

# **Engaging the Private Sector: Strategies for Achieving Better Employment Outcomes Transcript**

JOHN C. WALSH: Welcome to Engaging the Private Sector-- Strategies for Better Employment Outcomes. In this training session, we're going to explore ways to up your game in interacting with private sector businesses to create greater career opportunities for persons with disabilities. In this training, we're going to focus on you understanding the pain points for businesses, and how state VR agencies can be the solutions for those areas.

We're going to explore the role of identity with interacting with the business community, and why it's important to be aware of how identity plays a role in personal interactions. We're also going to look at why it's important to understand how strength-based approaches that focus on linking the talent of VR participants to business needs of employers are really going to make a difference for not only our customers, who are persons with disabilities, but our customers that are the business community.

We also hope to provide you with some concrete action steps to get started on improving business relations that lead to better employment outcomes for VR participants. All right. I also want to acknowledge that the contents of this presentation were developed from support from the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation, or CITVR, which is funded via grant through the US Department of Education, the Rehabilitation Services Administration. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the US Department of Education. And no official endorsement should be inferred.

So, our presenters today are myself, John Walsh. I serve as the project director for the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation located at the George Washington University. And joining me today is Gary Horton, Founder and President of Vanward Consulting Services, LLC.

So let me tell you a little bit about Gary. Gary Horton's career spans over 40 years in the information technology space, spanning several industry areas, including automotive, manufacturing logistics, accounting, and insurance. He is now the president of Vanward Consulting. Since birth, Gary had low vision. And in 2016, he became blind.

After navigating the vocational rehabilitation process and spending time with individuals that are blind or low vision, he observed an opportunity, leveraging his experience as a continuous improvement and compliance consultant, coupled with his staffing successes, he developed the Lean in! program. Through these efforts, he endeavors to encourage blind and low vision individuals to dream big, and to offer private sector employers insight into the efficacy of a valuable, untapped resource.

We are fortunate to have Gary's insights as an entrepreneur, who understands the inner workings within Corporate America. Gary is going to share with us his perspectives to provide additional strategies for successfully engaging with the businesses in your communities, with the ultimate goal to less increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your professional background, and how it impacted your current work that you do through the Lean In! program.

GARY E. HORTON: Oh, OK. That's great. Thank you for having me, John. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. Here's the thing. I have a 40 year career starting at General Motors and including my own entrepreneurial staffing and management consulting firm in the '90s. I was a traveling consultant focused on energy in the 2000s, up until the time that I lost my vision.

I would suggest that, and this is true for all individuals, everything that you do in your work life, everything that you do will contribute to everything that you're going to do. So what I would suggest is that, at a very young age, I decided that I would gain as much knowledge about as many things as possible, because I was always concerned about the threat, the possibility, the eventuality of losing my vision totally. It drove me my entire life.

I have used all my experiences as a consultant, ISO and QS-9000 quality auditor, my IT and technology background, I used all of those things to develop the Lean In! program for high school and college students, because I felt there was a deficiency of exemplars, mentors, and other individuals that could guide the way for those people with a so-called disability, such as myself.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yeah, Gary. I mean, having successful adult mentors with disabilities to work with students and youth to take your real life, real lived experiences and share that with youth is just such a valuable experience for students and youth to have. Wouldn't you agree?

GARY E. HORTON: I would agree. I would suggest to you the following-- when I was 11 years old, the doctors told my mom and I that I would lose my vision completely before I reached age 60. Pow! It's like a punch in the bread basket to an 11-year-old.

I fell into a fairly deep depression at that time. Not until I reached high school that I began to get the beginnings of the idea that, listen, in my life, in the early '70s, there were two options when you were blind-- Stevie Wonder and homeless. Stevie Wonder, homeless. That focuses the mind.

So, when I achieved my high school, a magnet school here in Detroit called Cass Tech, it opened up everything for me. I felt like I was in a team of people similar to me-- geeky, thick glasses, skinny, violin case, and book bag. I met a whole bunch of people like that at a magnet school. And that was the beginning of the importance of identity. And being successful. That I, if no one would employ me, I would employ myself.

I had to go out there and learn. I had to run faster, jump higher, see further-- visually, mentally-- of what I could accomplish. So I focused all of my energy on achieving success, learning at every stage. I did a deep dive. Like kids do video games today, I was doing employment in 1973. That was my only objective.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yeah. So, you talked about a couple of things. You're finding your cohort group. Individuals that you felt you had a connection with, that had similar interests to you, that understood that there were possibilities for you. Because, as you had mentioned, in the '70s, perceptions, societal kind of perceptions around what an individual who is blind could do were limiting, right?

And oftentimes, what society projects we absorb. And then we start believing some of those things. And that could be just a killer, right? If you start believing those things.

GARY E. HORTON: Done. That is so on point. As I say, I went to-- this is very important-- I went to the toughest middle school in the entire city of Detroit in 1970. It was literally two blocks from Ground Zero of the '67 riots in Detroit. Not a very friendly environment.

When I got into that magnet school, and I walked into that school, and I saw 4,000 students that are all focused on achieving success, and you got to play, you got support, you got elevation when you got straight A's, not when you threw the pass in the big football game. That's the high school I went to.

