

Transcription

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Woman: Hello, and welcome to "Eyes On Success," a weekly program of information on the ever-changing world of accessibility. Now, here are the hosts of this program, Nancy Goodman Torpey and Peter Torpey.

Nancy: Hello, I'm Nancy.

Pete: And I'm Pete. As many of us know, unemployment for the disabled and particularly the visually impaired has been a real problem for many years. In fact, some people say that in the US, unemployment is as high as 70% for people with visual impairments. Today, we'll be talking about a new innovative program that hopes to address that problem.

Nancy: We'll speak with Rachel Carver from Outlook Business Solutions about their program that matches visually-impaired consultants with specific skills to companies seeking these skills for their projects, but first for our tip of the week. This week's tip comes from Rachel Carver.

Rachel: If there's one message I can share, if...whether you have been blind all your life, or you've lost some vision, and you've had a professional career to not give up, that there is something out there that you can do, you just have to do it a little bit differently. And whether that's in writing or sales or HR, whatever it might be, there is a way that you can keep doing that job and to keep doing what you love to do just with some different adaptations.

Pete: And no doubt being visually-impaired or having any kind of disability can be a little bit more of a challenge. In fact, I would submit that many people have something that they have to overcome in their lives, and it's really a matter of how you address that and how persistent and proactive you are about defining some solutions that work for you. Almost anything can be done if you try and investigate some solutions.

Nancy: And fortunately, these days, access technology keeps improving to the point where many tasks are definitely doable.

Woman: You are listening to "Eyes On Success," success, success, success, success, success.

Nancy: Let's start by meeting Rachel.

Rachel: My name is Rachel Carver. I am the senior public relations specialist for Outlook Business Solutions. And I have been with Outlook, the parent company of Outlook Business Solutions for nine years now. And I have been

blind all of my life. And I guess I had a pretty standard childhood, high school, college, all of that. I was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and then we moved to Southwest Iowa and I went to college in Iowa and then came back to Nebraska for my job.

Nancy: And Iowa and Nebraska about one another.

Rachel: Yeah. So, I can actually get to Iowa in about 15 minutes from where I'm at right now.

Nancy: And having driven through both, you live in the prettiest part of each.

Rachel: Yeah, the Loess Hills are beautiful.

Pete: And let's move on to learn a little bit more about how she obtained that position and what Outlook Business Solutions's mission is.

Nancy: Support for "Eyes On Success" is made possible in part by our corporate partners.

Pete: Find out about partnership opportunities by sending an email to hosts@eyesonsuccess.net.

Nancy: This week's focus topic is Outlook Business Solutions's program that matches visually-impaired consultants with specific skills to companies seeking these skills for their projects.

Pete: So we'll talk in more detail in just a bit about the organization you work for, but can you give us the quick 30-second summary of what this organization does and what it's about?

Rachel: Outlook Business Solutions, we provide various services for businesses, for small businesses. So, if you need a postcard or a call campaign, we will help you do that. And we match your needs with the talents of blind and visually-impaired freelance professionals.

Pete: And you said that your role there is as the PR coordinator. Can you talk a little bit about what you do?

Rachel: So my role, I do a lot of writing and editing. I also do all of our media interviews. I work with our freelancers. I also do work for the sister companies of Outlook Business Solutions. So, Outlook Nebraska, I do all of our

government relations work, and then we all work together to promote Outlook Enrichment, which is the entity of Outlook that has all of our community-serving programs that are donor-supported. So, we are always getting the word out that, "Hey, these are here and here's where you can come if you are losing your vision and looking for resources."

Pete: Now, you said you've been working there for about nine years. Before we get into some of the details of what exactly the company does and the services it offers, can you tell us a little bit about how you got into this position?

Rachel: Yeah, so I started college in 2005 and I got out of college. I graduated a semester early, for some reason I thought working really hard and getting out early would benefit me. So I got out in December of 2008 and as we all know, 2008 was kind of a downtime for the economy and the job market. And I spent probably about a year and a half interviewing for different jobs in different positions. I went to Minnesota for a while because I'd had some summer jobs there. And what I found was not only was I young and inexperienced, but I was also blind. And there are some challenges when you are blind when it comes to finding employment.

Pete: And getting your first job is always difficult, even if you don't have a visual impairment.

Rachel: For sure. Yeah.

Pete: Now, you had a background in media, that was your degree, right?

Rachel: Yes. My degree is in media studies with a minor in English. So, I wanted to originally be a reporter, but then the newspaper industry has changed quite a bit. And so I ended up going this direction in public relations instead, and it's worked out well.

Nancy: Can you describe what the field of public relations entails?

