

AMC Theatres' FOCUS Program

Making a Difference

by Scott Standifer, January, 2012

"I've been in human resources for over 15 years now and this is by far and away the coolest program I have ever been a part of," says Andy Traub, Director of Recruitment at AMC Entertainment and leader of their FOCUS autism employment program, "I get very passionate about it very quickly."

The FOCUS project was a joint collaboration between AMC and the Autism Society of America. Over a period of 16 months in 2010 - 2011, the project went from initial concepts to a nationally implemented program – a pace that stuns Traub: "This is corporate America. Nation-wide programs usually don't move that quickly from concept to rollout. It was just amazing"



Andy Traub, AMC Director of Recruitment



Gerry Lopez accepting the Champions Award, 2009

The FOCUS project began during an acceptance speech by AMC CEO Gerry Lopez at the Autism Society's national conference in July, 2009. Lopez was accepting the Champions Award from the Autism Society for AMC's Sensory Friendly Films program. This program provides specially designated showings of first-run movies at AMC Theatres, during which sensory differences are respected by leaving the theater lights turned up, turning down the sound, and allowing noise and activity among children in the audience. In 2008, more than 25,000 children and adults attended the special showings.

In his acceptance speech Lopez announced the formation of a "workforce development project" in collaboration with the Autism Society. No one knew the details, but within a few months, Traub found himself assigned to head up the project.

"Quite honestly, I didn't know where to even begin," Traub remembers.

With the help of the Autism Society, Traub soon assembled a "dream team" of autism experts, including the following:

- Jennifer Repella, Director of Programs for the Autism Society
- Dr. David M. Mank, Director, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University

- Lee Stickle, Director of Kansas Instructional Supports Network at University of Kansas Medical Center
- Dr. Valarie Paradiz, autism self-advocate and Director of Special Projects at the Autism Research Institute
- Dr. Brenda Smith Myles, Vice President at AAPC Publishing, consultant for Ziggurat Group, formerly associate professor at the University of Kansas, assessment specialist, researcher and educator
- Andy Traub, Director of Recruitment, AMC Entertainment
- Derrick Nelson, Director of Diversity & Inclusion, AMC Entertainment



The project, now called FOCUS (Furthering Opportunities Cultivating Untapped Strengths), kicked off in February, 2010, at AMC Theatres headquarters in Kansas City, MO, with a three-day meeting of the work team. Over a series of 10 hour days, the group discussed their diverse perspectives and expectations, and gradually came to a common vision for the project.

To understand the scope of the task, it helps to have some background on AMC Theatres' standard hiring practices.

AMC Theatres receive approximately 1.75 million job applications a year. To ensure consistent hiring practices, these applications are all handled online. Local theater managers select promising candidates based on the applications and online assessments, then schedule individual interviews. (Note: each theater has a team of Managers, headed by a single General Manager. General Managers are usually not involved in interviewing job applicants.)

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The individual interviews follow an AMC script using "behavioral assessments" and situational questions, allowing managers to assess an applicants' compatibility with AMC performance standards for all "associates" (employees). Among other things, the interview script includes a few abstract questions such as "if you found a \$20 bill in the theater, what would you do with it?" and "If a patron fell down the stairs, what would you do?" Other elements of the script assess the applicants' ability to have "eyes and smiles" – eye contact with and a pleasant attitude toward theater patrons.

Once a manager has selected one or more applicants to hire, these new associates undergo a weeklong training process, including cross-training in all aspects of theater operations so they can handle any station as needed. By the end of a specified probationary period following the training, a new associate must show proficiency in these skills.

Although some AMC theatre sites had hired people with disabilities over the years, there was no formal support for disability employment from corporate headquarters. In the company's "Directors Guide" there was a short section on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Traub says, looking back, the underlying message of this section of the guide was "Here's the law – don't get us sued".

It was in this context that the FOCUS team was asked to implement some sort of autism-friendly hiring initiative. In effect, Traub says, the FOCUS project was AMC's way of asking, "Why don't we do the Right Thing, and see what that brings us?"



Jennifer Repella is Vice President of Programs for the Autism Society and was part of the work team.

Speaking at the Autism Society's 2011 national conference, she explained that the team had one unique advantage over most autism employment discussion groups - the team members could make significant decisions on their own authority. "It was not a situation where they would say: Well I have to go back and I have to check" Repella said, "We had folks at the table who could say "Yes, we can pay for that. Yes we can make that change. And that was a really critical part to get this thing up and running."

