Inclusion at AT&T:
Creating a Supportive Infrastructure
for People with Disabilities

Fall, 2008

In November, Jose Fiallos, a Manager of Diversity and Inclusion at AT&T, Inc., received a phone call in his Cerritos, California, office from Doug Burasco, the channel manager for Video Relay working in the AT&T, Inc., offices in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to his day job, Burasco was president of IDEAL, the company’s Employee Resource Group (ERG) for people with disabilities, and he was calling to ask Fiallos a question about his organization’s plans to participate in an upcoming national conference. Burasco had attended UCLA’s Leadership Institute for Managers with Disabilities, one of a number of sponsorships that Fiallos’ unit had approved, and the two men had met recently at the 2008 COSD conference in San Francisco. They shared a common appreciation of the efforts AT&T made around product accessibility and workplace policies for people with disabilities. “We’d like IDEAL to get involved in some community projects and have a positive influence,” Burasco said to Fiallos. “We can raise awareness of different disability issues and also show how AT&T is involved.”

Burasco was deaf and the conversation was held using Video Relay. Burasco used American Sign Language to communicate through the webcam on his computer, where it was seen by an interpreter who conveyed his message by voice to Fiallos.


Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities.
Fiallos was one of four Managers of Diversity and Inclusion at AT&T and his job was to represent the company on external communications in regards to these issues. Primarily, his responsibilities centered around two tasks: determining sponsorships of various organizations’ events or seminars, and handling the many requests for information concerning race, ethnicity, gender and management level indicators. For example, Fiallos had recently compiled data for the California Public Utilities Commission, tracking AT&T employees according to ethnicity and level of management. He also handled the kinds of surveys about employees sent out by organizations such as Diversity, Inc. or Black Enterprise.

The company’s diversity efforts, seen through the lenses of gender, race, ethnicity and management level, were fairly easy to determine and Fiallos was skilled at finding company subject experts and graphing the information. He could easily show, for example, that in 2008 there were more women at a higher management level in the company than the previous year. But disabilities were often not obvious and many employees did not like to self-disclose. AT&T did not track any information on these employees, yet Fiallos knew that the company put significant effort and funding into workplace accessibility, formulating policies for people with disabilities and keeping abreast of new initiatives that concerned the disability community. In addition to providing some support for IDEAL and sponsoring the UCLA Institute, in 2008, the company had sponsored the COSD event, and company executives met regularly with AAPAA, the AT&T Advisory Panel on Access and Aging. In 2003, the company had received the New Freedom Initiative Award from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), for its innovative and exemplary efforts in furthering the employment objectives of the President’s *New Freedom Initiative*, a set of proposals intended to ensure that Americans with disabilities had the opportunity to engage in productive work.  

Despite these efforts, Fiallos sensed that staffing managers did not receive many inquiries about employment from people with disabilities. He welcomed IDEAL’s plan to

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4 Cingular Wireless (now part of the new AT&T ) was the actual recipient of the award. AT&T, Inc., was a re-merger of many of the companies that had been spun off in the Bell System divestiture as a result of an anti-trust lawsuit in 1984. Cingular Wireless had been a joint venture of Bell South and SBC Communications. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AT&T](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AT&T). Cingular Wireless was cited for its unique interdisciplinary approach, which worked “to dispel myths about disabilities through innovative advertising, education and community outreach; developed tools to improve communication; encouraged employment and career advancement opportunities through collaborative efforts including dynamic public/private partnerships; created a disability friendly environment and mentoring opportunities; and leveraged the full benefit of employing people with disabilities to better address the needs of its customers and communities.” [http://www.dol.gov/odep/newfreedom/nfi03.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/newfreedom/nfi03.htm)
get involved and help increase AT&T’s visibility as a diversity employer. AT&T had long been concerned with accessibility and disability issues due to its history of involvement in the development of high-tech products and the need to be aware of consumers with hearing and vision impairments. And, as a company, AT&T strove to weave deep bonds with many constituent organizations, both through their employee networks and also through advisory boards. Yet perhaps there was still a lingering misperception in the disability community about the corporate world in general.

