Accessing Talent Through Partnerships: A Playbook
Introduction

To effectively build a pipeline of applicants with disabilities, employers can collaborate with a variety of organizations. While in the past such partnerships were often initiated by service providers, such as disability nonprofits and state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies, today more and more employers are taking the lead as part of their efforts to diversify their workforce and meet their talent needs.¹

Such efforts have taken shape in organizations of all sizes and in all industries, in both the private and public sectors. One example is CVS Health’s Abilities in Abundance program. This initiative, led by the company’s Workforce Initiatives team, involves collaborations with government agencies, community-based organizations, educational institutions, and others to build an inclusive talent pipeline prepared for successful employment based on CVS Health’s specific skills needs.

This playbook shares strategies CVS Health used to develop and launch the program so that other companies may replicate and adapt them. It also includes links to resources from the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) and other technical assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) that can assist organizations in meeting their disability inclusion goals.

Section 1: Getting Started

1.1 Aligning Efforts with Organizational Mission

1.2 By the Numbers

1.3 Building Relationships

Practices Checklist: Getting Started

Resources: Getting Started
1.1 Aligning Efforts with Organizational Mission

Central to CVS Health’s mission is a dedication to building healthy communities, which requires a workforce that represents the diverse customers it serves. As a result, the company invests in a number of recruitment, job training, and placement initiatives with partners around the country to:

- **Create** innovative workforce solutions and diverse talent pipelines.
- **Meet** business needs.
- **Improve** customer loyalty.
- **Gain** a competitive advantage over industry peers.
- **Break** the cycle of generational poverty in many communities the company serves.

These initiatives include partnerships focused on increasing the workforce inclusion of many underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities.

The first step in establishing a disability hiring initiative is to gain support from leadership. This is especially important for building a program that can be scaled across geographic regions and business lines. So, to start, CVS Health’s Workforce Initiatives and Strategic Diversity Management (WISDM) team successfully made the case to leadership that such an initiative would both help build a talent pipeline and deliver on the company’s commitment to a diverse workforce that reflects the communities it serves. WISDM also made the case that increasing disability inclusion enhances the corporate reputation of CVS Health as a leader in public-private collaboration and equitable workforce development.

The team then assessed the current state of disability representation in the CVS Health workforce and identified lines of business and/or specific roles that could serve as starting points for a new hiring initiative. The focus was on bridging workforce gaps and reducing workforce-related expenses, in alignment with two of CVS Health’s broader stated goals: 1) to create health and well-being within the communities it serves, and 2) to create a corporate culture that values diversity and inclusion.

These efforts became part of an enterprise-wide Workforce Initiatives team responsible for developing and managing strategic workforce projects across the nation in a creative and regionally responsive way.
1.2 By the Numbers

Through Workforce Initiatives, CVS Health has reported significant inclusive workforce development successes. The company has:

- Trained 13,000+ people and counting, including people with disabilities, in its Workforce Innovation and Talent Centers.
- Helped 120,000+ people receiving public assistance find employment.
- Sponsored 14,000+ apprenticeships.
- Experienced retention rates up to 30 percentage points higher than among its general workforce population.

From a financial standpoint, Workforce Initiatives’ efforts have resulted in significant cost reductions in personnel-related expenses such as training and turnover. Overall, by growing and pretraining talent to meet its specific skill needs, CVS Health ensures greater success and retention while meeting critical business needs.

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2 Workforce Initiatives: Building Partnerships for a Healthy Workforce (n.d.) CVS Health.
1.3 Building Relationships

Central to meeting CVS Health’s disability inclusion efforts are partnerships with service providers that can assist in sourcing candidates. Examples include the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and its National Employment Team (The NET) and the National Consortium of State-Operated Comprehensive Rehabilitation Centers.