That's where the identity piece comes in. There's lots of fellow travelers that I found. Fast forward 40 years from that point when I lost my vision. What happened is people began to drift away from me-- friends, colleagues, companies. I became and felt very isolated, but I hearkened back to what happened at that high school.

I aggressively, assertively went out to seek fellow travelers to understand the blind community, to understand myself and what I was going through, to apply the same rules that I have done my entire career. But it started in high school-- that mindset of resilience when you are faced with an obstacle. What do you do to surmount it?

I figured there's four or five things that are repeatable that you can always do-- visualize, analyze and assess, plan, execute, repeat. Those five steps will handle everything in your life, at least for this man.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yes. And taking your lived experiences, right, taking those lived experiences, knows what have been successful to you. Finding those fellow travelers in whatever stage of life you are. Boy, you got to find those fellow travelers, because they give you some tips.

GARY E. HORTON: That's exactly right.

JOHN C. WALSH: Further along in the journey, right?

GARY E. HORTON: I think you will find if you seek them out, they'll be seeking you out. To me, natural mentorship relationships-- and I've had many of them over the course of my career-- they happen because a person is seeking knowledge and another person is hoping to teach, and is open with sharing that knowledge.

And that happens every day, but what drives it, what facilitates it are those connective tissue of things that are the same between you and an individual, whether it's race, or gender, or so-called disability, height, interest, all these things play a role. Identity is defined in many, many, many, many ways.

JOHN C. WALSH: So, Gary, I'm so glad that you're willing to do this training with us because, based on all your live experiences, we now want to talk about how we can apply that to the work that occurs in vocational rehabilitation agencies. So, I really like the way you had characterized the interplay between services provided by VR agencies to assist individuals to gain the skills and the knowledge to prepare for a career, and the external supports that are needed to achieve and maintain gainful employment, and to really embark on a career pathway.

I love the way you said, the inside game and the outside game. So let's talk a little bit about the inside game, outside game, and why it's so important for our listeners today to understand the distinctions, and why they must also work in tandem for our customers to be successful.

GARY E. HORTON: Excellent. I came up with the term inside game, outside game based upon my own experience in engaging vocational rehabilitation. I lost my vision. I'm in my 50s now. And I'm thinking, OK, what comes next? And as I say, I have my plan-- visualize and assess. So, pursuing that approach made me take a real look at what was happening.

I felt like there are a bag of skills that one possesses at any given point in your life. Some of them are technical skills. Some of them are soft skills. Some of them is historical knowledge. Some of them is imagination and vision. All of it has value. Now, for me, in that assessment, I was thinking to myself, well, how can I continue to be effective as a professional?

Well, first, I needed to get some things accomplished. One, how does a man that is blind engage in the world? How do I use my cane? How do I eat? How do I dress? I mean, I look pretty good today, but you have to learn those skills.

I like to call that the inside game. It's what vocational rehabilitation, state organizations are very, very good at across this entire country. Helping me understand how to navigate my kitchen, in my basement, in my garage, in work, in traveling, using technology, using this computer I'm using right now, these are all skills that I needed to learn.

I recognize that there was a gap and I put a lot of focus on learning those skills. It also is that adjustment. How do I adjust from being a sighted individual to a blind individual? That, not so hard because I've been doing that transition from age 11.

That being said, then I wanted to deter my attention to the outside game. Because independence doesn't happen without employment unless you're rich. I'm not rich. So, I needed to figure out how I was going to be employed. Having learned those inside game skills, how do I then convert that translated cash it in to real employment outcomes? Well, I feel that is what the outside game is.

And I will share with you that I did not feel, as a professional has worked in recruiting and placement and business as long as I have, that I believe that is where the state organizations might be lacking. And that was the light bulb that went on for me personally, as an entrepreneur, that there's an opportunity to fill that gap.

So I think the most important thing that happens in vocational rehabilitation is the candidate, is the VR customer being employed. Because employment equals independence. And that's what we're all seeking.

JOHN C. WALSH: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, as you had mentioned, I think very well, Gary, that all of those items you talked about of transitioning from someone with low vision to no vision, that there was a lot of blindness skills you had to learn along the way. And the VR agency provided that. And I'm sure you found fellow travelers too that were blind, that were also supporting you along the way and providing you with tips, suggestions on how you could better interact in this question.

GARY E. HORTON: I have not historically been a joiner, but I did pursue some organizations and other individuals. I have a group of African-American gentlemen I meet with every month. And we just sit around a lunch table and we just talk about our navigation through this process. The ages are as low as young as late 30s and as old as me in my mid 60s. And I have found that to be significantly helpful.

Listen, in any engagement, whether you have a disability or you don't have a disability, it's always nice to have a group of individuals that are fellow travelers, people that you trust, people that trust you, and people that can provide you with guidance, insight, and truth.

JOHN C. WALSH: So let's expand a little bit on the outside game, because I think this is really important. And I thought when I heard your message at the CSAVR Fall Conference, that this was an important message for us to hear in the VR community. Because I know, ultimately, our gold standard is getting people launched on a career pathway, and making sure that the supports are not only there, I'm going to use your vernacular for the inside game, but also on the outside game. So let's talk about what that outside game really looks like.