The Employee Resource Groups: Diversity as a Cornerstone of Corporate Citizen Commitment

Diversity and Inclusion was one of the four cornerstones of AT&T’s corporate citizenship commitment, and the Employee Resource Groups (ERG) were one way in which the company developed bonds with its constituents. “The ERGs were created from the grass roots, bottom-up,” said Elizabeth Dixon, the Manager of Diversity and Inclusion who acted as the corporate point of contact for the ten distinct groups, all registered 501(c)(3). In addition to IDEAL, the ERG for people with disabilities, the company sponsored the following groups within the organization: Asian Pacific Islanders for Professional and Community Advancement (APCA); AT&T Veterans; African-American Telecommunications Professionals of AT&T (Community NETwork); Filipino American Communications Employees of AT&T (FACES); Hispanic/Latino Employee Association of AT&T; Inter-Tribal Council of AT&T Employees (ICAE); Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgendered United Employees at AT&T (LEAGUE); Organization of Asian Indians at AT&T (OASIS); and Women of AT&T.

“AT&T gives each group minimum operational funding and they are considered charitable organizations that do advocacy, mentoring and networking within the company, as well as a lot of very good external community services,” said Dixon. For example, since 2000, ICAE had awarded more than $30,000 in scholarships to Native American students; the Hispanic/Latino Employee Association regularly sponsored an annual High Tech Day, an event that introduced Hispanic students to careers in technology and telecommunications; and in 2007, members of LEAGUE spent more than 61,000 hours fundraising on behalf of external organizations and volunteering in their local communities. The AT&T Foundation itself also provided funds to community efforts and constituent organizations, and it was often through their own employees that the groups learned of these additional opportunities. Said Dixon,

I host monthly meetings with the national presidents, keep them up to date with what’s going on within AT&T, let them know about things they can help

5 The additional cornerstones were Community, Environment and Governance.
corporate with, and also ask how we can assist each group. And in 2009, for the first time, we are planning a joint national conference with all of our groups. Mr. Randall Stevenson, the AT&T CEO, will be the keynote speaker.

IDEAL

Dixon, who is blind, had a special relationship with IDEAL, as she had been a founding member in 1989 of the precursor organization, the Employee Technical Advisory Panel, ETAP. “ETAP was formed by a group of employees at Bell Labs who were looking for employees with disabilities who could help the company review products and services for accessibility and usability,” said Dixon, who was working in Human Resources at the time. “Human factors was a new discipline at the time and we did everything from reviewing new TTY and telephone enclosures, to giving the company advice on accessibility issues during construction of the new AT&T Learning Center.”

In its current form, IDEAL had approximately seventy members, and with Burasco as the new president, the group was intent on increasing its visibility. The organization had regional chapters, with eighteen members in the western region; twelve in the northwest; six in the midwest; nine in the central; and twenty-eight in the southeast. “We have some new members,” Burasco said, “and we can cooperate together and develop strategies.” He continued,

We are looking for partners to help us bridge some of the gaps and we would like to get some community projects going that could have a positive influence and input into the community. We are interested in working with veterans, because a lot of returning military people have disabilities. And we are also interested in meeting communication needs for people with disabilities by making sure they get the right accessible technology.

Burasco, who was deaf, had been employed by AT&T since 1983, entering the company in the Kansas City office as a merchandise account table person, a job he did for three years. He then worked his way into the merchandised accounts payable service and up through several levels in that department. When the Kansas City office closed, he transferred to a position as Data Processing Associate II in Orlando, Florida and worked there for another eleven years, then was promoted to manager for AT&T Relay, and in another three years was given the job of Channel Manager.

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6 Bell Laboratories was the previous research lab for AT&T. In 2009, Bell Labs was the research organization for Alcatel-Lucent.
In his current job, Burasco was an ambassador for the company’s many products that made communications accessible to those with vision and hearing disabilities. “Relay is the service that provides communication access to more than 31 million people in the U.S.,” said Burasco, “and I strive to increase awareness of the various relay services and options that AT&T provides to the hearing and speech impaired and hearing loss community.” Burasco gave presentations at national conferences and to companies and organizations throughout Georgia. “I have to do a lot of educating and explaining, and people are often just in awe because they don’t know about all the options that exist.” In fact, AT&T offered four distinct relay services to their customers:

- **TTY Relay Service** used a traditional TTY (short for teletypewriter or text telephone) that allowed a customer with a hearing disability to communicate using a keyboard and screen. The Communication Assistant (CA) would connect the call, and relay the typed message from the customer to the person on the other end, then type the reply back to the customer.

- **IP Relay Service** allowed a customer to communicate over the Internet. The customer would connect to a CA, type outgoing messages using the computer keyboard and read incoming messages on their own computer screen.