As part of Abilities in Abundance, its disability-focused unit, the Workforce Initiatives team has also established relationships with more than 200 organizations across the country that provide services or education to people with disabilities. For this, the team looks for community partners that can support candidates both before and after an offer of employment. An effective collaboration includes:

- Establishing a shared vision of success and an innovative mindset.
- Collaborating to identify barriers to success, such as training and transportation needs, and to identify innovative solutions.
- Sharing resources to implement solutions and create new opportunities.
- Fostering relationships built on mutual trust and passion for the well-being of the community.
- Sharing a desire to celebrate successes together.
- Developing a plan for evaluation and sustainability of efforts.

These efforts have led to the construction of dozens of mock stores jointly operated with community organizations to provide training and the opening of eight Workforce Innovation and Talent Centers in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, with more currently in development. These centers offer direct, hands-on learning, support, and skill development provided by the Workforce Initiatives team or collaborating organizations. As a result, people are trained for specific jobs, using the company’s systems and processes, leading to a smooth transition to employment on day one.
PRACTICES CHECKLIST: Getting Started

Assess the current state of disability inclusion and representation within your workforce.

Create a proposal for “C-Suite” support and seek a leadership champion.

Identify needs within each line of business, individual unit(s), or specific functions that can be solved by diversifying the talent pipeline.

Identify potential relationships to explore mutually beneficial strategies and cost/resource-sharing possibilities.

RESOURCES: Getting Started

Lead the Way: Inclusive Business Culture
Learn how leaders can establish an inclusive business culture by communicating the goal of an inclusive workplace to all employees.

Expressing a Commitment to Disability Inclusion
Learn about effective strategies for communicating your organization's commitment to disability inclusion as part of an overall strategy to meet diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) goals.
## Section 2: Establishing Collaborations

| 2.1 | Gaining Internal Support |
| 2.2 | Expanding and Evaluating Collaborations |
| ![Checkmark] | Practices Checklist: Establishing Collaborations |
| ![File] | Resources: Establishing Collaborations |
2.1 Gaining Internal Support

Effective communication with not only external but also internal audiences was key to developing and launching Abilities in Abundance. Investment in preemployment training and targeted hiring initiatives requires the support of people who hold key roles within the organization, including human resources, recruiting personnel, and hiring managers. To gain that support, organizations need to proactively communicate potential benefits and gain buy-in from all staff who will play a role in the program’s success.

To the CVS Health Workforce Initiatives team, the benefits of the program were clear. Over time, as they gained data on its success, they shared them with internal audiences to demonstrate how it helped meet specific business goals, including:

- Reducing turnover in customer-facing roles.
- Reducing costs associated with recruiting and onboarding.
- Saving money through tax incentives.
- Providing a steady pipeline of trained and prescreened candidates.
- Improving workforce diversity.
- Improving candidates’ broader skills, resulting in promotion.

CVS Health has more than 300,000 employees in locations across the nation, so efforts to communicate about the program are ongoing and extensive. The Workforce Initiatives team engages in clear, consistent internal messaging about its purpose and its contributions to the company’s larger mission (e.g., by widening the candidate pool and helping managers meet workforce goals). Key communication strategies include internal and external webpages and highlighting the program’s successes through various channels, including those of community organizations involved in the program and general media.

Tips for communicating about disability hiring initiatives from the Workforce Initiatives team at CVS Health:

- Managers play a key role in the success of CVS Health’s Workforce Initiatives team. As a result, CVS Health:
  - Informs managers of the diverse, well-prepared, and prescreened candidates available from the program.
  - Reminds managers that CVS Health hiring decisions should always focus on candidates’ qualifications and skills.
  - Encourages hiring managers to ask, “How can this candidate contribute to our success as an organization?” with every candidate they interview.
To source candidates with disabilities, CVS Health has scaled up and diversified relationships nationwide, with an eye toward meeting specific talent needs. As these relationships were established, common considerations to discuss included:

- **Funding** and resources.
- Potential **transportation** needs of participants.
- Potential to provide **on-the-job support** and **training** if needed.
- **Assistance** identifying and implementing reasonable accommodations, including assistive technology, if needed.
- **Finding** candidates.