As the team began to integrate the various perspectives on autism employment, the AMC staff emphasized one firm requirement – anyone hired under the FOCUS program would have to meet the standard performance measures for all AMC associates, including cross-training on all jobs and the "eyes and smiles" standards. AMC would provide appropriate supports but the bottom line would be doing the job to the same standards as anyone else.

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It was on this point that Traub got his first shock. "I asked the question: Who else is doing it in this space? And the program team looked at me and said, In a public-facing environment? Nobody." The team reviewed the well-respected and inspiring Walgreens autism/disability employment model and realized it involved very little public interaction with employees, as did all the other projects they could find. "So," says Traub, "that's where we had to start; nobody else is doing this. Welcome to being the pioneer."

Defining what would count as a success for the FOCUS program was another long discussion among the team. The standard "return on investment" and similar measures did not fit well with the "do the Right Thing" spirit of the project and were confounded by many other factors.

How to define success for the project?

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Eventually, Traub announced AMC would define success as making a difference. He explains that this covers a variety of intuitive and counter-intuitive outcomes as indicators of success: simply improving access to the application process may positively impact a person's confidence in job seeking, even if they do not get hired at AMC. Increasing the understanding and openness of management staff around working with people with disabilities counts as success. Personal growth of associates, improved community opinion of AMC, and similar intangibles also count as success.

During this initial planning phase, the work team took a tour of a local AMC Theatre. The experience was a revelation for everyone. The autism experts were surprised at all the behind-the-scenes parts to running a movie theater. Repella has commented "A movie theater is something that everybody thinks they know. I had NO IDEA what happens in a movie theater. We all were like, Oh my goodness – they wash the 3D glasses?"

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Even more surprising was how the previously-familiar theater environment now looked to Traub and his AMC colleagues after participating in discussions about sensory issues. They now saw potential challenges at every turn.



"If you go to the warehouse storage area," Traub says, "It is kind of dimly lit because it is not guest facing. There is just enough light to be able to function in there. And then walk into the concessions stand - you are talking about a very dramatic increase in light. You are also talking a very dramatic increase in sound. Your floor goes from being a polished concrete floor to being a kind of tile floor. You are going to be near the popper and anywhere within five feet is going to be a 40 degree increase in temperature at times."

How could the team address these potentially significant sensory issues without requiring AMC to radically alter the physical layout of their existing theaters? The answer gradually emerged over several conversations: The Traveling Interview.

In the Traveling Interview, the traditional interview is replaced by a walking tour of the theater with the General Manager.

Under the FOCUS Traveling Interview protocol the standard job interview is replaced by a walking tour of the theater with the General Manager, allowing the applicant to decide if the sensory environments and job tasks are too aversive. Following a loose script, the General Manager will show the applicant the various work environments, explain what work is done there, and ask the applicant if he or she is willing/able to do perform those duties.

The previous hypothetical questions about finding money or helping guests are now anchored in the physical environment. And open-ended, vague questions such as "What would you do if you found \$20?" have been replaced with the more concrete "If we show you how to hand in any money you find here, would you be willing to do that?"

Although the General Manager will still be assessing the applicant for "eyes and smiles", options for social coaching are now part of the final judgment. Continuous eye contact is not a prerequisite – occasional eye contact will do.

As the team developed this new framework, a more serious challenge emerged.

In preparation for the project, Traub surveyed the General Managers of AMC nationally to see what experiences they had with hiring people with autism and related disorders and what concerns they might have about the FOCUS program. The topic of job coaches emerged as a major issue.

Many, many General Managers reported significant problems in the past with job coaches. In addition, Traub remembers, "We had people calling and saying 'Ok, I put down job coach, but let me tell you my story of how BAD that was and what really went wrong.' That was expressed a LOT."

Traub and his staff learned that some job coaches did not show up on time (sometimes not at all), some job coaches did the work FOR the individual rather than training them in the work, some job coaches did NO training and sat in the corner texting on their smartphones, and some job coaches had no idea how to do job tasks they were supposed to be supporting.



"We have actually had situations where job coaches were caught stealing from the theatres," Traub remembers with horror, "What do you do with that?"

In some past cases, one or two General Managers had chosen to fire a person with a disability in order to get rid of a job coach who was stealing.