- **Video Relay Service (VRS)** allowed a customer to use a web camera or video phone device in connection with a high-speed Internet connection. The customer could connect with and see a Video Interpreter (VI) through two separate video windows. The VI would interpret the signed conversation for the person whom the customer had called, and in turn, interpret the spoken reply back into signed conversation.

- **AT&T IM Relay** allowed customers to communicate with an Internet connection and an AIM®™ account, usable on a computer and also on most mobile devices.

Taking the lead for IDEAL, Burasco hoped the organization could participate in a variety of events in the upcoming year, 2009. Of major importance were the Proyecto Visual Conference, sponsored by the World Institute for Disabilities for the Hispanic/Latino community; the annual AIDS Walk in San Francisco; and the annual conference for the National Association of the Deaf. “We’d also like a way to publicize our efforts, perhaps with a newsletter or another publication,” Burasco said.
Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (COSD)

AT&T was also interested in reaching students and had begun to strengthen its relationship with COSD, a national organization based at the University of Tennessee. COSD filled a unique niche in the disability world, with a mission to ensure that students with disabilities knew about and used the extensive career placement and internship opportunities that were available on most campuses. Founded in 1988, the organization was the brainchild of Alan Muir, Executive Director of the organization, and Dr. Robert Greenberg, the Director of Career Services at the University of Tennessee.

Muir, who had a disability himself, had been a commercial lending officer and Vice President at Chase Manhattan Bank until he moved to Tennessee, where he began looking for an opportunity that would positively impact more people. Working with Greenberg, he documented the gap between on-campus disabilities services and career services and with help from the U.S. Department of Labor, COSD began to take shape. Said Muir,

We went out and we did research, talking to over twenty universities and about twenty-five different companies around the country. We conducted this research to try and find a model program on the University side, and then also to meet with companies to see what their progress has been in recruiting people with disabilities.

And what we found was that there was no model program out there, and a great amount of interest and eagerness to do things on the corporate side. We were able to bring back some pieces, some remnants of things that were out there, and brought them back to the University of Tennessee and established a campus program. And as we were building the campus piece, it really became apparent that we needed to unite the universities and employers together to get them talking. And that’s how this whole concept of COSD came about.\(^7\)

COSD bridged the gap between two already existing university oriented organizations; AHEAD (Association of Higher Education and Disability) which focused on disability in academic settings and in campus life and NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) which focused on the Career Services professional on campus. COSD was funded by the United States Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) for four years, and maintained momentum thereafter with corporate funds from companies such as AT&T.

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\(^7\) Taken from an interview at VoiceAmerica.com, “Disability Matters” with Joyce Bender, http://www.benderconsult.com/radiocaption/030904VA.html
In the fall of 2008, Burasco and Dixon attended the organization’s annual meeting, an event that AT&T also sponsored, and both of them spoke at a presentation on IDEAL. “Our company also participated in two All Access Student Summits,” said Dixon, “where students learned about résumé writing, interview skills and self-disclosure.” She continued,

We brought in mid-level managers to speak to the students at these events in Jacksonville, Florida, and Nashville, Tennessee. The managers gave them an idea of the jobs and skills required at AT&T and the students asked them all sorts of questions about life in corporate America. The feedback from both the students and our managers was that the events were a great success.

Leadership Institute for Managers with Disabilities

Burasco was also an attendee at the first Leadership Institute for Managers with Disabilities at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management, a groundbreaking effort of which AT&T was one of the sponsors.\(^8\) The five-day event was structured similarly to other leadership institutes that the school had created for those executives “who are often overlooked by corporate America.” The School offered leadership training for women, Latinos, members of the LGBT community, and African-Americans. The School also offered an option to design custom Leadership Institutes.

The Institutes were based on a premise that was simple but profound. The retention of managerial leadership was important to firms, yet promotional opportunities and success were often not clearly defined, and the traits one needed in order to be promoted were usually learned informally. Consequently, managers who didn’t fit the typical corporate mold and were seen as “different” had difficulty learning the unwritten prerequisites for advancement. They faced unique challenges and often had high levels of voluntary termination.\(^9\)

The week-long events provided classes and seminars as well as time to network with peers and share creative solutions to obstacles and challenges. The Leadership Institute for People with Disabilities included discussion topics on self-definition, understanding feedback, mentoring and personal development, different leadership styles, the community of people with disabilities, and understanding national initiatives of importance to the self-sufficiency and empowerment of people with disabilities.