With these considerations in mind, the Workforce Initiatives team provided expertise on jobs and business imperatives at CVS Health, in turn facilitating preemployment training and on-the-job support based on actual workplace requirements. Abilities in Abundance also involved a network of relationships with partner organizations that operate nationwide. These relationships assist in bridging the gap between the worlds of business, rehabilitation, and training to make the process seamless for both candidates and employees.

Partnerships are a key part of the success of CVS Health’s Abilities in Abundance initiative. The following recommended practices can build and sustain successful partnerships.

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<th>Call to Action</th>
<th>Recommended Practice</th>
<th>In Action at CVS Health</th>
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<td><strong>Get Involved</strong></td>
<td>Learn about the systems, services, and resources already in place to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.</td>
<td>The Abilities in Abundance team members work with national, regional, and local organizations focused on disability and employment. They attend conferences, join workforce consortia, and offer their time and expertise as a resource.</td>
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<td>Invite Collaboration</td>
<td>Find collaborating organizations for all locations where candidates will be recruited and trained. Ensure each region has personnel with disability expertise who work with disability and workforce development organizations.</td>
<td>Abilities in Abundance supports the Workforce Initiatives team members in many of their U.S. markets. These staff members work with communities and build innovative collaborations nationally and locally that can be scaled and replicated. For example, personnel working with New Hampshire’s VR agency created special internships for VR clients.</td>
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<td>Evaluate “Fit”</td>
<td>Before working with an organization, ensure they have shared values and objectives.</td>
<td>Before starting a partnership, CVS Health evaluates all potential collaborators for shared purpose and value.</td>
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<td>Dedicate Resources</td>
<td>Dedicate resources to relationship development and expect that the partnership will take time to come to fruition.</td>
<td>CVS Health has been investing resources in hiring people with disabilities for more than 20 years. They have been partnering with entities such as CSAVR/The NET and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (the state’s VR agency) for more than a decade, in addition to establishing the training program at the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center, which took more than two years to develop and is still evolving.</td>
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<td>Co-Create Objectives</td>
<td>Ensure that collaborators can provide a diverse candidate pipeline, training, and/or supportive services. Potential collaborators will also have criteria for outcomes that they will need to meet. Negotiate to identify goals and set expectations.</td>
<td>CVS Health looks for organizations interested in staying involved throughout the employment lifecycle to support employee success. It considers retention and professional growth, not just hiring, to be important outcomes.</td>
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<td>Identify Gaps</td>
<td>Use strategic relationships to fill gaps in internal processes and increase capacity to implement hiring initiatives.</td>
<td>CVS Health provides hands-on and app-based learning processes for retail trainees, which leads to highly effective training. Training opportunities are offered in “nonlive” settings, which allows trainees to progress at their own pace, before entering a live working environment. Trainee participant surveys indicate this type of training greatly improves comfort level once on the job.</td>
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<td>Measure Progress</td>
<td>Create metrics and define success to evaluate effectiveness.</td>
<td>CVS Health monitors the number of participants who successfully complete a training, the applicant rate, and the number of applicants converted to hires, both within and outside CVS Health. It is interested in all skills gained and quality of life benefits experienced by trainees.</td>
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<td>Evaluate and Refine</td>
<td>Regularly evaluate outcomes and make changes as needed to ensure investments in partnerships are yielding the intended results.</td>
<td>The Abilities in Abundance team looks for opportunities to demonstrate the value of a positive business image in the community, resulting in improved customer loyalty and market share.</td>
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Accessing Talent Through Partnerships: A Playbook

Practice Spotlight:
CVS Health offers job coaches training from collaborating organizations to help them provide on-the-job assistance to some employees with disabilities. Before being asked to support new employees in a CVS Health establishment, job coaches receive instructions on the policies and procedures that will help them support the new employees more effectively. In this way, CVS Health helps ensure the employee can perform their best work from day one.

To maintain relationships with community organizations, CVS Health created the Abilities in Abundance Council. This internal group serves as a disability employment resource within the organization and works across departments to facilitate participation in disability hiring initiatives. Notably, the number of Workforce Initiatives team members has doubled in two years. Council members also serve as external ambassadors for disability initiatives at CVS Health, helping develop relationships with national, state, and local entities and providing information to external audiences. The Council is a unique approach to increasing capacity for workforce disability inclusion and representation.

