

RI WINS (Workforce Investment & New Solutions) is the name utilized by the RI Cross Disability Coalition for our DD Transformation Grant in collaboration with the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) and Skills for RI's Future. This newsletter provides information on the status of implementation of the goal areas within the project and efforts to educate and provide support to people with disabilities, staff from community agencies, and RI employers on creating sustainable change for meaningful and inclusive lives for individuals with disabilities.

### ***INTERVIEW BETWEEN ERIKA & BRITTANY***

As a case study of a successful job candidate placement, this is an exemplary case. More importantly, that it reflects the collaboration and cooperation between two developmental disabilities agencies working to satisfy a demand-driven business's first employment request, underscores the value of workforce transformation. It also reflects typical frustrating, time-consuming challenges and how they can be tackled...with outstanding outcomes and solid partnerships.



Photo of Erika, Brian and Brittany.

Erika Middleton, who does all of the job development and placement at Avatar, had the initial contact with Bryant University-based AVI Food Systems, a company with mass hiring needs at the time. She considers her organization relatively small, and recognized she needed additional power to assist this employer, which was developing a program to integrate people who have disabilities into their work environment.

Since Erika already had a few clients who hadn't found what they were looking for, she worked with Skills for RI Future's program Ready Set Workability, connecting with Danna, Brittany and Christina Battista. Erika notified Brittany of her lead and need, inviting her to a meet and greet – a tour and discussion – to determine AVI's needs and how they could fulfill them together. Cafeteria-related jobs and tasks were on the menu for them and the two prospective candidates. Spoiler alert: both were hired, as a dishwasher and a utility worker in the cafeteria.

Brian – was Erika's primary contact at AVI. Brittany acknowledges the importance of this, noting that when a company reaches out directly to an agency, the process does not always lead to this immediate connection. "I was excited that the company wanted to begin inclusion hiring, for the chance to work with Erika, and to meet the candidates." Turns out that Joe was one of the Workability candidates as well as a participant. In the RI Developmental Disabilities Council's Small Business Start-up Series. Higher level job offerings were evolving, forming new workforce placement opportunities.

Partnerships and placements develop.

At the outset, Brian indicates he's willing to be flexible with the candidates – a reassuring start to this venture for Erika and Brittany. Also, they are a union, which poses barriers; they are also demand driven and short-staffed, which alerts them to the demand for their hands-on role to accomplish their goal

"We were willing to jump through hoops and down into rabbit holes to figure out how to make it happen" admits, Erika while acknowledging to support AVI's new HR staffer in any way possible. Brittany adds context that

“walking side by side with the employer in nurturing a relationship is typical – sometimes more is necessary.” With humility and a chuckle, she continues, “I think it’s wonderful we both have a strong voice and continue to be advocates in the process.”

Listing the myriad usual and unusual details of the process from asking questions about start dates to incessant texting, to beginning to work with the company’s newly hired employer contact, to continually advocating for the candidates, they admitted that this month-long process was lengthier than usual. Together, they echoed the importance of keeping the candidates motivated and informed. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of their partnership, noting that “the partnership benefited both the candidates and the employer.”

Transportation challenges, planning for the roundtrip worksite commute, are familiar to RI’s team of job developers. All in a day’s work; included in Brittany and Erika’s shared division of labor .

Joe – was hired by Brian, the AVI contact doubled as Joe’s supervisor.. According to Brian, “Joe... With a month of experience under his belt, Joe says...

Considered a new hire, Joe has a job coach with whom Erika check’s in weekly, as well as with the employer, making sure AVI is a satisfied customer.

Brian was already aware of the value of DEI hiring, and Brittany and Erika pointed out the workplace impact hiring Joe. “The workplace is a more positive environment.”

Joe’s placement continues to be success. A total of six candidates were placed as a result of this effort. There is no ceiling on the opportunities available at AVI Foods, or for the amount of continuing new placements that may evolve from this or similar partnerships evolving between agencies and prospective employers.

Beyond considering what strategies we can implement externally to further dispel myths about hiring people with disabilities, the transformation grant continues working internally to dispel concerns about agencies sharing employer connections. With the complexities of both, the working relationship between Erika’s and Brittany’s agencies is working as well as that of Joe and his employer. Highlighting the benefits of both strengthens the foundation to continue building both.



Photo of Joe in the workplace.

**For More Information on the Transformation Project and collaborative partners RI Cross Disability Coalition, RIDDC or Skills for RI’s Future contact:**

- **Tanja Blicher-Ucran, RI Cross Disability Coalition, [tanja@riddc.org](mailto:tanja@riddc.org)**
- **Sue Babin, RIDDC, [suebabin@riddc.org](mailto:suebabin@riddc.org)**
- **Danna Spencer, Skills for Rhode Island’s Future, [dspencer@skillsforri.com](mailto:dspencer@skillsforri.com)**