



EMERGING PROFESSIONALS

NIB'S NEW TRAINING PROGRAM HELPS ASSOCIATED AGENCIES PAVE A TALENT DEVELOPMENT PATHWAY FOR EMPLOYEES.

BY SHARON HARRIGAN

Developing business and leadership skills is essential to NIB's mission of enhancing opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind. Launched in 2003, the Business Leaders Program has provided training and work experiences to more than 8,000 people who are blind or visually impaired to help them advance in their careers. The program, which until recently consisted of five tracks – the Fellowship for Leadership Development, Business Management Training, Leaders at All Levels, Business Basics and Effective Supervision – added a new track, Emerging Professionals, for 2017.

Emerging Professionals prepares high-potential employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies who are blind for upward mobility using learning and development strategies from several Business Leaders programs – the hands-on work experience of the Fellowship, the formal training of Effective Supervision and the distance learning offered through Business Basics – while participants remain at their agencies, in their current jobs. During the eight to 12-month program, employees develop new skills through on-the-job training, job shadowing, coaching, and independent learning, and take on new responsibilities.

The desire for an agency-based talent development pathway using in-house, hands-on training had been percolating at several agencies for a while, but development was hampered

by a lack of time and resources. At NIB, Business Leaders Program Director Karen Pal had the same idea, but didn't know of an agency with the time and resources to devote to developing and piloting a program. So when Mark Plutschak, human resource (HR) director at Outlook Nebraska Inc. (ONI), called Pal to pitch the idea, she was all-in.

“We [at NIB] thought it was a great idea because it would help agencies attract and retain employees and would help us all achieve our missions – to improve the lives of people who are blind or visually impaired,” says Pal. “We welcomed the opportunity to collaborate and make the program a reality.”

The program is customized based on each participant's skillset and developmental interests, and the timeline is flexible, allowing agencies to respond to unanticipated events. NIB provides various types of support, helping HR professionals gain leadership buy-in, clarifying roles and responsibilities, setting up enrollment and program launch, identifying appropriate workplace experiences and providing learning opportunities. Agencies carry out the program, which requires a high level of involvement by HR staff, the employees' managers, and other supervisors throughout the organization.

The first pilot program launched at ONI in the spring of 2014. By fall of that year, two other agencies – The Lighthouse for

the Blind in St. Louis and Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – rolled out pilot programs of their own. After evaluating the success of the pilots, NIB added Emerging Professionals as the sixth track in the Business Leaders program.

Piloting the Pilot

The required level of agency involvement didn't deter ONI's executive team from jumping on board. "We truly try to live our mission here at ONI – to help people who are blind or visually impaired reach their dreams, their career goals," says Plutschak.

ONI used a multi-step application process: After first communicating the program, Plutschak invited anyone interested in learning more to meet with him individually. Of 13 employees who showed interest, six ultimately submitted applications, and one applicant – Johnny Botsford, then an entry-level machine operator – was selected as the program's first participant.

Botsford's supervisors at ONI had identified him as a high-potential employee when he told them of his desire to continue to learn, grow and move up at the agency. His drive and business background made him a perfect choice to pilot the program – Botsford opened a successful business selling protein shakes and healthy snacks at a gym on a nearby Air Force Base when he was just 18, and ran it for five years.

Although his business was successful, Botsford lacked the experience needed to grow it into something more. "Plus, I had been steadily losing my eyesight since I was 18, so I thought it was time to get a steady job and benefits," says Botsford. He landed a job at ONI, where his commitment and work ethic led the agency to name him employee of the year in 2014.

Botsford entered Emerging Professionals with an interest in becoming a trainer and increasing his confidence in communicating with people in a professional capacity. He learned to run the machines in his division, shadowed supervisors throughout ONI to learn about their work, and took NIB-provided courses in communications, email and voicemail.

"The experience helped me see the big picture of what ONI does and why," says Botsford. "I gained so much insight about what people do across the organization, and I learned how to interact with them in a professional manner. It was a great experience." Shortly after completing the program, Botsford was promoted to machine operator III, a position with responsibilities that include training employees on all of the shop machines.

Leaving a Comfort Zone

HR Director Karen Nelson already had an employee in mind

"I gained so much insight about what people do across the organization."

– Johnny Botsford



▲ At Outlook Nebraska in Omaha, Emerging Professionals helped Johnny Botsford develop a deeper understanding of what the agency does and why.