Rachel: Yeah, so public relations, I remember I was in college and I took a class on intro to public relations and the big thing was relationships. So, forming relationships with media, with other important people in your network and really being able to promote who you are and what you are doing and have a solid understanding of your brand. So, we do work with a PR firm who really helps us start those relationships. And then also being able to write to, like I said, to promote your brand and that's done through social media, through news releases, through going to different events. So I think in some ways, all of us are

responsible for some aspect of public relations because we're all out promoting our brand, but it's always trying to figure out what's the best way to promote yourself and really show what you're doing.

Nancy: And I understand there's a certification process that's available, and that you are the first blind person to have been certified in public relations?

Rachel: Yeah. So there is an accreditation in public relations certification that you can obtain. About 20% of professionals do it. For some people who have been in the industry a long time and they have quite a bit of experience, they might not always do it. It is kind of a daunting process, too, for sure. So, the process starts with a portfolio presentation that basically involves you putting together a communications plan. And then once you pass that, then you sit for a computer-based examination and you pass that and then you obtain your certification and it's good... You have maintenance credits that you complete every three years

Pete: After the recession in 2008 and you spent a while looking for a job, what was your breakthrough in getting a position with your current organization? Did you have some interaction with them previously?

Rachel: So I had a counselor with the Iowa Department for the Blind who actually introduced me to Outlook. And at the time, it was a much smaller organization and they were looking for an administrative assistant role. And I had applied for so many other things and thought, "You know, I need somewhere to get my foot in the door and I can, with my technology and all of this, I can do it in an administrative assistant role." So what ended up happening was the person who got that role as her and I are very good friends now. She's great at it. And I got a phone call that said, "We are not going to give you this position. However, we need someone in communications because we don't have that."

So, I was given the opportunity to not only grow myself, but to start a whole new part of the organization, if you will, that wasn't there. And it has since grown into a whole team of marketing people. And I have learned a lot through my years of being here. Because I started when I was very young and green and didn't really know what I was doing at the time, but I was really allowed to grow and develop.

Pete: Well, that sounds like it was right up your alley.

Rachel: Yeah, it really was. It was a great fit and it still is a great fit. I'm never bored. There's always projects to do, which is great.

Pete: So let's talk a little bit about Outlook Nebraska and Outlook Business Solutions and how these two relate to each other. Can you put that all in perspective for our listeners?

Rachel: Yeah. So Outlook was formed in 2000 and it was primarily formed to provide employment for people who are blind because, as we all know, 70% of blind Americans are unemployed and that is still the case today. We produced, and still do, toilet paper and paper towels for the federal government and other customers under the AbilityOne Program. So that was going strong. And then in 2015, we realized that, you know, it's great that everyone has a career, but more is needed in our community. So, our enrichment programs began. So, things like if you need help reading your mail with technology, if you want to learn how to use your smartphone with limited vision, we can help you out with that.

So that turned into additional programs that include recreational opportunities and cultural opportunities. So we have a monthly team rec program where they go ice skating and ziplining and all kinds of things that really give them so much confidence because if they can go ziplining, they have the ability to lock onto a college campus or go do that job interview. And then our cultural side also experiencing audio description at a live theater performance, and really, those programs are designed to help people with vision loss realize that, "Hey, you're not alone. You can do the things that you've always done. You're just going to do them a little bit differently." And then last year, Outlook Business Solutions began.

Nancy: And what does Outlook Business Solutions do that's separate from Outlook?

Rachel: It began primarily as a contact center and has evolved into the structure it is today, which is we want to give blind and visually-impaired people more opportunities for more knowledge-based jobs. So, like, one of my freelance writers is in Atlanta right now and she writes blogs for us. We have a graphic designer in Portland who is visually-impaired. So the idea is to provide businesses with services or projects that they need completed and allow people who are blind the opportunity to do those projects.

So, the short answer is now we have Outlook Nebraska, which is our government-producing entity, Outlook Business Solutions, which provides knowledge-based jobs to people who are blind, and then Outlook Enrichment,

which is our entirely donor-supported entity that provides community programs. And all of these organizations are under Outlook Collaborative, which is the company that basically oversees everything.

Nancy: One of the reasons that unemployment is so rampant among the visually-impaired is that the sighted population has difficulty imagining what the visually-impaired are capable of doing. You, very explicitly on all of your promotional materials and your website, go out of your way to say that many of your employees have visual impairments. Do you get pushback from potential clients? I'm thinking in particular of having a visually-impaired graphic artist.

Rachel: We are still pretty new. And so our hope is that we will have samples and testimonials and things to show that will demonstrate very well that the blind and visually-impaired are just as capable of doing these jobs as sighted people are. Like, for example, if you go to the Outlook Business Solutions blog right now, the last month, all of these blog posts have been written by someone who is blind and you wouldn't necessarily know that if you were just browsing the blogs.

