

# STAFF WITH IDD: A Programs Considerations Guide



## Why hire staff with IDD?

If we want a more inclusive organization and accepting world, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) must be allowed to contribute in ways beyond the sports field. One of the most powerful ways we do this is through Athlete Leadership, which creates opportunities for people with IDD to learn new skills, develop an individualized leadership style, and ultimately demonstrate their abilities in meaningful leadership roles, which could include the opportunity to join a Program as a staff member.

Special Olympics is **for** people with IDD, so it should be led **by** people with IDD as well. They should be involved in every decision we make as an organization. To truly become a movement led by people with IDD, they must be given the opportunity to share their abilities, experiences, and knowledge.

Not only are we fulfilling our mission by providing opportunities for people with IDD, but having them in leadership roles improves their lives, helps us as an organization because we are including the perspective of people who are participating in our Programs, and it demonstrates to the world that people with IDD can and should hold meaningful leadership positions, whether as volunteers or staff.

By committing to hiring people with IDD, we make programming more relevant and meaningful. It's not just the right thing to do, and it's not just good business, it's a meaningful and profitable step toward inclusion in our organization and in our communities.

**Special  
Olympics**



Created 2022

## Why does this work matter?

Special Olympics is not turning into a job placement program, but because many Programs have already hired staff with IDD in paid or unpaid roles, this non-exhaustive list of things to consider when it comes to the hiring process can help Programs avoid any pitfalls that others faced when starting this journey years ago. These tips from Programs and staff with IDD cover everything from how to write a job description, to accommodations for the interview, to onboarding the staff with IDD, to training staff without IDD how to work with someone with IDD, and much more.

This is the real legacy of Unified Leadership – training people without IDD on how to work with, for, and eventually be led by people with IDD.

## How do we do it?



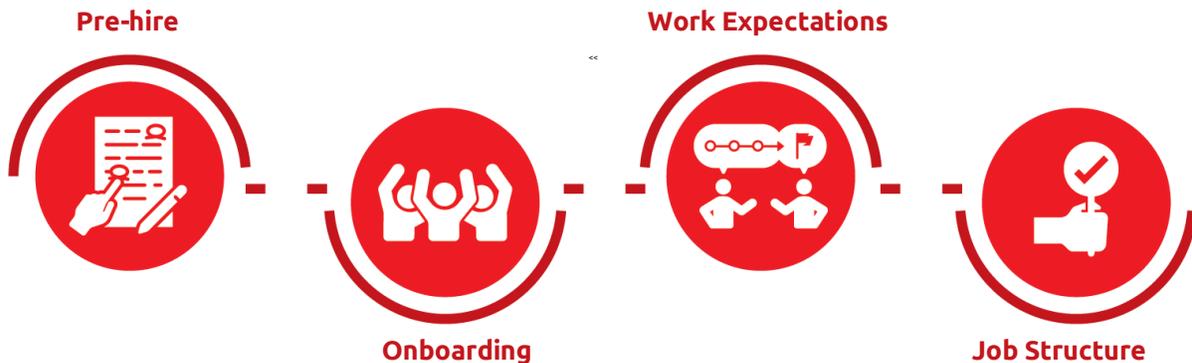
But this doesn't happen by accident. It takes strategic vision by a Program. It requires dedicated resources, and it flourishes when there's an authentic organizational and cultural commitment to embrace the philosophy of [Unified Leadership](#) - from the highest levels of leadership down (from the Board of Directors, CEO, and staff to coaches, volunteers, and families) - to prioritize the training and empowerment of people with IDD as leaders. Sustainable meaningful inclusion also includes a commitment to creating an environment where these meaningful roles are accessible to every person with IDD and they have a reasonable opportunity to be successful.

Athlete Leadership and Unified Leadership are approaches to understanding and achieving true inclusive leadership (Unified Leadership) and it starts with empowering and equipping people with IDD to lead the way (Athlete Leadership).

With our push to educate external companies on their hiring procedures through Unified Leadership, we need to make sure we are "walking the walk" and educating our own Programs on the benefits of having a meaningfully inclusive workplace where people with IDD can thrive.

## Feedback from Programs

These came from talking to Program staff (with and without IDD) throughout the world and collecting their thoughts on what to do and not do when hiring staff with IDD. Resources and suggested steps to address some of the issues listed below are found on the following section.