▲ Botsford's increased self-confidence and improved communication skills help him train employees.



Basing the training program at NIB associated agencies will allow more employees to participate.

▲ Emerging Professionals helped Mike Edwards become more comfortable initiating communication with supervisors and department heads at The Lighthouse for the Blind in St. Louis.

when the Lighthouse for the Blind in St. Louis agreed to pilot the program. Mike Edwards, then a production coordinator, “had been with us for several years, and we knew we had to get him out of his comfort zone,” says Nelson. “The Emerging Professionals program helped do just that.”

Before coming to the Lighthouse, Edwards worked as a pre-assembly aircraft inspector. Diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at 37, the disease caused his vision to deteriorate to the point that he could no longer perform the job. “They didn’t want me inspecting aircraft for safety anymore,” jokes Edwards. “Imagine that.” Neither the inspector position nor his production position at the Lighthouse required a great deal of professional communication with others, a skill Edwards wanted to improve.

To help get Edwards out of his comfort zone, the program required that he schedule meetings with department heads, introduce himself and schedule times to shadow them. “I wanted to become more comfortable initiating communication to supervisors. This program certainly helped me with that,” says Edwards. The final project in the program showcased his accomplishments: Edwards

spoke at a quarterly all-employee meeting about Emerging Professionals and what he had learned. “I was in tears that day, seeing how much Mike had grown through this program,” says Nelson.

For Edwards, the program was incredibly rewarding. “Coming to work every day during the program was eye opening, especially getting the chance to learn about all aspects of the Lighthouse,” he says. “It was definitely confidence building. Now I know I can handle anything.” And as for that comfort zone, Edwards – promoted to senior coordinator at the Lighthouse – says “Let’s just put it this way: I’m not content yet. There’s always more to learn.”

Keeping it Local

Rob Buettner, Beyond Vision’s senior director of relationships and business services, selected call center representative Mary LaPointe to participate in its Emerging Professionals pilot program. LaPointe, who has been legally blind since birth, ran her own home child care business for twelve years.


“That experience gave me good negotiating, daily planning, communication and management skills,” explains LaPointe.

“But my work was focused on children, not adults. I wanted to learn about the different learning and communication styles of the people I work with, and how my communication style affects them.”

Emerging Professionals was invaluable, says LaPointe. “I’m a somewhat strong willed, outspoken person. The program helped me learn how to be a better listener, how to compromise and be a team player, and how to give employees constructive feedback. And I loved the fact that I could do it all without having to travel. I wouldn’t have been able to do it otherwise.” As a result of the program, LaPointe has taken on more responsibility and was promoted to team leader in the agency’s call center.


It’s the Mission

Achieving buy-in for such an intensive program might seem daunting, but senior leaders at agencies piloting the program are some of its biggest supporters.

“This program meets the mission of NIB and our associated agencies,” explains Pal. “As the nation’s largest employment resource for people who are blind or visually impaired, we all want to provide education and training opportunities that develop the skills for upwardly mobile professional careers, whether inside or outside NIB agencies. Programs like Emerging Professionals help us fulfill that mission.” 

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 Team Leader Mary LaPointe, shown here with Customer Service Representative Deb Wenzel, says Emerging Professionals improved her listening skills and her ability to provide constructive feedback.

Fueling Career Options



Since 2003, NIB’s Business Leaders Program has been helping employees who are blind expand employment opportunities by providing training programs that cover everything from entry-level business skills to graduate-level management courses taught by faculty from nationally recognized business schools. The Emerging Professionals program joins five existing tracks:

- **Business Basics**

Produced in partnership with the Hadley School for the Blind, this online course covers general business concepts, business writing and communications, spreadsheets and web-based research.

- **Leaders at all Levels**

On-site training for staff and management that focuses on team building, leadership, communications and other fundamentals that enhance workplace effectiveness and morale.

- **Effective Supervision**

A combination of self-study and three in-person classroom sessions designed to develop supervisory abilities and prepare employees for increasing levels of responsibility.

- **Business Management Training**

An intensive curriculum taught by graduate-level faculty that builds business acumen with classes in general management, finance, production, HR management, and marketing and communications.

- **Fellowship for Leadership Development**

A 16-month program that combines business-focused, on-the-job experience with professional development activities designed to prepare participants for professional managerial positions.