Inclusive Employer: A Guide Dog School’s Trial to Employ a Blind Instructor

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Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. (GDB) provides enhanced mobility to qualified individuals through partnership with dogs whose unique skills are developed and nurtured by dedicated volunteers and a professional staff. In 2005, GDB expanded its vision to be a more inclusive and diverse employer. A trial commenced to determine the feasibility of the current instructor position being filled by a blind person. To complete this trial a qualified individual was hired to undergo task analysis of all job functions in conjunction with senior members of the Training Department. Additionally, a consumer advisory committee was consulted to ensure a fair and impartial evaluation. Results of the trial are presented in this article.

Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. (GDB) have increased efforts to employ a larger number of qualified blind and vision impaired individuals. It is the organisation’s belief that the hiring of more vision impaired people will not only contribute to making GDB a model employer, but will also assist in opening more career paths to this population. The Training Department embarked on a trial to determine the feasibility of employing a blind instructor under the current job description guidelines.

In order to ensure a fair and impartial evaluation of the project, GDB consulted a wide range of people and organisations throughout the process. An Advisory Committee comprised of representatives of consumer and educational groups that serve blind and vision impaired people was assembled. This group consisted of representatives from The National Federation of the Blind, Louisiana Tech University, American Foundation for the Blind, the California Department of Rehabilitation, San Francisco State University’s Orientation and Mobility (O&M) program, as well as independent O&M specialists, both blind and sighted. In addition, GDB requested the assistance of Sensory Access Foundation (SAF), a Northern California-based company that provides evaluations for employers to determine job accessibility for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Project goals

The goal of the project was to hire a person with vision impairment as an Instructor Assessor for 9 to 12 months with the incumbent assisting with reviewing and performing all current instructor job functions. Another goal was to determine job accessibility as well as any reasonable adaptations that would be needed for a person with vision impairment to perform the job.
From 16 applicants, 5 took part in a working interview that assessed physical abilities, problem-solving skills, O&M skills, as well as basic dog-reading skills. The candidate selected was a totally blind individual who has been using a guide dog for less than one year. His guide dog handling skills fall in the average range and his O&M skill set would fall in the average to above-average range according to GDB assessment.

In preparation for the project, GDB conducted interviews with guide dog users who had trained their own guide dogs; visited the Colorado Center for the Blind to observe two vision impaired O&M instructors, as well as visited MIRA Foundation, a guide dog school in Canada. MIRA employs a vision impaired instructor, whose job duties include dog testing once the dogs are trained, “Juno” instruction (teaching basic handling to students by playing the role of the dog), community and campus orientation, and class monitoring. This instructor’s job duties do not include training of dogs or street work teaching clients how to work with their new guide dogs.

While it is understood that there are many ways to complete a task, and that an individual without vision may use various techniques to arrive at the same end product, a task analysis was determined to be the best approach. The task analysis could assist to examine what could and could not be done within the current structure of the department. It was felt that there would be time at a later date to further delve into working towards outcomes.

The current Guide Dog instructor job description was broken down into a set of tasks that an instructor is expected to complete throughout a training cycle of 17 to 20 weeks. All completed tasks were analysed, evaluated, summarised and documented. The trial was administered under the direction of the Director of Training who led a committee consisting of a senior licensed instructor, an O&M specialist, and an administrative manager, who is an experienced guide dog user.

Street training

The current and proven method of initial training that GDB employs under its Balanced Educational System of Training (BEST) program is referred to as “pattern training”. Pattern training consists of positively introducing dogs to required automatic guiding behaviours and guidework responses by consistently causing the desired class-ready responses. This should only be done using positive reinforcement, with all efforts towards improving attention to work to be derived through obedience commands and exercises. For example, an instructor would walk a straight line down the middle of the sidewalk at a pace that was purposeful to the individual dog, stopping the dog at any elevation changes, as well as moving the dog around obstacles in a fluid manner, not coming into contact with anything. This pattern training occurs for approximately the first 10 weeks of the dog’s training, with progressively more responsibility being placed on the dog. This was not a method of training that the Instructor Assessor was able to perform. We could not determine a way to use a cane for safety while simultaneously patterning a young dog and maintaining fluid, effective movement. While it could be surmised that some issues were related to individual mobility skill set, it must be acknowledged that visual preview of a dynamic area
would be extremely beneficial. For example, the ability to move a dog fluidly around an unknown object or the ability to anticipate an unfriendly community dog and handle the situation accordingly were issues that appear strongly linked to vision. We were unable to devise an effective alternative when dealing with a young, untrained dog.

Altering the original plan and working backward in the training process proved more successful. The Assessor was successful in working dogs with more finished responses on familiar routes, providing the primary handlers of the dogs with feedback, reworking errors, and teaching the dogs some new techniques. However, even three months into their training the dogs still require a significant amount of input from the handler. The handler must be able to move between acting as a trainer and simulating the actions of a blind handler. Understandably, this differentiation was a difficult concept for the Instructor Assessor to master in our given time frame. The lack of effective handling did have a negative impact on the dogs being worked. Even our most resilient dogs would eventually give up if not provided with clear direction. On a positive note, there were numerous areas where it was felt that a dog’s training was improved upon by having a blind instructor. One area where there were no barriers was the testing phases of the dogs. These are benchmark tests to ensure that all dogs are progressing towards being capable of guiding a totally blind individual on varying routes and performing basic obedience exercises. As these tests are performed with an instructor under blindfold, there were no barriers due to vision loss and no alterations were needed to be made.

Client training

The Instructor’s job also includes client training, both at our residential facility as well as in the client’s home. We had mock clients working dogs while the Assessor followed using his cane and then using his guide dog. This portion of the project should be viewed as incomplete. Our Advisory Committee was able to provide significant verbal input with regards to using alternative methods of teaching to maintain client safety at a pace conducive to cane travel, but we were not able to gain much information with regards to what skill set a candidate would need to achieve the same results during guide dog travel. Adding to the complexity is the variable of the dog and the fact that a dog thinks, gets distracted, makes mistakes and displays initiative that a cane does not.

The trial ended prematurely with the Assessor citing numerous variables that he felt affected safety, including personal confidence, dog handling skills, and lack of vision. With regard to client training, the biggest challenge for the Assessor was found to be moving through space while simultaneously being responsible for the teaching and safety of a new team.

Ultimately the Assessor reached a point where he believed that his skill set was impeding the progress of the trial. The Advisory Committee met and discussed the challenges as well as the extensive list of positive outcomes that occurred. It is understood that people differ in the skills they possess to handle various tasks, both physically as well as cognitively.

GDB acknowledges the obvious issues with regards to using one person to assess a job for a whole population. GDB is hesitant to draw definite conclusions, knowing that
it is likely that another blind person could effectively complete much of what our Assessor could not, thereby rendering a completely different outcome. At the conclusion of this trial project, with a commitment towards promoting opportunities for qualified persons with vision impairments, a permanent position will be created to include dog-finishing tasks, specific class duties, as well as further exploration of barriers that this trial presented. This position is believed to be uniquely beneficial to our organisation, not simply a position created to be filled by a blind individual.

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