GARY E. HORTON: OK, here's what I would say. As I say, there's always an assessment of what your skills are and the things that you want to do. The skills that are required are the following. And this is true whether you have a disability or whether you do not have a disability. I operate under this assumption. Everybody, everybody, all God's children got something. With me, it's vision. With someone else, it might be height. Who knows?

But we all have something that we consider a weakness, but we really can turn into a strength. So, for me, the outside game happens with a group of individuals that are with you, a group that you belong to, a group of fellow travelers, a group of individuals that are your-- I would call them trusted advisors-- you need that in any career search. I don't care who you are.

You need confidence through experiences. Let me drill down a little bit on that one. One of the most important factors when you're in the room in an interview is your confidence, your ability from work that you have achieved, experiences that you have had, that you can communicate, articulate to individuals what you can do confidently. It goes a long way to putting you in the winner's circle in a job search and in an interview.

Your professional network-- people that will tell other people about you is the number one factor that guarantees a person to get a face-to-face interview. So again, the people that you know and associate with that will say things about you. The confidence that you yourself develop, and I mean real confidence from things that you have achieved, is the most important thing that you can do within that room when you get the interview.

Now, if you add your analytical skills and technical skills and being able to identify job requirements, you're halfway there. Once you have a vision of what it is that you want to do, then you can assess what your skill sets are as it relates to that thing you want to do. And whatever that delta is, that's your plan. Focus on getting it. Focus on developing those skills.

Now, armed with those skills, you're ready to execute. I believe if you follow those steps you will be successful. They're easy to say, harder to do, particularly if you have a disability. But what I would also suggest is that that confidence comes from trying, and failing, and trying, and failing, and refining.

It didn't happen immediately. There's a lot of failure that had to happen for my success. But the resilience is that I know I've had low vision. I've been behind the eight ball. I've lost my vision and I've come back. I thought I was going to not be as good as Excel or Project Management Workbench or any of the other tools that I use, but I focus on developing those skills. And that's all encompassed in me, in the individual.

The counselor was a great partner in that he gave me what I needed. But I had to know what to ask for. So marrying that outside and inside game is critical to being ready to be a real employable individual. And that is true for people that are 18 and 80.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yes. Now Gary, I want to drill down a little bit more, because you said something that I'm pretty sure they may not teach in graduate programs and rehabilitation counselors. The whole business-to-business networking, about creating your networking. And I used to find this as a counselor too. If I had a successful interaction with a business owner, and they say, man, I'd recommend John's agency, because I had a good interaction with them. That's golden.

If one business person to another business person says, yeah, they actually do what they say they're going to do. But I recognized, as a master's level counselor, that I did not have all the skills to interact with business. And frankly, I had to get additional training experiences. As you said, dealing with discomfort failure to know that certain things were not successful and other things were.

One of the things we always talk about as counselors are meeting people where they are. But are we doing that with businesses? So, there's a question in there somewhere, Gary, but-- [LAUGHS]

GARY E. HORTON: Let me say the following. Yes, I've been an entrepreneur. I've had to stand in rooms. And I've had to convince companies to buy my services, which is largely buying me. I have this saying, and it was coined by Mitt Romney during his campaign. He says, companies are people. He was right. Companies aren't these big monolithic things, entities. They're a collection of individuals. If you can connect with the individual, you connect with the company.

Let me give you a couple of examples. We talked briefly about identity, how we identify ourselves, how we see ourselves, and how we want other people to see us, right? Companies have an identity. The identity are the people that represent those companies. If I am calling on the company for whatever it might be, including employment, I'm going to be looking for those areas of sameness, you might say.

Those things that connect us. Again, could be gender, could be race, could be religion, could be any host of other things. The fact that I like to dress nicely, it could be that. When you are able to connect with an individual on a personal level, and you begin to understand what they're about, what their pain points are, what drives them, that's how you can forge a relationship.

And that relationship will pay dividends. My life has proven it. From the time that I lost my vision in 2016, got my vocational rehabilitation and Social Security, to employment again, was about 90 days. It was 90 days because I was hyper-focused on gaining the skills. And I called upon the people that I had worked with over 40 years, that understood me and my essence, and that the vision didn't matter to them. It wasn't even a conversation because of what I had done in the past.

Every work experience that an individual has, every single one, including those that work for states, are used in that tapestry and leveraged in your business situation. So if I'm a counselor inside of the state organization, part of my activity has to be engaging. It has to be being outside the office and meeting these companies, understanding what they are, understanding their identity, if you will, in the individuals that are making the decisions.

And to the extent that you begin to understand how these companies operate, you then know how to use their language. In other words, I love Mrs. Horton, and I met her almost 45 years ago, and I didn't do it by not listening to her.

[LAUGHTER]

That is the one time Gary Horton would learn to shut up and listen. I'm sorry.