Pete: Well, you know, I was going to say, it sounds to me from looking over your website that you actually matched the people pretty carefully with the task that they need to perform. So you wouldn't have a totally blind person assigned to doing some graphic task that needed some sight, but you might have some person with low-vision doing that, or even a sighted person, if need be, to fill in sometimes.

Rachel: Yeah. So, we have a visually-impaired graphic artist in Portland and he is visually-impaired, but he has some sight.

Nancy: Well, I don't know who designed your website and I'm fully sighted and Pete's totally blind, so I don't know if it's accessible. I assume it is.

Pete: It was.

Rachel: It's very attractive, very easy to navigate. It's very nicely done for people who can see it. And apparently also for people who can't.

Pete: Well, that's important because that's the first showcase of your work to potential people who wanna hire you.

Rachel: Yeah. We always make that a point, that our websites are both attractive and user-friendly and functional.

Pete: Now, you talked about hiring all these people to do these various tasks for third-party companies. Do these people actually work for you or do you kind of connect them with the third-party companies and hire them out as consultants? How does that interaction work?

Rachel: So, everyone who freelances will work for Outlook Business Solutions. We have project managers that essentially work with the client and work with the freelancer and create a seamless process for the client to make sure that their work gets done to their specifications.

Pete: And I take it these projects are of various durations, they're for specific tasks?

Rachel: Yeah. We actually are working with a client out of Phoenix right now on creating accessible PDF forms. So this is kind of our first testing of those waters. And I think it's going well.

Pete: And hopefully, some of these interactions will lead to long-term employment with these third parties, I guess.

Rachel: The growth potential is pretty limitless. We don't know where we will end up. There might be some people who want to stay freelancers and there might be some who would someday come on fulltime. It's just really hard to say.

Pete: Well, both have valid ways of having a profession, right? I mean, some people like to work on defined short-term tasks and jump from project to project because it's new and exciting, and some like the opportunity to have some long-term employment and kind of focus on something for a long time.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, the flexibility that freelancing gives you, I think is pretty unique, too. So.

Pete: We talked a little bit about the general tasks that are performed by the people you employ. But can you be a little bit more specific about what these things involve, what kind of services you're actually doing on a day-to-day basis for some of these other companies?

Rachel: So, right now we have a couple of call campaigns going for Motorola. And so we have one fulltime person, who is blind, who is doing a lot of those calls. And then we do have a sighted person working on them as well. So our

goal is that 50% of our billable hours are done by blind people. So, we do have a mix right now.

Pete: So this job would involve calling potential customers to get feedback from them about the marketing campaigns and how the business is doing?

Rachel: Yeah, so, like this one, she is calling different companies and it's a list that the customer gives us. And I believe she is asking about whether they use two-way radios and if they have interest in their product, basically. So, and then, like I mentioned, we are working on accessible PDF forms that are fillable with a screen reader also with a client out of Phoenix right now. So, we are still new, but there are meetings that are happening that are hopefully gonna bring in some more clients.

Pete: So in this last case, for example, a company wants to create a form on their website or send out a form to their customers and they wanna make sure it's accessible, but they don't have the expertise in-house to know what is accessible and how to make their forms accessible.

Rachel: Correct. We have a designer who is familiar with creating those forms. And then we have people that test the forms to make sure that they are accessible.

Pete: Now, I guess a lot of this work, it sounds like it can actually be done remotely from a person's home or even a different location, which is kind of ideal for people who are visually-impaired and who can't readily get around.

Rachel: For sure. So, I could be living in Western Nebraska or Colorado, or like I said, we've got a writer in Atlanta and we've got our graphic designer in Portland. And because of all the technology, you can work remotely.

Pete: Do you provide any support yourselves in terms of technology and access equipment for the people you're employing, if they have technical questions or need support questions, "How do I do this job?"

Rachel: So Outlook Business Solutions doesn't, but that's where our Outlook Enrichment entity would come in if somebody needs some training. So whether you're wanting to know how to use your computer or your smartphone, we have three trainers who are all totally blind and they use this technology every day. So, yeah, if I were to come across someone that has technology questions, I would for sure send them their way.

Pete: That could be a great resource.

Nancy: That sounds like a terrific combination because you have everything from job training to technology training, to real, meaningful employment opportunities. And you can use the training parts of your program to get people ready for the employment part.