\(^8\) Founding organizations included AIG, AOL, AT&T, DiversityInc, Fannie Mae, Google, IBM, Merck, Microsoft Corp., Motorola, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, PepsiCo, the Society for Human Resource Management, Union Bank of California, and the U.S. Business Leadership Network.

\(^9\) http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x17215.xml
Addressing the Consumer Needs of People with Disabilities: The Advisory Panel on Access and Aging (AAPAA)

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Americans with disabilities increased 25 percent between 1990 and 2000, more than any other subgroup that the census followed. In business terms, the market segment of people with disabilities was thought to constitute about 54 million people, a group whose aggregate income exceeded $1 trillion, and who had discretionary spending power of approximately $220 billion. “That is an estimate,” said Tari Hartman Squire, a consultant who had previously worked for Cingular Wireless and continued to work with AT&T on constituent relationships. “And with the baby boomer population aging, the number of people with disabilities may grow.” Said Squire,

Even if the per capita income for a person with disability is low, the person with disabilities is still in a network of friends and family. If you want to go to a restaurant and it’s not accessible, you’ve lost the business of the person with the disability as well as the guests with whom that person was going to dine.

AT&T met each quarter with a group of constituent organizations to discuss issues of technology, marketing, employment, and customer service, and the expertise of the Advisory Panel on Access and Aging (AAPAA) was another way in which the company helped create a reciprocal link to its consumers. The following organizations were represented at the table:

_alliance for Technology Access (ATA) A national network of product developers, services providers, community-based resource centers, individuals, and vendors that provided support services and information to children and adults with disabilities, working to increase their use of technology. www.ATAccess.org

Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) A national consumer organization representing people with hearing loss, HLAA focused on accessibility, research, public policy, public awareness, and service delivery on issues related to hearing loss on a national and global level. The organization had an office in the Washington, D.C. area, fourteen state organizations and two hundred local chapters. www.hearingloss.org

American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) The organization promoted healthy and independent living for people with vision loss through its strong presence in Washington, D.C. Providing individuals and their families with timely and relevant resources, the organization also focused on broadening access to technology. www.afb.org
**National Asian Pacific Center on Aging** The leading advocacy organization committed to the well-being of elderly Asians and Pacific Islanders in America. Its goals were to: advocate on behalf of the APA aging community; educate APA seniors and the general public on the unique needs of the APA aging community; and empower APA seniors and the aging network to meet the increasing challenges they face. [http://www.napca.org/](http://www.napca.org/)

**Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family National Center for Accessible Media at WGBH** A research and development facility dedicated to expanding access to present and future media for people with disabilities and representing their constituents in industry, policy and legislative arenas. [http://www.ncam.wgbh.org](http://www.ncam.wgbh.org)

**American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)** A nonprofit cross-disability member organization focused on developing the economic self-sufficiency and political empowerment of Americans with disabilities. [www.aapd.com](http://www.aapd.com)

**Owner Solutions Marketing Group** A consulting and marketing firm dedicated to developing relationships between companies and consumers with disabilities. [www.disability-marketing.com](http://www.disability-marketing.com)

**Accessible Technology Initiatives, California State University System** The California State University system project provided access to technologies and information resources to individuals with disabilities. [www.calstate.edu/accessibility](http://www.calstate.edu/accessibility)

**National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)** This organization advanced independent living and the rights of people with disabilities through consumer-driven advocacy. [www.ncil.org](http://www.ncil.org)

**World Institute on Disability (WID)** An internationally recognized public policy center that focused on issues and problems affecting the lives of people with disabilities: employment, economic development and financial stability, personal assistance services, accessible health care, and technology. [www.wid.org](http://www.wid.org)

**SeniorNet** A nonprofit organization dedicated to educating older adults about technology. [www.seniornet.org](http://www.seniornet.org)

**Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc. (TDI)** A national advocacy organization focused on equal access issues in telecommunications and media for four constituencies: the deaf, the hard of hearing, the late-deafened, and the deaf-blind. [www.tdi-online.org](http://www.tdi-online.org)
Inclusive Technologies A consulting company dedicated to providing services to public agencies, consumers, companies, researchers, policy makers, and purchasers, on how all products can be made accessible to all users, including people with disabilities and the elderly. www.inclusive.com

AT&T Employee Profiles

Like most large companies, AT&T had an integrated disability service center that assisted with making reasonable accommodations for all employees whether they worked in the corporate offices or in AT&T authorized dealerships out in the community.

