

## **Individuals with Disabilities Augment Marriott's Work Force**

**Jennifer J. Laabs**

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*Abstract: The Chicago Marriott hotel has been awarded a Rebuild America Challenge Grant by Personnel Journal in recognition of its efforts to provide meaningful training and employment to people with disabilities. The Chicago Marriott's ambitious on-the-job training program was launched in 1985 with the assistance of the International Assn. of Machinists Center for Administering Rehabilitation and Employment Services (IAM CARES). Since then, the Marriott hotel in Chicago, IL, has successfully trained 131 people with disabilities, of whom some 98 were subsequently employed by the Marriott hotel or by other local Chicago businesses. The beneficiaries of the Marriott/IAM CARES training program have mainly been high school students with various physical and mental disabilities. Most are members of minority groups and tend to have economically disadvantaged backgrounds.*

Everyone who works with Keenan Hodges says that he's one of those people who just makes you smile. No matter how your day's going, he'll hold your gaze until you smile back at him. Hodges works in the utility department at the downtown Chicago Marriott as a dishwasher. He isn't the fastest worker, nor is he what you might describe as his department's star player, yet Hodges is one of the most well-liked workers on his team, and for that matter, in the entire hotel. Although he sometimes forgets certain parts of his job such as how to separate the silverware from the dishes or how to load the dish trays into the giant dishwashing machine, he simply asks a co-worker, his job coach or his supervisor for a little help and gets right back to work.

Affectionately and respectfully, Hodges' supervisors describe him as a "true-to-life cartoon character." Some even say Hodges reminds them of the cartoon character Barney. "This guy is like 6-foot-something and almost 300 pounds," explains Angel Montanez, housekeeping manager at the Chicago Marriott. Without hesitation Montanez adds, "He's just lovable." Nearly everyone at the hotel is proud of what Hodges has accomplished in the seven months that he has worked there, and they hope that his tenure on the job will be a long and prosperous one. Although Hodges graduated from high school in 1991, this is his first job. As an individual who is educably mentally handicapped (an IQ between 70-80), has learning disabilities and a speech impairment, Hodges needed some career guidance and job training before he could find and secure full-time employment. Although somewhat shy, he was eager to learn, Hodges' chance to prove himself as a qualified worker came from his participation in a training program offered through the Chicago branch of IAM CARES (International Association of Machinists Center for Administering Rehabilitation and Employment Services) and the Chicago Marriott hotel. IAM CARES is an Upper Marlboro, Maryland-based international non-profit organization that teams up with employers to train and help to secure employment for people with disabilities. IAM CARES and the Chicago Marriott have partnered since 1985 to train individuals with disabilities locally. Since 1987, they have trained more than 131 individuals with disabilities. IAM CARES has found jobs for 98 of them either at the Marriott or at other local businesses.

As the partnership evolved, the following special-interest organizations also became active partners: the Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services and the Chicago Public Schools. Each of these partners has provided substantial contributions to this program and the target population that it serves.

In 1993, the Chicago Marriott and IAM CARES found yet another partner: Personnel Journal. The hotel and the Chicago branch of IAM CARES jointly applied for and received Personnel Journal's Rebuild America Challenge Grant, which was set up to assist new or existing programs that are helping to break down barriers to employment in the United States. (See "Personnel Journal Helps Rebuild America Through Its Challenge Grant," page 48, for a more detailed explanation of the grant.)

The Chicago Marriott and IAM CARES usually train 30 individuals at the hotel each year. Although most of them are high-school students, some are adults. Personnel Journal's grant funding came at the perfect time because IAM CARES had just lost federal funding from the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services to cover adult training, a segment of the population that IAM CARES usually can't work with because of the lack of funding. The bulk of the agency's money comes from the Department of Rehabilitation Services through Title I or Title II funds, which usually are designated for students, not adults. The organization also receives Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) funding through the Chicago Mayor's Office on Employment Training.