JOHN C. WALSH: And that is one of the skills that counselors are trained on, right? Empathic listening is reflecting back to folks what they heard, and to meet people where they are, understand their needs. And I think your message, Gary, is, boy, we've got to just do a better job in understanding what the pain points of employers. And how we're the solution.

GARY E. HORTON: I would say the following. I would say if you have your large employers in whatever your area might be in any state it is, you need to understand those industries. It's hard to bump into anybody in Detroit that doesn't understand automotive manufacturing, for instance. There's a nomenclature. There's a lexicon that's employed. They understand how the money is made, how the union engages.

This is what I'm saying. The major employers-- I am an ISO and QS-9000 consultant, which means you have to be able to dissect a company and understand its customers and understand its suppliers. On that customer side, you need to-- the customer here in this context is the private sector companies, that is the customer of VR.

If you're going to engage them in a conversation, you need to understand where they are having pain. What type of employees are they looking for? Where have they had problems with employees before? Do the people that are being submitted have the requisite skills to do the actual jobs that are required?

If you are helping General Motors make money, they will hire you. OK, it's that simple. If you can demonstrate that you have those skills, they will hire you. And if you place the focus on that, when you engage them, of understanding of that dynamic, I think you will become more successful in your engagement with those organizations.

JOHN C. WALSH: So, one of the primary audiences for our trainings that we produce at the Center for Innovative Training in VR are VR counselors, the predominant group of folks that access these trainings. And we've got the question up there on the slide. Why is this important for VR counselors to know? Why is it important?

Now, we know there's some statistics. And you and I, Gary, have talked about this. And it's based on research. Persons with disabilities still have high rates of unemployment and underemployment. There's flat wage growth for folks with disabilities. How about those missed opportunities to launch on a career pathway that is out there now? We know it's out there.

So, Gary, why else would you say it's important for our VR counselors to become more knowledgeable about the outside game and upskill themselves to be able to do it effectively?

GARY E. HORTON: I've spoken-- over the last several months, I've spoken to multiple states across this country. And here's what I have learned and have confirmed-- that it is sometimes difficult to engage companies that you do not fully understand.

So, the option is-- I talk to a lot of counselors, they are trained a certain way. They're social work professionals. They're very good. They're very caring. But understanding the inner workings of a corporation is sometimes daunting.

Here's what I would say-- the VR counselor is the center of the universe in this space. They have access to the students. And they can have access to their employers. They suggest what needs to happen in the inside game. And can either execute or facilitate those things that are part of the outside game.

What I would suggest is that what counselors can do, if they want to be the agents, they have to get outside of the offices and engage these students. Because as I said before, the companies rather, as I said before, nothing happens in independence without employment. Nothing. So we have all these individuals that have low vision or blind, have disabilities. They have degrees. They are anxious to work. And we have a low unemployment rate. And we have companies screaming for new employees.

What's going on? Why does that not work? I would say there's two pieces. Piece number one is the individuals that are seeking the jobs. And are they fully prepared to do so in the jobs that are being offered? And B, do the companies understand the value of said individuals? And do they have trusted partners? And I would say, anecdotally, that if a VR professional engages an organization and they start off by saying, let's talk about how you can comply to the ADA, your date has stopped listening.

You're not going to get a second date. There's not going to desert after dinner.

JOHN C. WALSH: It's just-- it's listen politely and watching the clock, right?

GARY E. HORTON: Have a nice date. So I think there's probably some I would say fear. And time is a factor as well. No question. And I think what happens is when-- like Corporate America, if you can't actually execute these things themselves, then you seek individuals that can. They exist. Anybody that's had a recruiting background, a sales and marketing background, they may not have a degree in social work or psychology, but they have a degree in how to engage businesses and understand what their pain points are.

They partner with counselors can be an effective tool to engaging these companies. And goodness, if you have a state organization and a person with a disability that happens to be candid, and confident, and competent, just imagine how many doors that opens for your other VR clients. That's what needs to happen. To me, that's the most effective way.

I'm a business guy. If don't come up with the right solutions, guess what? I'm out of business. You have to do things that are effective. I have found in the time that I've been in this space that I've been very effective with the young people, and some of my older clients as well, by being honest with them, connecting because we are connecting on our joint blindness, and engaging companies to say, you don't know what blindness is.

This is what blindness is. It's not the blindness, it's what's in here and in here. And when we produce individuals that understand those two things, they will be hired.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yes. Absolutely. Now, another piece, because you talked about students and the Lean In! program. And you and I have had these conversations as well about-- sometimes our students come to us, and they have a very limited perspective of the types of careers they want to go into. And some of them may not even have a perspective as a person with a disability going into the private sector.

They say, well, maybe I should do something like my counselor does. My counselor is blind or visually impaired, maybe that's something I want to do. Although, I have a real business mind. But I just don't see that as. So how do we make sure that students and youth kind of get a broader perspective of what the world of work really is?

GARY E. HORTON: Oh man. OK, this is a great one. Two things. One, I would separate high school, pre-S age students from college age pre-S students, because I believe the following. If you're trying to talk to an audience of 13-year-olds and 21-year-olds, you're not talking to either of them. That's number one.