Since job coaches figure prominently in many high school transition-to-work programs, this was a problem that threatened to derail the project

The team's solution was a contract to be signed between AMC staff, a job coach, and that job coach's supervisor/employer. No associate will be allowed to have a job coach unless that coach signs the contract. The contract spells out AMC expectations for job coach performance and other significant elements, including steps for replacing one job coach with another if necessary. This clarifies the expectations for job coach performance and empowers the management teams for dealing with any problems that might arise.

Once the work team worked through these issues, Traub was thrilled by the speed at which the project progressed. Within 60 days the team had built the new support system, selected a pilot site in Kansas City, and selected an initial participant - Kyle.

Kyle was a transition-aged young man on the spectrum, with limited speaking skills and good reading skills, who attended Blue Valley High School in the Kansas City area.

The management team of the pilot site theater had some experience with disability employment because of an existing associate with a cognitive disability who had been employed there for 12 years, but that associate was only trained to be an usher.

Under the new FOCUS program, Kyle was soon on-site learning all the various jobs of an AMC Associate - which is when something remarkable happened.

As Kyle's manager was showing him the jobs associated with the concessions stand, the existing associate with a cognitive disability noticed them and asked what they were doing. When the trainer said Kyle was learning to do concessions, the other associate asked if he could learn that as well. The manager had been through the FOCUS management training and simply agreed to train them both. Soon the other associate was working shifts at the concessions stand for the first time in his career.



Within a week, the General Manager of the theater noticed the associate's new assignments on the schedule and questioned what he thought was an error in job assignments. The shift manager apologized, saying the associate had asked for the training and they did not think to consult the General Manager first. The General Manager realized that had been the right choice – if any other associate had asked for additional training, there would have been no question. It was The Right Thing To Do.

When he heard about this, Traub remembers thinking, "We just made a difference. The culture of that theatre has changed because of the FOCUS program."

Other reports came in of Kyle's personal successes. After his probationary period, a manager told Kyle one day that there was going to be a graded "shift evaluation" that day. This motivated Kyle to work even harder than usual as he helped theater guests. The General Manager reported Kyle "was our first and only associate ever to receive 5 outstanding scores for every single line item in our evaluation, including Earn A Smile."

90% of General Managers rank their FOCUS associates as meeting or exceeding expectations

Within eight months, the AMC team expanded the program to a handful of other sites around the country. These, too, were successful, and in April, 2011, AMC officially extended the FOCUS program to all 300+ theaters across the country. By December, 2011, more than 800 AMC associates were using elements of the FOCUS program – both new hires and existing staff with disabilities.

In the fall of 2011, AMC again surveyed the General Managers to see what they now thought of the FOCUS program. "90% of the General Managers ranked their FOCUS associates as meeting expectations or higher" Traub says with pride, "The General Managers talk about the enhanced sense of community among the staff, of what the individual brings to their theatre when they come to work. All the statistics about people with disabilities, and their loyalty and their attendance, and their engagement - now our theater staff are actually seeing that for themselves."



In November, 2011, the group U.S. Business Leadership Network (USBLN) – a disability employment advocacy group - named AMC Lead Employer of the Year because of the FOCUS program, Sensory Friendly Films and role in the Greater Kansas City BLN chapter

Traub emphasizes that the FOCUS project is not an entitlement program. Traub and his recruitment staff are on the phone every week with different disability employment projects around the country explaining that just because someone has autism does not guarantee they will be a good match at AMC. FOCUS is about removing barriers to application and employment, but applicants with autism and related disabilities still have to meet the job requirements.

"This is not a workshop," Traub says, "This is not a work experience opportunity. This is not volunteer service. This is competitive employment. You are actually going to earn the same wage as neurotypical associates. You will be eligible for benefits just like any other associate."

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Brenda Smith Myles, noted autism researcher/educator was also on the FOCUS team. She says that another remarkable success for the program is the way other businesses are approaching AMC for advice on doing the same thing themselves. "It is all well and good for us as outsiders to go to a business and say, "You know, individuals with autism are fantastic employees," Myles says, "But if someone from their field says, "Let me tell what we've done." It just has so much more credence."

Traub is delighted that other companies are contacting AMC for advice: "It is a great story, and if it is something that another employer can learn from, can take ideas, we are totally open. I love talking about it. It is passion of mine - and how many times can your passion match up so well with your job?"

Andy Traub will give a presentation on the AMC Theatres' FOCUS Project at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, March 6 & 7, 2012.

Details on the Autism Works National Conference are available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452> or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

The Autism Works National Conference is presented by:



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