Rachel: Yeah. So our technology trainers are great. They have worked with people that were looking for employment. They've worked with some who were still employed, but, you know, needing some technology help to stay that way. And then they also work with people that are retired that are just like, "I wanna be able to connect with my grandkids, browse Facebook, do my own banking, read my cookbook," whatever. And then we also work with some youth, making sure that students are keeping up with their sighted peers in the classroom.

Nancy: How would a potential client find out about Outlook Business Solutions?

Rachel: Well, right now Outlook Business Solutions is...the clients we have have come a lot through word of mouth. I believe a couple have come from LinkedIn. We are still new. Just getting the word out that, "Hey, we're here. Can we try a couple of projects with you?" And we try to make it as easy for them as possible to make sure that they're getting what they need and while we are able to provide those employment opportunities.

Pete: And how about for people who want to work for you? How do they generally find out about you and what requirements do you place on them?

Rachel: Kind of the same thing again, with a couple from LinkedIn. I've actually known a couple of writers that live here locally that write for us just through my own connections. I think it's been a great combination of just connections and the internet finding people that, "Hey, you guys, you do awesome work." And, really, I guess the requirements of them depends on what the project is. You know, if someone can write well, we kind of try to find things that are gonna fit your style of writing. Like, are you gonna be stronger for Outlook Business Solutions or for Outlook Enrichments blogs or press releases or whatever the case might be. So.

Pete: Well, it sounds like a great and special service to be able to connect these blind individuals with gainful employment by these third-party companies. And it's tough to connect with the community of blind people because they're scattered all over. You just don't take an ad out in the local paper.

Rachel: Yeah. That is the million dollar question of where to find blind people. I feel like those of us who are blind ourselves usually have a connection somewhere that's, "Hey, can you pass this on to your connections?" And it can work well going that route as well.

Pete: Well, and hopefully people listening to radio shows and podcasts like this will find out about your service and be able to ask some questions and connect if they want to.

Rachel: Yeah, we definitely appreciate these great opportunities to be able to share our message any way we can.

Woman: You are listening to "Eyes On Success," success, success, success, success, success.

Nancy: Now, for this week's final item, how to learn more about Outlook Business Solutions and how to contact them if you want to learn even more.

Pete: If people would like to find out more about your services, where would you direct them?

Rachel: So you can go to outlookbusinesssolutions.com to learn more about what kind of services we provide and if you wanna send in a resume for a freelance opportunity. And then if you are visually-impaired and you're interested in learning more about our programs, you can go to outlookne.org. And that's where you'll find all about our enrichment programs and our other employment opportunities with our sister organizations.

Pete: So you said that people can send in resumes and I assume they can ask questions. Is there an email address where they should direct those resumes and questions?

Rachel: Yeah. You can send resumes and questions to info@outlookbusinesssolutions.com

Pete: And for people who prefer phones, is there a phone number?

Rachel: Yeah. So if you wanna give Outlook Business Solutions a call, the phone number is (531) 365-5055.

Nancy: And do you have a social media presence?

Rachel: Yes, we are on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Nancy: And what are your names on those various social media sites?

Rachel: I know Facebook and LinkedIn are under Outlook Business Solutions, and then our Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn for Outlook Nebraska is just @OutlookNebraska.

Pete: And as usual you can find all of that contact information in the show notes associated with this episode at www.eyesonsuccess.net. You know, also, we've done a number of shows on employment and getting jobs, interviewing for jobs, where to look for jobs, once you get a job, etc. So use the search feature on our website if you're interested in those shows and put the word "employment" in there, and you'll find all those shows along with summaries of the show, links to the audio and the show notes. That can be very useful.

Nancy: And what will also come up if you do that is the individual episodes in which we spoke with people who have specific jobs. So if you're looking for information on a specific job, you could enter that job title into the search field, or if you enter "employment" or "career" or "job," all of those shows will pop up.

Pete: We hope people find that search feature useful. That's why we put it there.

Nancy: That's it for show number 1951. Next week on "Eyes On Success," we will be celebrating the completion of our ninth year hosting and producing this program. And we hope you join us as we revisit some of our favorite clips starting with our very first episode and running through some highlights over the past nine years. If you have any questions regarding something you've heard about on the show, or you'd like to share an idea for a future show, send an email to hosts@eyesonsuccess.net.

Woman: You've been listening to "Eyes on Success," hosted and produced by Nancy Goodman Torpey and Peter Torpey and distributed by WXXI Reachout Radio. Browse that full archive of programs, find instructions for subscribing to the podcasts and much more at www.eyesonsuccess.net. You can also find us on iTunes and follow us on Facebook at Eyes On Success or Twitter @_EyesOnSuccess. We hope you will join us again next week for more information and updates on products for accessible living. Thanks for listening to "Eyes On Success" and have a nice day.