In the past year, the Personnel Journal Challenge Grant was used to set up a scholarship fund to pay for training wages (\$4.25 an hour) and IAM CARES workers' compensation costs for 30 program participants. Ten of those individuals, such as Hodges, are adults. The other 20 individuals were students in high school. "The Personnel Journal funds helped us to open the door to individuals whom we normally wouldn't have been able to serve," explains Janice Daniels, Chicago area project director for IAM CARES. IAM CARES' job training program, which is called the Transitional Employment Program (TEP), is aimed at helping individuals who have such disabilities as mental-function disabilities, physical disabilities, hearing impairments or learning disabilities.

The specific barriers to employment that TEP addresses are:

- \* Lack of job experience.
- \* Lack of job skills.
- \* Lack of job-seeking skills.
- \* High unemployment rates among people with disabilities.
- \* Dependency on public assistance.
- \* Business communities' attitudes toward workers with disabilities.

Ninety percent of the people who are trained through this program are minorities, such as Hodges, who's African American. In addition, most of them come from economically deprived communities or low-income families. Many of the individuals are illiterate and have only a future on public

assistance to look forward to. This year, 37% of the individuals in TEP have received some type of public aid such as Social Security or welfare.

Individuals with disabilities train on the job. Trainees must complete at least eight weeks in the program, although they usually spend approximately four to six months training on the job with help from supervisors, co-worker "job buddies," the HR staff and IAM CARES counselors. IAM CARES staff people have two desks in the human resources office. There is one full-time and two part-time staffers who all are essentially treated as part of the human resources team, even though their salaries are paid by IAM CARES funds. Their job is to work with Marriott supervisors and managers to help the trainees become acclimated to their jobs, to solve problems when they arise and to help ensure that trainees work within the rules and regulations of the hotel. The IAM CARES staff representatives continue to act as job coaches even after the trainees have been hired. Most of the program graduates go on to jobs paying \$5.50 or more per hour plus benefits.

About 28 Marriott supervisors and approximately 130 employees work alongside the TEP trainees. Hotel supervisors spend about one hour per trainee per week for each of the 12 training weeks that trainees are normally in the program.

Trainees typically work three hours a day, five days a week or a total of 15 hours a week. Most of the individuals in the program work in jobs that don't require contact with guests. Trainees are assigned laundry work or to other areas in which they function as a part of a team or group. Many of the graduates get jobs in the housekeeping department, but some trainees (such as work in convention services cleaning meeting rooms and others (such as Jessie Blakes) work in the associates' cafeteria. Some, like Cristina Ortiz, even work part time in the HR department doing light office work such as filing and filling out paperwork.

Once the trainees are hired, they go through the orientation process with other new hires. "It's a good opportunity for them to meet other people who work in the hotel," says Stacy Cataneo, HR supervisor for the Chicago Marriott. In this orientation, Cataneo also includes individuals from some other special programs in which the hotel is involved, such as the Earnshare program, which works with people who are on welfare. "I don't want any of them to feel as if they're being separated. I want them to feel like any other employee," Cataneo explains.

The orientation includes three phases: a mini-orientation in which they learn such basics as how to punch a time clock; a follow-up orientation that involves presentations on company history, benefits information and hotel procedures; and a departmental orientation in which they get information about their specific departments and get to meet their co-workers.

Supervisors, on the other hand, don't go through a formal orientation program that acquaints them with the trainees and their special needs. Rather, the IAM CARES staff representatives work with the supervisors one-on-one to provide whatever training they may need--both while the TEP individuals are in training and after they're hired.

The Chicago Marriott finds that its supervisors are very willing to work with the trainees, mostly because the human resources staff discusses with them the importance of training and hiring individuals with disabilities. "The supervisors may need a lot of explanation as to what the disability is, but once they understand it, it seems that they're really willing and able to work with them," says Cataneo. "I haven't seen any resistance that I can remember."

The Marriott benefits by employing people with disabilities. The Chicago Marriott and IAM CARES formed a partnership nine years ago because the hotel wanted to work with the city in helping disadvantaged youth who were physically or mentally challenged. Knowing that The Hudson Institute's Workforce 2000 predictions of worker shortages by the year 2000 would come to pass--probably sooner than later--the Marriott wanted to invest resources in developing alternative sources of employees.

For the Chicago Marriott, those grim predictions haven't yet surfaced. In an industry that typically charts 50% turnover a year, the hotel only experiences 32% turnover--which is considered unusually low for a hotel. In addition, the Marriott isn't at a loss to fill vacant positions--it receives 200 to 400 applications a week. "We're fortunate to have such a large pool of applicants from which to choose," says Cataneo.