### Pre-hire

- Consider the current staff capacity to develop and/or support the skills of someone with IDD. That should be considered when first deciding to hire someone with IDD and considered again when attempting to assess different development needs for the candidates. You shouldn't hire someone whose needs don't match up with the staff's capacity to meet those needs.
- There needs to be specific job or role descriptions for staff with IDD written before the job is posted. Do not hire someone with IDD and then write the job description later. You would not do this when hiring a staff member without IDD.
- Make sure you and your Human Relations staff know and understand any local or federal laws pertaining to how much money a person with IDD can make or have within their bank accounts. Also make sure you research how paying staff with IDD could affect any government benefits they receive (i.e., health insurance, disability pay, etc.)
- It is important to find a way to translate the skills that staff with IDD obtain through Special Olympics and apply them to positions within the organization. Think about those potential skills when writing the job description.
- Staff with IDD should go through traditional application process, but it should be adapted to be more inclusive; more information on that on the next section.
- Hire staff with IDD who have the expertise for the role; don't just hire staff with IDD to "check a box." Tokenism is easy to slip into if we aren't careful



## Onboarding

- Just like with any new hire, the burden of assimilating into the team is on everyone, not just the new staff with IDD. People with IDD have been expected to “fit in” their whole lives; now we must adjust how we do business to meet their specific needs.
- Don’t just train the supervisors working directly with the staff with IDD, train the whole staff on how to work with and alongside someone with IDD. This training should be led or co-led by someone with IDD and the new hire with IDD should have the opportunity to share their story. Supervisor training benefits all employees, not just those who supervise staff with IDD.
- All staff, but especially staff that will be supervising the staff member with IDD, should attend local programming events and gain experience working directly with people with IDD. Trainings are necessary, but the best experience will always be hands-on. Everyone on staff has a responsibility to educate themselves on how to best work with people with IDD.
- Ensure that you have a comprehensive onboarding process for new hires. Then modify it as needed for staff with IDD (SOI is developing a template onboarding process that regional Programs will be able to copy).



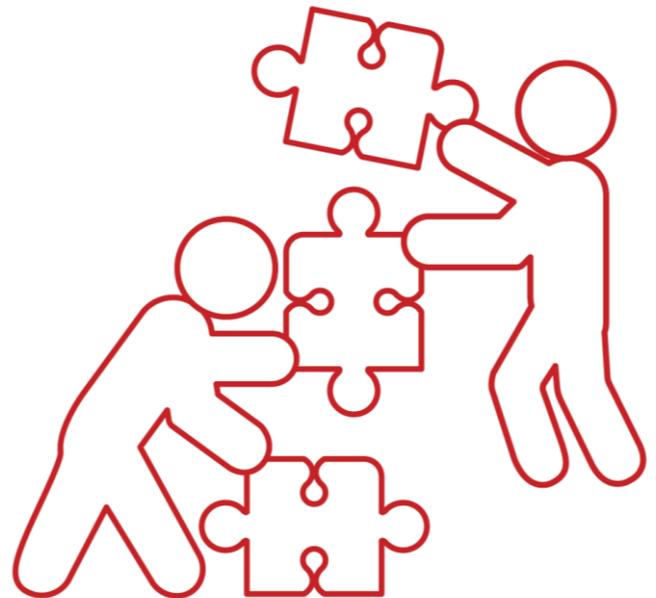
## Work Expectations

- Do not refer to staff with IDD as “staff with IDD” internally or externally unless it is important to the context of the conversation. Never refer to staff with IDD as “athlete staff.” It is important to distinguish between their role as a Special Olympics athlete and their role as a staff member.
- Treat staff with IDD like any other staff member without IDD; do not baby them. Make accommodations so they are put in a position to succeed, but when something goes wrong, explain to help correct the behavior or actions. This is the most inclusive approach and ensures dignity and respect at every step.
- While it is important to talk directly to the staff with IDD when problems arise and treat them like any other staff member, there may be times when supervisors need to talk to the mentor, job coach, or parent of the staff with IDD to get clarification or ask for guidance. Always do this with the approval of the staff with IDD.
- Ensure there are opportunities for advancement for staff with IDD. There should be clearly defined expectations and growth opportunities for staff with IDD just like there are for staff without IDD



## Job Structure

- Staff with IDD should report to someone who has similar staff roles and responsibilities within the organization (if staff with IDD are working in the sports department, they should report to someone who also works in the sports department).
- Staff with IDD need weekly or bi-weekly meetings with supervisors to ensure they are learning and improving. Do not wait until yearly reviews to give feedback – do so on an ongoing basis.
- Staff without IDD should not take anything for granted nor make any assumptions when it comes to working with staff with IDD. Every person is unique and handles situations differently. Get to know them as you would any other staff member and ask how you can best support them, while explaining how they can best support you.



## Things for Programs to consider

This is not a complete list of considerations, nor is it a “checklist.” Rather, these are thought-starters to help your Program as you think about hiring a staff with IDD and how you can support them.

### Commitment

Does the Board of Directors / President / CEO / staff understand and support the concept of Unified Leadership?

Does the staff see the benefits of/opportunities for hiring staff with IDD with respect to their duties?

Do we currently have capacity to have a person with IDD (paid or unpaid) take on a role, and for a staff member to support them within the organization?

Have we discussed how hiring staff with IDD fits our strategic plan and vision?

Do we “walk the talk” already? Are we consistently modelling Unified Leadership and inclusion in this space for others?

Do we have tokenistic or patronizing practices and behaviors we need to acknowledge and constructively work to address?