The Workforce Initiatives team at CVS Health has formed a variety of collaborations to expand its capacity to make the program successful through effective accommodations or adaptations to systems and processes. For example, when working on solutions for effective training processes for preemployment program participants, the team realized that they lacked the internal capacity to create the digital platforms needed. As a result, they entered into an agreement with an external organization to develop that technology. Note, however, that not all employees with disabilities require supports or accommodations. For those who do, resources and expertise are available.

“My advice is, really tap into [partner] resources because they’re going to help you with those reasonable accommodations.”
— Senior Manager Duane Rohr, Workforce Initiatives

External Relationships
CVS Health collaborated with a private special education and rehabilitation company to develop a virtual platform described as a “job coach in your pocket.” Using the app, candidates set goals and input daily routines and tasks for both their work and personal lives. For example, they can use the app to store information about bus routes to get to work. People in support roles, such as family members, teachers, and job coaches, can also access the app to help set tasks, monitor progress, and communicate with other trainees. The platform is currently being used by trainees pursuing pharmacy technicians and customer care positions.
PRACTICES CHECKLIST: Establishing Collaborations

- **Identify** personnel who make hiring decisions and develop and implement a communications strategy that conveys the benefits of disability hiring initiatives.
- **Develop** resources and support systems for internal audiences.
- **Identify** existing challenges and explore ways external organizations may be able to provide solutions.
- **Develop** close relationships with collaborators in all locations where talent development occurs.
- **Customize** external relationships to meet business needs and create a pipeline of qualified candidates for multiple roles.

RESOURCES: Establishing Collaborations

**The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**
A technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, JAN is the leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations.

**Finding Candidates with Disabilities**
Learn how to access state and local service providers and other community-based organizations that can help source candidates with disabilities.

**Build the Pipeline: Outreach and Recruitment**
Learn more about building a sustainable talent pipeline in this short course.

**The Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT)**
A technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, PEAT promotes the employment, retention, and career advancement of people with disabilities through the development, adoption, and promotion of accessible technology.
Section 3: Creating an Inclusive Workforce Model

3.1 A Commitment to Corporate Culture

3.2 Innovation and Investment

Practices Checklist: Creating an Inclusive Workforce Model

Resources: Creating an Inclusive Workforce Model
3.1 A Commitment to Organizational Culture

Both the Workforce Initiatives team and the Abilities in Abundance Council play a key role in communicating the benefits of an inclusive workplace culture and how disability inclusion can drive results from a business perspective. In doing so, they have successfully made the connection between CVS Health’s overall mission and values and Abilities in Abundance. To help expand and connect Abilities in Abundance to larger organizational goals, they developed the "Four Pillars of Purpose," which explain how workforce diversity and inclusion initiatives result in business value.

- **Building** nontraditional talent pipelines by partnering with a network of organizations
- **Leveraging** strategic partnerships and opportunities at the national, state, and local levels to creatively meet business talent needs
- **Fostering** diversity and inclusion to build a workforce reflective of the customers, patients, and communities we serve
- **Delivering** monetary value through training- and hiring-related business incentives to fill our labor needs and reduce cost
DISABILITY IS DIVERSITY

Fostering diversity inclusion through workforce initiatives benefits both new and incumbent employees. For example, greater disability representation in the workforce has led to a better understanding of the importance of certain therapies and services for some autistic children, treatments that are now covered by the company’s benefit plan. This is an indicator of corporate culture that signals to prospective employees that CVS Health is an employer of choice for people with disabilities or with a disabled family member. Other positive indicators of a disability-inclusive culture at CVS Health include:

- **A centralized reasonable accommodation program:**
  A centralized accommodation program (CAP) offers a single office or location with the subject matter expertise necessary to assess, evaluate, and select effective and meaningful accommodations. A CAP may also consolidate funding streams for some or all accommodations at a level removed from the department or unit in which the employee requesting the accommodation is working.