If the hotel isn't at a loss for employees and has low turnover, why does it invest so much effort in maintaining a program to train and hire people with disabilities? "The benefit to us is that we hire a percentage of these kids and therefore give something back to the community," explains Bryon Peterson, director of HR at the Chicago Marriott. Peterson doesn't see his company's involvement in this program as a way to bolster the hotel's ADA compliance. "It obviously assists us in our compliance obligations, but we were way ahead of the curve in regard to ADA before it [was required]. ADA is a law," he says. "What we're doing is morally and ethically responsible."

Beyond the feel-good reasons for hiring these individuals, the hotel experiences some important business benefits including a lower average turnover rate among the graduates it hires from this program.

Other benefits that the Marriott has experienced as a result of this training program have been:

- \* Managers and supervisors develop their management skills, such as patience, listening, communication and training.
- \* The trainees tend to be hard workers and tend to contribute a lot to the departments in which they work.
- \* The trainees often are inspiring to their co-workers, which helps build better teams.
- \* The trainees help heighten everyone's awareness about individuals with disabilities and encourage employees to talk about other people they know who have disabilities.

"We've gotten some positive feedback from our fellow associates in housekeeping when they see these individuals assisting them in their work areas," says Montanez, who's responsible for running the IAM CARES program in the housekeeping department.

"We're providing them with the training ground and we're getting free labor while they're in training; that's one of the big benefits," says Peterson. In addition, he says that these workers tend to be highly dedicated to doing a good job.

Of the 10 adult students who received training wages under the Personnel Journal Challenge Grant, nine already have been hired. The one individual who didn't yet have a job at press time was still in a summer youth program through the Chicago mayor's office. Sixty percent of all the other people

whom the Marriott trained this year through the program have been hired.

Why is this program successful? The key words are partnership and commitment. Marriott's partnership with the IAM CARES staff is essential to the program's success, says Peterson. He explains that the IAM CARES staff's willingness to jump in and help the HR staff with any situation having to do with these workers facilitates the continuation of the program. "If we ever got into a situation where we began to have a lot of problems with a lot of kids and [IAM CARES] wasn't there to assist us, then our willingness to work with them and the program would diminish." He adds: "If your agenda is only your own, then what you're going to facilitate is failure. It's just not going to happen."

From IAM CARES' point of view, it's important to have buy-in from three levels for partnerships with employers to be successful: the CEO, the human resources staff and the direct supervisors. Daniels says that she doesn't always see this in other IAM CARES' partners. "The Marriott is unique because it has had such a positive experience as a corporation with individuals with disabilities. In addition, the CEO is very pro working with programs for people with disabilities." When all management levels are supportive, programs such as TEP can soar.

Working with individuals with disabilities can be challenging, but worthwhile. "It's a lot of work," says Peterson. "These kids have special needs." Montanez agrees. "Each student is unique. They all have their own special disabilities. But they're hard workers, and the program helps them develop a lot of skills such as coming to work on time and being properly dressed," he says. He explains that a lot of the students are reserved when they first come to work, and it's sometimes challenging to help them become more outgoing--a trait that's encouraged in the hotel's hospitality environment. For example, when Hodges started the training program in February, he was very shy. By the time he was hired only three months later, however, he was much more relaxed. How did this transformation occur? Some important people cared enough to spend time with him. Montanez rides the city bus to work with Hodges nearly every morning. He says when he first met Hodges in February, three weeks passed before Hodges finally spoke to him. "People ask me, How did you get that kid to talk? He never says anything." By going out of his way, by doing such things as stopping off at McDonald's with him before coming in to work, Montanez has helped Hodges become more comfortable with his co-workers. Now when people tease Hodges in fun, he even teases back.

"When Keenan first came to the Marriott, the HR director wasn't sure he'd be placeable," says Lynne Wallander, a job-placement specialist for the IAM CARES program who works part time at the Marriott. At first, Hodges was task-focused, but now he can see the bigger picture of his job. Hodges also had a hard time at first understanding why he had to work at all. He had little motivation because he had no work experience and was receiving Social Security income, explains Wallander. Once he started earning a paycheck, however, he became more motivated. And as he learned other ways to do his job faster, he also became more sure of himself. "He's just not a speed demon, but he has learned quite a few tricks to make himself a better employee," says Wallander.

