



**BIG SIGN SYNDROME:  
*THE JOB DEVELOPER'S SMALL BUSINESS ADVANTAGE***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Consider Klements Lane in Florence, Montana, where Cary lives. Florence has about 1,000 residents and we live outside the town center on a two mile long road with 24 mailboxes. On this road are at least 11 families supported by their small businesses. None of these enterprises is identified by a sign. Now, this circumstance is certainly a ringing endorsement for the power of business enterprise in rural areas, but more than that, it should be a source of wonder and optimism for Employment Specialists and Job Developers everywhere. Small business in the U.S. creates more jobs than big industry, and of the estimated 20 million businesses in this country, only 14,000 have more than 500 employees. So, where are the jobs? Evidently, they are in these companies scattered throughout the urban, suburban, and rural communities of America.

**THE BIG BANG**

As job developers, we always reveled in the accomplishment of finding jobs in large corporations. Both of us have worked with the huge companies that mean multiple placements once an “in” is nurtured with the Vice President for Human Resources. It is true that these companies, including Wal-Mart, McDonalds, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Citicorp, Home Depot, and others mean good jobs for people. It also means significant time and effort cracking the hiring code, it often means facing 200 applicants for each job, and it also means that changes in shift managers or department heads, something all too common in big business, can signal a change in corporate culture on the local store or factory level that leads to folks with significant disabilities losing their jobs or suffering reduced hours and opportunities. Still, the seductiveness of landing a dozen jobs scattered throughout a company with just one good shot, the Big Bang, is too hard for most of us to resist. And who doesn't want a few Fortune 500 companies on their resume?

Experience teaches us that working with big companies can yield significant payoffs for people with disabilities. In the early 1990s in Colorado, Dave and our team at the Center for Technical Assistance and Training (CTAT), along with the state VR agency, and the late Rick Douglas from the U.S. Department of Labor, established the prototype for what would become the Business Leadership Network (BLN). This group of employers was less an educational group than the BLNs of today. Instead, they were actively involved in meeting job seekers, using their personal and professional networks, and creating employment up and down their supplier and customer chains. With Dave taking the lead, these members of the BLN, many from very large corporations, helped find work for about 50 people with significant disabilities in one year. Interestingly, the small business

members were just as active as the others, but the complications in creating employment were significantly reduced. Sometimes in seeking the Big Bang of a corporate account, job developers may be creating more work than necessary.

## **THE PROBLEM**

Looking for jobs in big companies makes sense. Cultivating relationships with HR people is one important aspect of identifying opportunities for employment that often result in fringe benefits and long term employment tenure. But, it is just one part of the equation.

Driving down “the strip” in any community reveals all the same box stores. The home improvement company, the department store, the discount store, the fast food giants. And while these employers are happy to employ people with disabilities, they can also be the toughest to break into. Big companies have standardized approaches; their job descriptions are developed far away at corporate headquarters by HR people and labor attorneys; and when they advertise positions available, 200 applicants show up for the same job opening. The competitiveness of this job market, the sluggishness of the corporate office to approve a local job carve, and the dead-end nature of ubiquitous part-time positions must be a consideration for job seekers and developers alike.

In a recent job development seminar, Cary was reminded by over 40 Employment Specialists working in a community of 6 million people, that HR staff complain regularly that someone from a human services agency is always knocking on their door. These developers suffer from Big Sign Syndrome. That is, they are the ones driving the town’s commercial strip, pulling into the lot of every corporate chain store, and seeking ready-made jobs. Over the course of a year, every agency visits every store. Of course, the small businesses, many hidden from view and requiring a networking effort to crack open, remain beyond the view of these “job cruisers,” they often have no set application method, they hire based on word-of-mouth, and a written job description can be a rarity.