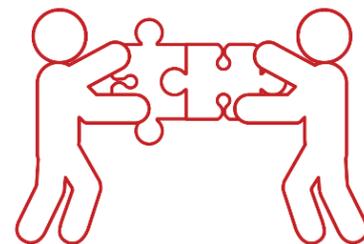
Do we have consistent internal messaging about our goals to hire more inclusively?

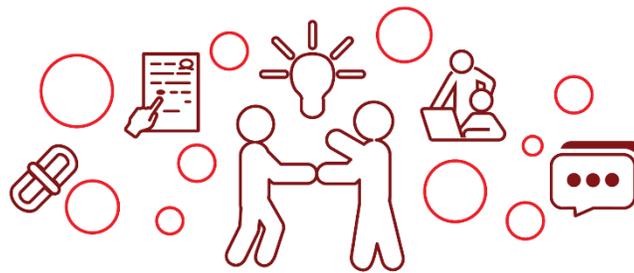
Does the board of Directors / President / CEO / staff support Athlete Leadership?

Do key leadership staff and volunteers understand and support Athlete Leadership?

Are we willing to make both small and potentially large changes to the way we recruit, interview, and train new hires so that our whole hiring process is accommodating to people with IDD?

Do we have commitment from key decision-makers to make hiring staff with IDD a priority and not just a token hire?





## Resources

Do we have the ability or knowledge to adapt the job description and interview process in a way that is easy-read and accessible for all people with disabilities to apply?  
 (i.e. [Remove “must be able to lift 30 lbs.” language from all job descriptions; Learn how to conduct a job interview of someone with Autism](#))?



Do we currently have any financial capacity to invest in hiring staff with IDD ensuring this isn't a short-sighted venture, but part of a larger multi-year goal?

Do we have current or potential partners or sponsors who may wish to support the hiring of people with IDD and building out an inclusive workplace model? Maybe they already have something that we could build on?

For example: The Arc (U.S.), local job coaching agencies, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Inclusive College Programs via Think College, etc. If you have global resources/suggestions that you'd like to add to this list, please email [bschatsiek@specialolympics.org](mailto:bschatsiek@specialolympics.org) and we will include them in a future version of this document.

Have we talked to staff at our regional office to learn about potential funding / grant opportunities from Special Olympics International?

Have we seen the Workplace Inclusion trainings ([“Disability Awareness”](#) and [“The World Through My Eyes”](#)) designed by SOI staff Garrie Barnes and Ben Collins? Both resources are currently only available in English.

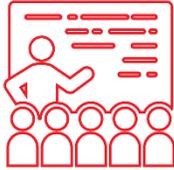


Have we read through the [“Summary of Workplace Inclusion”](#) research done by Ben Haack?



Are we familiar with any regional resources, [SOI Athlete Leadership resources and curriculum](#) and/or [SOI Unified Leadership resources](#)?





## Education / Training

Do we have a preliminary plan for how we could / will offer education / training to Board, CEO, staff, field leadership to ensure accurate understanding of Unified Leadership?

Have we assessed what capacity / expertise / funds we will need to train staff with and without IDD?

Do we have a plan to train the staff without IDD on how to work with someone with IDD, including (but not limited to) anyone will be their supervisors?

Can we commit to support the staff without IDD on potential continuous counselling and job coaching as situations arise that they don't know how to deal with?



## Marketing

Are we marketing Athlete Leadership currently?

If "no," have we discussed how we could / will market Athlete Leadership to potential athlete leaders, mentors, partners, etc.?

If "yes," what athlete leaders currently in our Program can we consider hiring as staff?

Do we have the ability to promote these openings on social media and in digital communications (website, e-newsletters, emails)?

## Opportunities & Inventory

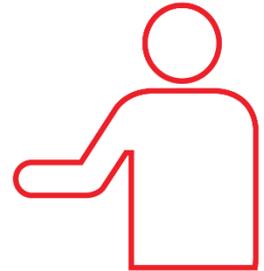
Do we currently have a list of possible roles / jobs, at all levels of the Program, for people with IDD?

If “no” to above...have we brainstormed / audited current and potential future roles / opportunities? Have we identified which of our athletes and leaders without IDD who could be a part of this exercise?

Do we have job descriptions for any / all of our various roles that we would modify for staff with IDD?

Do we have capacity to create job descriptions for roles if they don't currently exist? Do we know who could best help create them?

Do we know of people with IDD who are diverse in gender, ethnicity, and disability who already display leadership qualities that could be a great hire for our Program?



## Tips

Start small and build from there; it can start with minimal cost in terms of staff time and resources, especially if you utilize a SOI or regional grant to create the position

Unified Leadership training for your staff and board are an incredibly important piece to ensure success.

Scale at a responsible pace so quality, purpose, and impact are maintained

Don't sacrifice quality for quantity

Talk to your regional Athlete Leadership staff about resources, trainings, and opportunities to engage with other Programs on this topic.

Email former SOI board member, SOI Leadership & Organizational Development staff, and athlete leader Ben Haack for advice:



[haack.ben@icloud.com](mailto:haack.ben@icloud.com)