- **Installation of augmentative communication devices:**
  CVS Health is installing Instant Language Assistant (ILA) devices capable of providing assistive communication in retail and training operations. These devices can make communication more effective for some employees with disabilities and enhance the customer experience.
3.2 Innovation and Investment

CVS Health has invested extensive resources into workforce initiatives, including the growth and expansion of Abilities in Abundance. Mock stores, continuing education and training, and inclusive Registered Apprenticeship programs are just some examples of how the company invests time, personnel, and funds into expanding its talent pipeline through nontraditional recruitment sources.

The company's Workforce Innovation and Talent Centers also create programs tailored to the specific needs of other organizational collaborators and the populations they serve. These customized programs incorporate education and on-the-job skills development while providing exposure to work in a retail environment. In addition, the Workforce Initiatives team is constantly growing and adding new areas of focus, like its recent engagement with faith-based organizations. In short, through Abilities in Abundance, CVS Health customizes and innovates training programs to meet its needs and those of the communities in which it operates.

Case Example:
The Tennessee Rehabilitation Center Project

Before joining CVS Health’s Workforce Initiatives team in 2017, Karen C. was an employee of the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC), an eight-organization consortium in the state charged with developing and improving workforce solutions and programs for youth with disabilities. At a consortium meeting, she met a member of the Workforce Initiatives team who was in attendance to talk about what CVS Health could offer. The two got to talking about developing a training program at TRC. What began as a program to train students for retail customer care positions has expanded over the last five years to include a Pharmacy Technician Certification program and a mock store training facility. Karen now manages CVS Health’s relationship with TRC and the ongoing expansion and development of the collaborative training programs.

Karen’s advice to other companies considering workforce programs like the one at TRC is to jump in: “Take the plunge...begin the process. Start looking for other collaborators. Start having the conversations. Start planning.”
PRACTICES
CHECKLIST:
Creating an Inclusive Workforce Model

- **Develop** relationships with consortia and associations (businesses and/or community agencies) working toward similar workforce development goals.
- **Leverage** state and regional initiatives by offering resources and partnerships.
- **Contribute** expertise about your industry to the development of training curricula.
- **Connect** workforce initiatives to the broader mission and corporate culture indicators as a further return on investment.
- **Communicate** the benefits of workforce initiatives to incumbent employees.
- **Utilize** best practices in accessibility and accommodation for the entire workforce.

RESOURCES:
Creating an Inclusive Workforce Model

- **EARN’s Inclusion@Work Framework**
  Explore strategies for creating disability-inclusive workplace cultures and meeting your organization’s DEIA goals.

- **Creating Inclusive Workplaces**
  Explore strategies for fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace culture.

- **Increasing Disability Inclusion: Centralized Accommodation Programs (CAP) as a Best Practice**
  Learn about a framework for designing a CAP, including key decisions involving the scope, placement and staffing, limitations, budgeting, communication and training, procurement, and accountability and tracking.
Section 4: The Formula for Success at CVS Health

4.1 Seven Steps to Success

4.2 Moving Beyond Pre-employment and Training

Practices Checklist: The Formula for Success at CVS Health

Resources: The Formula for Success at CVS Health
4.1 Seven Steps to Success

The Workforce Initiatives team at CVS Health has spent two decades developing and refining a process that allows them to innovate and bring to scale comprehensive preemployment initiatives that include recruitment, training, and advancement opportunities for people with disabilities. The team outlines a seven-step process that can help other organizations develop similar initiatives, whatever their size or industry:

Form internal partnerships

Explore external possibilities

Develop relationships

Build a pipeline

Refer and influence

Celebrate success

Measure results

1. **Form internal partnerships**: Find champions and allies, including leadership and those with decision-making authority, willing to invest time, energy, and resources. Abilities in Abundance relies on relationships with internal leaders and managers to understand workforce needs and the skills and talents required for roles so that managers understand the value employees with disabilities offer in terms of talent solutions. Success cannot be achieved without a mutual understanding of shared goals.