What I'm focused on in high school and what I'm focused on in college are different. In high school, this is the focus-- visualization, visualization, visualization, job exploration, job exploration, job exploration, and make it exciting, and competitive, and compelling, and fun. The more that a young person knows that is what is out there, the more that they'll expand their dreams.

Like I said, I was a big thick glasses-wearing kid from inner city Detroit that had nine brothers and sisters. Didn't leave my neighborhood too far until I started in high school. What was important for me was the book-- reading, being in other places, reading about other people. High school students, particularly those that might be isolated in those situations, as a person with a disability, must get access and exposure to other individuals like them, that are successful, like they can be, that are doing things all across the spectrum-- IT logistics, health care, it's all open to them.

But someone needs to engage them on those points. That could be a parent. But probably most effectively, it can be someone outside that school, somebody that connects with them on some personal level. That's the focus for high school students. Because if high school students have a wider range of choices, they will probably make different decisions in college. That's number one, that's high school students.

College students-- they're in the game now. Now, they're in the college, right? They have two organizations. They have the job placement organization and they have the disability services organization. Level that disability organization to assist you in your studies. However, think about all the skills, all the dreams that you had in high school, and start focusing on how you solve that problem rather than ignoring the opportunity.

I would tell you, since we've started this program, the Lean In! program for our college students, we've had this happen with at least four students, where they started on one page of career, and by the end of the program they had another direction, a more effective direction.

JOHN C. WALSH: You talk a lot about, man, we got to expand our networks. We got to explore what's out there. And we can't go in with just a preconceived notion of, this is what blank does. This is what we're going to do. Let's talk a little bit about the role and importance of internships in that learning process, and how you've implemented some of that in the Lean In! program.

GARY E. HORTON: OK. I'll try to make this-- I'll connect the dots. Here's the thing. It is a proven fact that when an individual of any ilk has an internship during their college career, they are going to find their job post-graduation faster and in a more satisfactory fashion. Internships allow individuals, no matter what their backgrounds are, to understand whether they really enjoyed an area that they perceive or that they desire, or whether they will not enjoy it.

It's an opportunity to meet future mentors and/or fellow travelers and/or people that will suggest you to other people, if you are mindful about what it is you're attempting to do when you're in that position. Lastly, but most importantly, what internships, particularly corporate ones, corporate internships in the private sector, what they do more than anything else is they educate the employer. They educate the employer.

The reason I focus on internships is because they are limited in length. There's not a great, great investment that's required on the business side. But it gives you an opportunity to introduce them in a very organic way how people with disabilities navigate. That's why it's important. It's important for the employer. It's important for the job seeker, the intern. And it is also important to achieve this objective of more employment for individuals like me. That's why.

JOHN C. WALSH: Yeah, absolutely. And I couldn't agree with you more about the business person is learning more in an organic way, and not a preachy way, in an organic way from an individual with a disability. And we know, and some of the research backs this up, there's probably more likely that a job is going to come out of that just based on that interaction.

GARY E. HORTON: Without question. It's not anecdotal. We have had this happen. We have set up just informational interviews with some of our young people, with business people. And from that resulted a job. Because the closer people are to these things, when they see people engage, when they understand what blindness is and is not.

I mean, how is Gary going to make it to the bathroom? Are we going to have to walk him everywhere? How does that work? How are you going to get to work every day? How can you see my facial expression? These are all things that I say contribute to what I call bias.

And I'm a math guy. Algebra. I learned algebra back in high school. And the idea of algebra is you have an unknown. And the whole idea is to get the unknown on one side of the equal sign and the answer on the other side of the equal sign. That's called solving the equation. I solve for bias.

That is to say, I assume that there is bias because there is. It goes back to truth. So this is what I tell my students and any of the people that work for me. In this world, there is bias. Sometimes bias works in your favor, while other times bias works against you. But one thing is universally true-- excellence trumps bias.

So, don't be lazy. Don't be mediocre. Do the work. Be excellent. So, to that point, John, if you have a college-aged student that has been prepared, has confidence and competence, can communicate, has a vision, has done their research, and now has to walk into a Zoom meeting or a real meeting to indicate to some person that they should have an opportunity, they'll get it.

When the company sees the competence of this individual, it will change their attitude about blindness and how they talk about blindness with their colleagues, and how they talk about blindness with their friends. And maybe a little bit of that fear of blindness itself goes away. It dissipates. You must be focused on how you're going to make things better for the company.

That's what programs, I believe, like the Lean In! program, that's what it does. It helps these young people fail in an environment that's safe as well as develop confidence as a result. And when you give people the tools to achieve their dreams, they'll pursue them if they're really their dreams. That's what I think. I spend my time with young people for that reason. There's a saying, the children will lead, right? But who leads the children? Who teaches the children how to lead?

We need exemplars like myself and some of my colleagues and other people around the country that engage with young people. They give them those exemplars, they give them those examples, those lived experiences, and this is how you walk around this and this is how you walk around that. They see the failure. But they see the phoenix bird arise. They see both. You must see both.

It can't all be darkness and sadness like 11-year-old Gary. It has to be shared objectives like high school Gary. It has to be achievements that you didn't think you could achieve, like doing the GM work that I did. Because I believed in myself and I did the work.

