a disability wishes to do so?* The more integrated that people are, the happier they tend to be with their jobs as they experience the full support of their co-workers.

Fully integrated employees are also more valuable to the business, as seamless, profitable relationships are created. When layoffs occur, an integrated employee is often kept on, while others are let go. An integrated employee also gets mentored at a higher level than other employees, which can make them more profitable workers and position them for advancement.

The gist of the matter: *The road to integration does not end with someone getting a job in an integrated setting; there are many degrees of integration.*

Relating Integration to Services

How does integration relate to delivering services that businesses consider excellent enough that they'll be happy to supply you with reference quotes? Employers are quite aware of the subtle degrees of integration that take place in their businesses. They know which employees are fully integrated in the workplace team and which workers are on the periphery.

Because fully integrated employees are often the most profitable to a business – if an agency's referrals don't become fully integrated in the workplace on all levels, socially and productively, employers may be dissatisfied enough that the SE organization should NOT expect a quote-generating “excellent” rating. Put another way, an employer might be reluctant to recommend a resource that provides

them with employees that are on the periphery – but NOT at the heart of their workforce.

However, if your referrals *become fully integrated* employees, they will be seen as profit-makers – and your program will be considered an excellent resource of available workers, which in turn will lead to quotes about your services.

Supported employment professionals must be sure to ask about integration levels when they follow up with businesses. *How included does the individual feel? Are there areas in which he/she feels excluded?* It may or may not be appropriate to solicit this type of feedback directly from an employer and co-workers. However, you can always ask job coaches and significant others, such as family and friends. Listen and watch for clues about the depth of integration. People may be reluctant to talk about this matter, but if it isn't discussed it won't be improved.

Moreover, ask other employees with disabilities how *they* became more integrated where they work, and put their lessons into practice in your program. Create a benchmark chart that shows levels of integration so you can see what needs to be done to make progress.

In my experience, when this process is done well, it helps people with disabilities obtain new ways of working that foster integration and helps to overcome ignorance and prejudice. It cannot be overstated: *Improving integration leads to increased employee, co-worker, customer, and employer satisfaction – and ultimately, more profits.*

Summary

Supported employment agencies that put these areas of employer satisfaction into practice, will have services that deliver at an “excellent” level and become worthy of a quote. These quotes, in turn, become a powerful marketing tool because they represent businesspeople vouching for your services. This is much more meaningful to businesspeople than anything *you* can say because employers respect the opinions of others in the private sector more than any other voice. Make it your goal to increase the number of quotes you receive from business customers. That will tell you when your services are really excellent!

Larry Robbin will use his 45 years of disability program and business experience to close the gap between your organization and the private sector – to go from placement to partnership with the business community Contact Larry at larryrobbin@aol.com or phone (510) 834-8524.