In the Stores

George Tomich was nearly finished with a certification in phlebotomy and had a job set up at Verdugo Hills Hospital in Glendale, California, when he became a manager at an AT&T-authorized dealership. “The store job was supposed to be just temporary until I finished an internship, but the pay was excellent so I stuck with it,” he said. Tomich managed the store for three years until he finally took the advice of the corporate representative who visited with promotions. “He kept saying to me, ‘Why don’t you come to corporate?’” Tomich said. “And I finally just called him and set up an interview.”

Disabled at seventeen, Tomich used a wheelchair, favoring the kind developed for athletes. He applied for a sales job online and was hired as a sales representative at the AT&T store in Pasadena. The store was laid out with generous space around the products so the only accommodation made was lowering a counter and placing a keyboard tray beneath it. “I get around pretty well so there weren’t too many things they had to change,” Tomich noted. When Tomich moved over to be assistant manager at the Sherman Oaks store, the same adjustment was made.

Tomich drove himself to work from Eagle Rock, a nearby community, and used an already existing ramp to enter the store. After two years, with encouragement from the District Manager, Tomich moved into the job of assistant manager. “I can tell sometimes that customers in the store are surprised that I’m going to help them, but you get used to that. I still do some sales, but my job is mainly management and I’ll stay in it for a year and then start looking for a new challenge within the company.”

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On the Training Floor

Vicki Sarantakos was a trainer for the new account services team, a job she had held for three years. Prior to that, Sarantakos had worked in a variety of positions at the company during her fourteen years of service, some moves generated by a desire to progress, others by internal company transitions. “Some of my job changes were promotions and some were lateral,” said Sarantakos. “The company doesn’t like to lose good employees, so if a department or unit is closing down, they will find you a position equally as good somewhere else.”

Sarantakos had spina bifida, a congenital disability, and she used a wheelchair for mobility. “I’m the type of person that enjoys the spotlight,” said Sarantakos, “so I really like the training position. I like to teach.” On the job, Sarantakos taught new hires the policies and procedures of the company, codes of business conduct, and business systems and navigations. She then helped transition them to the actual job and coached them to success.

Sarantakos didn’t need any accommodations for her job on a day-to-day basis, but if she traveled to do call center training in another city, she would rent a hand-controlled car or take a taxi, expenses the company always supported. “I don’t think we look at disabilities in the same way anymore. I’ve been here for so long and I have so many good relationships with the people here … it’s not the first thing they see.” She continued,

Two of my very best friends are both in wheelchairs. One of them is a social worker in Rancho Los Amigos, a rehabilitation hospital in Downey, and my other friend works for the USTA and runs their tennis programs. And we all just consider ourselves very active working women doing our thing.

Continuing Efforts for Diversity and Inclusion

Towards the end of 2008, AT&T began work on a new diversity and inclusion initiative that put senior-level executives directly in touch with experts in the field through special Advisory Summits. “These experts will give the company new insights into conferences, sponsorships, policies, and procedures that will help AT&T develop the diversity of its workforce even further,” Fiallos said, “and it’s important because our senior executives report directly to the CEO.” Fiallos continued,

As a company, we would love to boast that we have so many individuals with disabilities and we’ve promoted this many … but we can’t do that. We want individuals to come through the door. We want them to be capable of performing the job responsibility and we do not care about race, gender or disabilities. We are
always looking for new employees. Perhaps individuals with disabilities still think that employers will not embrace them, but that’s just not so.
**Abbreviations and acronyms used in the Inclusion at AT&T case**

AAPAA: AT&T Advisory Panel on Access and Aging.


AHEAD: Association of Higher Education and Disability.

COSD: Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, a national organization based at the University of Tennessee.

ERGs: Employee Resource Groups at AT&T. Those identified by abbreviations or acronyms follow below.

  APCA: Asian Pacific Islanders for Professional and Community Advancement.

  Community NETwork: African-American Telecommunications Professionals of AT&T.

  FACES: Filipino American Communications Employees of AT&T.

  ICAE: Inter-Tribal Council of AT&T Employees.

  IDEAL: Individuals with Disabilities Enabling Link.

  OASIS: Organization of Asian Indians at AT&T.

  LEAGUE: Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgendered United Employees at AT&T.

NACE: National Association of Colleges and Employers.