JOHN C. WALSH: And if you don't believe in yourself, you're not going to take risk. You're not going to try to seek excellence. You're going to seek mediocrity. If you don't believe in it-- just

GARY E. HORTON: Excellence is earned. Excellence is earned through hard work. I don't want to get too crazy here, but I just reread Up from Slavery, the slave story by Booker T. Washington. In the second chapter, he coins it much more eloquently than I do, but he says exactly the same thing. And he wrote that in 1901. None of this is different.

If you want to be successful, you must be excellent. Here's another adage I will give you. Any work experience, volunteer experience, any experience that you have in your life where someone's compensating you, there's two ways of valuing it. One is the money that you're getting paid for the work. Two is the opportunity to learn more, build your skills.

If you have a vision of what you want to achieve in your life, focus on building the skills in that job situation that feeds to that goal. That's doing things with purpose. That's thinking through it and executing a strategy and not just responding or reacting to what occurs. What we try to engage these young people in doing is to start with a vision, develop a plan, and then execute it relentlessly, if you don't achieve the objective or the results.

Take a step back, reanalyze and reengage. If you do this, you will achieve your objective. This is true. It's been universally true since the beginning of time.

JOHN C. WALSH: Could be applied at this time. Now, one of the things, Gary, you mentioned was the role of bias. And when I started to talk about hearing your presentation, you actually, the title of your presentation at CSAVR was "Identity is Not Everything, But It's Not Nothing." And I wanted to talk a little bit about the role of identity and, as we do the outside game as VR agencies.

So, why don't we folk a little bit about Corporate America's identity and the role of bias in our interactions, and really thinking about who's the best person to deliver the message? Could we expand a little bit upon that, Gary?

GARY E. HORTON: Yeah, no doubt. And I've said this many times, and I know in recent history, there has been a significant amount of focus on identity. And there are many people that say, identity, identity, identity. Why do we talk so much about identity? And I might even agree with them to an extent. But one thing I would also say is, identity isn't everything, as I've said, but it's not nothing. It is a component. You cannot ignore it.

My identity and what I perceive to be my identity is what drove me early in my life. I have an identity. You have an identity. All God's children got an identity. Sometimes that identity is foist upon us from others. That's their perception. As it relates to businesses, what is their identity? If I'm trying to do business with a business because they have the jobs, what's their identity?

Here's a business's identity in general, at a high level. They are in the business of performing for their investors and stockholders, which means they must turn a profit. Not at all costs, but they must turn one. It is important. It's like breath. It's like breathing. They have to turn a profit. That's part of it.

They do have a responsibility to the community. But business community first, rest of the community second. In general, these things are true. They want to solve their internal problems around the processes that they're executing within their companies that generate those profits, and the individuals that are doing the work to generate those profits. That is the human resources component.

So, if I'm engaging with companies, I need to craft a solution and a dialogue that recognizes those things. Because that's the identity that they project. All companies are not the same. But most companies in the private sector have a similar objective. And that is, do not die. Do not go out of business. Make as many profits as possible. Keep my job. Support my stockholders.

Now, if I'm a job seeker engaging, or if I'm a counselor engaging, I should be armed with that because these are the things that are important to them. These are the things that the recruiters and talent acquisition professionals are looking for. They're looking for someone that understands their plight, understands their issues, understands what they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. That's how you engage American business.

And let me just say this, if I haven't said it already, this underemployment of individuals with a so-called disability, including and particularly those that are blind like myself, this will not substantially change without Corporate America. It will not change in any real appreciable way, in my view, without buy-in from Corporate America.

When they make a decision that they're going to get behind something, it happens. It happened in the #MeToo movement. It happened in the race movement in the '70s and '80s. When Corporate America says, OK, we get it, stuff starts to happen. That's why I'm so hyper-focused on Corporate America. Again, that's where the jobs are.

JOHN C. WALSH: Absolutely. And I want to go down, drill down a little bit about Corporate America, and about the business community in general. And one of the things, a key concept in marketing is the value proposition. So that is, that full mix of benefits of economic value, which are service or product promises to deliver a customer. So, let's talk a little bit about describing the value proposition for business.

Now, you touched upon that, right? You talked about, the company has to stay in business, right? They have to earn a profit, or they're not going to be able to continue to do what they're doing. How do we get to understand the value proposition for the business folks in our communities? How would we start?

GARY E. HORTON: Again, you start through understanding, by way of example. If I'm engaging a business and they're in the business of manufacturing, or health care, it doesn't really matter, they are providing a service or a product to a group of customers. And if they do it at a high quality and at the correct price, they will receive remuneration for it.

Now, if I want to be an employee E in that environment, I have to provide the company with the type of resources that allow them to achieve that objective, which means, specifically, if I know what a line person does in a manufacturing company, if I know what a nurse has to do in her work, if it's a human resources professional, or if it's an IT person, if I understand the requisite skills that that person has to bring to bear in order to achieve the objective, coupled with a real understanding of the company, I have a good way of introducing a student or any other job seeker to that business, regardless of their visual status.