You can learn more about how companies have initiated and sustained disability diversity inclusion initiatives on EARN’s Learn About Successful Programs webpage.

2. **Explore external possibilities**: Become connected to communities where you conduct business. Learn about local needs for workforce development and connect with others working on similar objectives. Many organizations providing employment supports have a person dedicated to employer engagement. Abilities in Abundance seeks out the people in those roles to create a single point of contact. You can learn more about connecting with external groups on EARN's Resources for Finding Candidates with Disabilities webpage.
3 **Develop relationships**: Find organizations that can help fill gaps and contribute additional resources as needed. For example, local agencies provide *on-the-job coaching* support for those who may need it. The Workforce Initiatives team invests the time needed to “meet and bond” with potential collaborators so that they develop a deep understanding of CVS Health’s workforce needs, priorities, and culture.

4 **Build a pipeline**: Leverage relationships and connections with public and nonprofit organizations to create a source of candidate referrals in all locations where business operations occur. The Workforce Initiatives team creates relationships to develop pipelines where talent sources are lacking. This includes direct referral of qualified candidates with disabilities as well as collaborations to create workforce training and development programs.

5 **Refer and influence**: Expand initiatives internally and across lines of business by engaging in coordinated communication efforts and “word-of-mouth marketing” to leaders across the enterprise. The Workforce Initiatives team gets hiring managers involved in the development of programs and partnerships, in turn helping to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of initiatives.

6 **Celebrate success**: Celebrate successes big and small to generate interest and momentum around expanding workforce initiatives. Success stories are a big part of spreading the word about the accomplishments of Abilities in Abundance, especially through video testimonials.

7 **Measure results**: Create methods and processes to measure effort against results. Review those results regularly to learn what is working well and what is not and adjust as needed. Use outcome data to quantify return on investment and ensure sustainability.
4.2 Moving Beyond Pre-employment and Training

When it comes to disability inclusion, pre-employment training and hiring programs are only one piece of the puzzle. It is also important to think through strategies that improve the retention of employees with disabilities and offer the potential for career advancement. CVS Health considers retention and advancement of diverse employees to be critical to the type of corporate culture it wishes to cultivate and to communities they serve. Similar to all employees, candidates who find jobs through Abilities in Abundance are offered opportunities for professional development and advancement. Overall, promotion and advancement opportunities make up a large part of the company’s diversity and inclusion strategies, and they are regularly evaluated to ensure they are meeting workforce goals post-hire as well.

Success Story:
A Workforce Initiatives senior manager in Baltimore told the following story:
A woman came to the program with no work experience. She was not certain she would be able to work, and her family never thought full-time work would be a possibility for her. Through preemployment training and the support of community organizations, she became a cashier in one of CVS Health's retail locations. Within a few years, she was promoted twice and is now an operations manager with an established career at CVS Health.
PRACTICES CHECKLIST: The Formula for Success

Create your own “formula(s) for success” based on your organization’s unique business needs and strategies to overcome identified challenges.

Create a plan for regular internal and external communication highlighting program successes.

Plan for sustainability by including multiple internal and external collaborators.

Ensure opportunities for professional development and advancement of people with disabilities.

Establish measurements to evaluate achievement of short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

RESOURCES: The Formula for Success at CVS Health

Measure Success: Accountability & Self-Identification
Learn how effective implementation of DEIA initiatives is achieved by measuring outcomes.

Communicate: External & Internal Communication of Company Policies & Practices
Learn about internal and external strategies to effectively communicate your organization’s commitment to disability inclusion as a part of an overall strategy to meet DEIA goals.

Retention in Action: Case Studies
Learn about successful efforts to retain employees with disabilities from a wide range of organizations.
The Abilities in Abundance Program at CVS Health has become an integral aspect of the overall success of their Workforce Initiatives team, gaining ongoing internal support through consistent return on investment. By leveraging a nationwide network of relationships and partners, the company continues to increase the number of people with disabilities with careers at CVS Health while meeting critical business objectives.

To learn more about strategies you can use to develop a successful disability hiring initiative, visit AskEARN.org or email EARN@AskEARN.org.