Trainees' initial job assignments don't always work out, however. For example, Hodges' first job at the hotel was in the associates' cafe. "We had to move him out of there because he was eating all the food," explains David Nelson, director of services. Hodges' next assignment in the utility department

has worked out much better.

There are other challenges. Peterson tells a story about one trainee who wanted to buy a car. As a member of the credit union, the trainee had filled out a cash request for \$1 million. "I had to sit down with him and say Marcus, you don't have \$1 million, and anyway, the car doesn't cost that much.' Marcus said, Then loan me \$100,'" explains Peterson. "Their concept of time and money in many cases is the greatest challenge."

Sometimes, accommodations need to be made. For example, a bell-station job was modified for a trainee who has a mental disability. Instead of helping people with their luggage, his job is to polish all the bell carts. Says Montanez: "He does a bang-up job." This individual also had a problem understanding the time-clock system, so the IAM CARES staff intervened to help him with that for a period of time until he could learn how to do it himself. In addition, the Marriott modified a room-service job and a housekeeping position so that the individuals could perform those jobs at 100%. One individual who was placed in a convention-services position needed a digital watch so that he would know when to move from task to task because he found it difficult to read a traditional watch.

Communicating the reason for progressive discipline procedures also can be a challenge with some of the program participants. "They don't always understand why they're in trouble, and you have to explain to them why you're disciplining them and why you're giving them a written warning," says Peterson. In general, the program's administrators say that it's important to spend a little extra time going over the basics. Montanez adds that you often need to use your listening and communication skills to make sure that the message is getting across.

Although working with individuals such as the ones in TEP can be difficult in some ways, the key is to recognize abilities, not disabilities. "People have a tendency to look at their limitations," says Daniels of IAM CARES. "We're not going to put them in an area in which they're going to fail because they can't accomplish a task. But we're going to look at what they can do and work on their capabilities and functional skills and build on that so that they can be as independent as possible."

One reluctance that Daniels says employers have is the extra workers' compensation coverage to cover trainees. IAM CARES solves this problem by covering the trainees under its workers' comp coverage until they complete the training period.

In addition, Daniels says that some people have a negative mind-set about working with individuals with disabilities. The reality is there are never any sure bets with anyone you hire--including people with disabilities--but that doesn't mean you exclude them from your recruitment list for that reason.

"Working with these individuals is definitely a challenge sometimes," says Dennis Gavagan, executive chef at the Chicago Marriott and manager of the utility department in which Hodges works. But, as he points out, the level of difficulty is all in your perception and your attitude. "I just think that we all have an obligation to one another. No matter what the mental capacity or color or race, if we're going to make it, we've all got to make it together. If people aren't willing to help out the Keenans in the world, then, in my opinion, there's something wrong with them."

Rather than looking at the challenge as a negative, Gavagan says he enjoys working with people whom other employers might not be as willing to help. He's clearly impressed with Hodges. "When I first met him, he told me, I don't know anything, but if you teach me, I'll work hard, and I won't be late." Gavagan adds: "I wish I could find 10 people off the street who'd work like that. You don't find that in the work ethic in America anymore."

Maybe most of America isn't looking in the right places. People with disabilities need employers to give them the chance to prove that they can be just as employable as anyone else. According to a survey published in December 1993 by the U.S. Bureau of the Census on people with disabilities, 52% of individuals with disabilities between the ages of 21 and 64 in the United States are unemployed. Clearly, something stands in their way.

The benefits of working to people such as Keenan Hodges are getting vacation pay, life insurance and health and dental benefits. And although Wallander says that Hodges admits he doesn't quite understand what all of that means, he knows that he has a paycheck, friends and most of all, a future.

The benefit to Marriott of employing people such as Hodges is having long-term, reliable workers. "I can see Keenan staying in [the utility] department for at least three to four years before he even thinks about moving into another department," says IAM CARES' Wallander. "I think he'll probably be working at the hotel for the rest of his life."