Again, businesses are in the business of providing a set of services for a price to a customer base, whether they are businesses or whether they are individuals. If I am attempting to become an employee in those organizations, or engage in a conversation, I have to do it with that understanding. I don't go to GM and talk about health care. I don't go to health care and talk about GM. I talk about their problems. And I talk about how my resources that I represent vis a vis those job seekers that are blind and visually impaired, or myself representing myself, on how I can contribute to that.

But I have to be able to articulate that I know what it is. You can't just answer an ad and say, I'm here, employ me. It's going to be better-- or employ my customer. I can't be a VR person and go to a company and say, just hire my guy, Amazon, just hire him. I need to present a proposition that this individual in this job role can work because they're prepared in this fashion.

They need an opportunity. They don't need sympathy. We're not asking for a sympathy play. We're not talking about compliance. We're talking about helping your company achieve its objective. Because one of those objectives is on the list, how they engage with the community at large, all communities. And that's where, as I say, identity isn't everything, but it's not nothing, right ? It's not nothing.

And to the extent that you can connect with these individuals that you're engaging with, it's easier to facilitate-- it facilitates an easier delivery of the message. So when I'm engaging anyone, I always look for those areas where we are the same, where we can collaborate, where we agree. And I build on that. And the more of those lines of communication that you can build or assimilation, association, the easier it's going to be to deliver the message.

If you make that message package the value proposition and how you can fix it, how you can address it, now you're in a conversation. Now you've developed a relationship. Now you're a trusted advisor. Now you can introduce individuals to those companies that can solve those problems. But none of that can happen without establishing that relationship, partially through identity. Me understanding what the company's identity is and pressing down on those areas. Does that make--

JOHN C. WALSH: It makes perfect sense. Absolutely. And we know, as you said, Gary, businesses need more talent. We hear it every day. And are we really emphasizing the experience, the attitude, transferable skills of our VR consumers, that great talent pool, that strength-based approach of what they're going to bring for that company. That's the key.

GARY E. HORTON: Yes. Therein lies the challenge, that it is important. Again, I ran a company that engaged in recruiting and have worked in that area of job placement, job search, and recruiting for over 30 years. I've represented scores and scores if not a couple hundred individuals in finding placement in their jobs or in a contract position.

When you are advocating for an individual for employment with a company, you have to be armed with two things. One, understanding the need of the company. Two, understanding the resource. Understanding the resource is going to be the technical skills that you're going to find on that resume. It's going to be some of the soft skills you find on that resume. But it's also going to be the reference that you give a trusted advisor.

If I'm a trusted advisor with a company, if I've developed a relationship with talent acquisition, if there's a relationship there, however it's been established, where they are now seeing me as a trusted advisor. When I say I got a candidate, his name is John Walsh. He's low vision, but he's prepared. His resume doesn't show it, but I will tell you he's prepared. He's enthusiastic. He's intelligent. He knows about your company and has an interest to do work here.

That's going to go a lot better than if I say, hey, I have 50 people that are on my portfolio. And I want to give you 20 of the resumes to look at. And you pick out the ones that you think may work.

JOHN C. WALSH: Right. It's that inside game supporting the outside game.

GARY E. HORTON: That's the difference. That is the difference. You have to set the stage for the candidate, the job seeker, to sit in that room, be on that Zoom meeting, and feel confident. Well, they're going to feel confident because you've prepared them. They know what's at stake. They understand the value of themselves regardless of their visual status. They make the conversation about what they can do rather than what you need to do for me, because they have the money. You have their interest.

If you want the money, you've got to make a deal. And you make it by being confident and communicating that you understand your pain and that you can fix it. That's how you get employed. That's how it works. It doesn't work any other way other than that in the private sector. That is why I say, to achieve true independence, if you're gainfully employed in the private sector, that means you are providing value, 100%, or they wouldn't have you there. That's a reality. That's truth.

But I would say if you're a person with a so-called disability and you're making it happen, you're running faster than half of your cohorts anyway. And there will be a reason to keep you around. But you got to get in there first.

JOHN C. WALSH: You got to get in there first. You got to get in there first.

GARY E. HORTON: You got to get in there first.

JOHN C. WALSH: Now, that takes me to the next point. And so, Gary, we want to help VR agencies build their capacity. And how can we make a difference for our dual customers? So, we have one customer that are those persons with disabilities that are coming in, getting the services we're providing. But we also have that customer of businesses that are looking to fill critical roles in their organizations. So, let's give some real specific ways on how we can get started today.

GARY E. HORTON: Perfect. OK, so just to set the predicate, I think of this whole idea of employment of people with disabilities as a bow tie. On one bow, you have the talent. That would be those individuals that are currently customers of the state vocational rehabilitation for any number of conditions that they may have. On the other side of the equation, the other bow, you have employers. Employers have needs to achieve their objectives as we just mentioned, to make the money that they need to be successful.

How do those two get married? This is how it happens. As we had pointed out before, you must speak to businesses in their language. That can be done by a counselor, but it can also be done by a sales person, a business development manager, a recruiter from the private sector. In other words, in these state organizations, consider the application of individuals that have the experience and training that might not be a master's degree, might not be a social work degree, but it will be a degree effective for having that conversation.