## **THE SMALL BUSINESS FIX**

Getting off Main Street may be the most obvious fix for Big Sign Syndrome. But, getting onto Elm Street sometimes requires a network. Those are easy enough to develop of course, and involve at least a few of these items:

1. Using a Board of Directors member to get a lunch or an informational interview with small business owners they know who might have employment opportunities related to the interests of a job seeker;
2. Joining a Service Club (the Lions, Rotary, the Chamber) and getting to know the diversity of business and industry in the local community;
3. Completing a relationship map with others in the agency to identify staff family and friends who own or work for local businesses;
4. Completing a relationship map with families and consumers to identify in which local companies they spend their money for goods and services, and what family

- members either own businesses themselves or can serve as the entrée into businesses they frequent or work for;
5. Identifying the suppliers of the many goods and services the rehabilitation agency buys and enlisting them as employers or as connectors to other potential employers in their networks.

Having identified smaller employers who may fit the employment needs of specific consumers is just one step in curing Big Sign Syndrome though. Because many small businesses are under-capitalized and surviving on limited profit margins, a job creation approach is often required to create jobs or intrigue employers. In fact, breaking the cycle of entry level employment for people with disabilities generally mandates a creative re-thinking of positions and opportunities. The typical scenario for people with significant disabilities is part-time, minimum wage jobs for a lifetime. One successful approach we've used for years now is Resource Ownership. This approach recognizes that small business could sell more goods, better satisfy customers, or increase market share by adding a person with particular talents or technology. For instance, a baker we worked with recently heard customers complaining that they could not buy an espresso to go with their fresh Danish. The baker simply couldn't afford a \$4000 espresso-maker. But, a young lady itching to go to work in a coffee shop, through a Customized Employment project in Georgia and some Vocational Rehabilitation dollars, was able to purchase the machine and create a new position within the company. This mutually beneficial approach helped a struggling entrepreneur and created a career track based on an individual's work preferences. And, happy customers mean more business, which means higher wages all around.

In this case, the espresso machine is the same lever that a college degree or a welding certificate represents for other job seekers. Having exploitable resources, whether it be brain-power or a color Xerox machine that boosts customer satisfaction at the local copy shop, is critical to creating jobs a few rungs up the career ladder from entry-level. Resource Ownership is simply the concept of acquiring materials, equipment, or skills that an employer uses to make a profit. For instance, many people spend \$50,000 or more on a college degree, and that degree is a symbol of exploitable resources. Employers reason that they can profit from a graduate's intellect so people with degrees get hired. In essence, the graduate gives the employer that degree in trade for wages. The same occurs when a truck driver who owns a tractor-trailer applies for a hauling job. Without the trucking equipment, the trucker is possibly forced to face unemployment, or a less satisfactory, lower paying trucking job in which the employer has to buy the equipment. The point is that people have to have exploitable resources to get a good job, and by putting the means of production in the hands of people with disabilities, it makes them more employable.

IBM and Boeing can afford their own equipment, and negotiating these job creations in companies of this size will likely end in a bureaucratic tangle of policy and regulation. Small business is the perfect place for job creation strategies such as this, however, because the job developer and job seeker are likely dealing with the owner or manager, there are few, if any, layers of approval to be navigated, and management is less likely to

change and reverse previous hiring decisions. A small business owner can also see immediate results in the bottom-line by adding valuable products or services, and employers still tell us that they enjoy creating jobs for people. Giving back to the community by employing one's neighbors is one of the joys of owning a business.

#### Conclusion

This article is limited in scope, but does point out that with literally millions of small businesses across the country, no job developer should ever run out of employer prospects for any sort of job seeker's dreams. Driving down Klements Lane, no outsider would ever guess that so many opportunities for job creation exist. There are thousands of miles of country roads, inner-city avenues, and suburban cul-de-sacs that hold a potential job match. Get off the strip and start looking for the small-sign/no-sign shops that fuel this American economy.

Cary and Dave are the authors of the book [Making Self Employment Work for People with Disabilities](#) (2003). For more information or to arrange training contact Cary at [cgriffin@griffinhammis.com](mailto:cgriffin@griffinhammis.com) or Dave at [dhammis@griffinhammis.com](mailto:dhammis@griffinhammis.com). More information can be found at [www.griffinhammis.com](http://www.griffinhammis.com)