The counselor is the hub. They are the ones that drive everything. They are the ones that make the choices. Make one of those your job development people, which takes me to two. If you cannot build this expertise within the state organizations, do what businesses do. Buy it. Buy the expertise. It happens every day in business.

I'm in one part of the business. This other organization has this expertise. We can build this expertise within our company. It's going to take seven years to do it and $16 million. We can buy these guys for $14 million cash. Buy them. That's what you could do. And what I mean buy in the state organization context, it means engage with companies that have this knowledge, that can make those relationships, that can train your internal staff, or work as your agent on your external staff to really get that relationship going.

Three-- understand your talent not only from the inside, but the outside and what business expects them to do. Two weeks of technology training for someone that has never had any technology background, in my opinion, does not make them ready for certain jobs in the corporate environment. Therefore, there has to be some upskilling that occurs after fundamental vocational rehabilitation inside game is completed.

You must then develop an upskilling layer of training to make your candidates better prepared for the potential jobs that are out there. And that should be driven by understanding what those jobs are. You have to understand what the companies need before you can offer it. And if you don't understand your product, you're being rehabbed. And the product being the customer, you will not get success if you're offering somebody a shoe that's trying to buy a house.

You can offer them-- this could be the best darn shoe in the world. But if you know your talent, if you know your talent, and you understand the need, you as the counselor or the organization that sits between-- you make the translation. Build an opportunity for the student to really achieve, or the job seeker, to achieve. That's how you do it.

If you're trying to convince a company, that a large employer in your area, to consider working with those disabilities, the best possible way, the best foot that one can put forward is a blind business person that speaks in their language that is confident and articulate, and can really demonstrate to them the capabilities of those people. That's where the identity is critical.

Again, if you go into an office and talk about individual disabilities and how companies can leverage them, that's going to have one impact. If I go into those same rooms and I make the case, it cuts a different, it will be a different answer. It will be a different impression. Using those types of techniques to achieve is the way to go.

Here's the thing. I've had a business and I've had businesses. Here's how it works in for-profit businesses. If I am not successful and I don't get results, I die. If I take that concept to vocational rehabilitation, if I do all of the fantastic work that they do with the inside game, and the person feels better about themselves, and they're through the trauma, and they can engage with their cane. They can travel, get on planes, go to hotels, do math on their computer in their pocket, all those things.

But if it doesn't result in employment, you failed. You have failed. Here's the good news. Failure is a stepping stone to success. So all I would argue is you just apply what little Gary Horton learned in high school-- visualize, assess and analyze, plan, execute, repeat. That's how it happens.

JOHN C. WALSH: And the key is to take action.

GARY E. HORTON: Take action. Exactly. It's not going to just happen. That's what the execution is about. So, my feeling is, if you want to achieve better outcomes in the private sector, that is the way to do it. Understand your talent. Understand the business. Build a trusted advisor relationship with the businesses. Offer them individuals that are prepared and ready to do said work. That means have an assessment process on the other end. Engage with companies that know things that you do not know.

JOHN C. WALSH: Putting a capstone on-- and if I could summarize some of the pieces you've talked about, is if folks are going to take action today, we need to assess our current capacity to successfully engage with businesses. And we talked about a simple Kaizen exercise. What's working and what are those areas of improvement? You develop data from that.

And where there are gaps of where you're missing the target, let's develop some plans. Let's try some actions. Let's put them into a pilot project. We're going to fail. We're going to succeed in other areas. We continue to adjust our plan.

Build your team. Develop your partnerships. You got to build partnerships with folks in the private sector. No one entity is going to do it all alone. And let's be innovative. And let's work with our private sector partners to develop innovative strategies that are going to make a difference for those we serve. And most of all, let's always take a strength-based approach. Let's focus on strengths.

GARY E. HORTON: If I want to learn about the wife I'm trying to marry, spend some time with her mother. If I'm trying to get people employed, have business people that have been there and done that be the ones that you consult with. Bring people from the business community inside that discussion, inside that room, inside state rehabilitation.

We did try it in Michigan. Bill Robinson, bless his heart, and Michigan gave me an opportunity to do this innovative program. And our numbers were really, really positive. And I suggest to you that as we follow these students through, as they matriculate through college and they go on to employment, we're going to see some positive results.

So we plan to-- I don't think the numbers will be publishable, but we will definitely be tracking these young people as they matriculate out of college. Did they make better decisions? I believe that we've already had a couple of examples of students that have.

JOHN C. WALSH: Awesome. And that's our bottom line, right? If we talk about bottom line, we want better outcomes for the folks we serve.

GARY E. HORTON: That's what I get paid for.

JOHN C. WALSH: Well, Gary, I want to thank you so much for joining me today. I think you provided us with so many insights and actionable items that folks can use. On the current slide I have up, I have Gary's contact information. If folks want to get in touch with Gary, to learn about his Lean In! program, you can reach him at his email at gehorton@vanwardconsulting.com.

We also have Gary's cell phone number on here as well as my contact information. I want to thank you all for joining us today in this presentation. Be well.

GARY E. HORTON: Thank you.