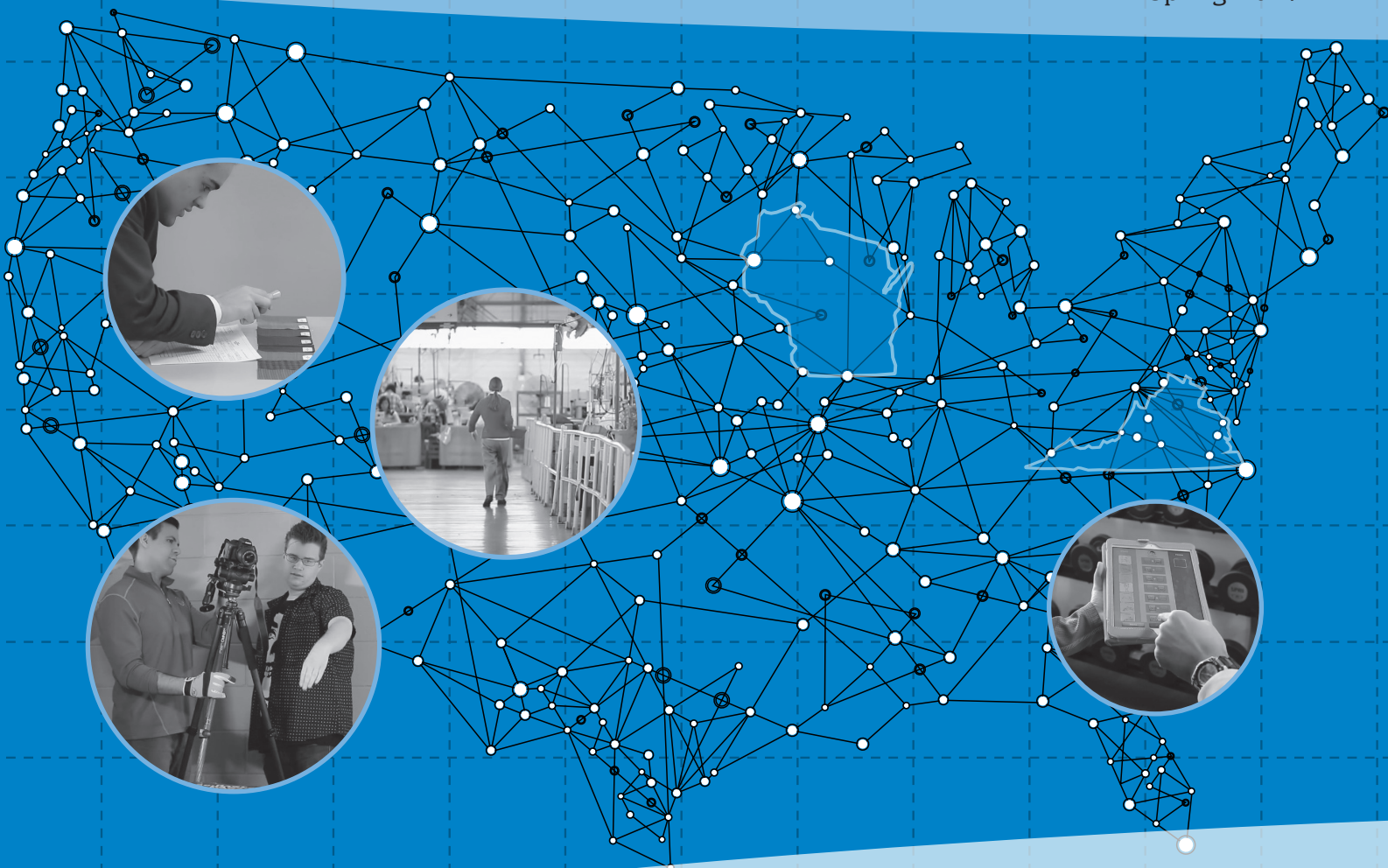


PROMOTING ABILITIES ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

The *dis*Ability Advocate

Spring 2017



UW–Madison researchers connecting with businesses to examine best practices for hiring, retaining workers with disabilities



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Connecting with businesses

Collaborative project examining best practices for hiring, retaining workers with disabilities

Faculty members at UW–Madison are playing important roles in a federally funded research project designed to examine business practices that lead to companies hiring and retaining workers with disabilities.

This initiative is especially important, researchers say, because it's estimated that nearly 60 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed in the United States.

"This project is unique and exciting because it will allow us to work with the private sector on solutions that are important to society," says UW–Madison's Timothy Tansey, an assistant professor with the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education (RPSE).

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is the lead institution on this \$4.37 million Rehabilitation Research and Training Center grant announced in November 2016, with UW–Madison's subcontract on the project worth \$1.75 million. The award is from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research.

Funding will support four studies, two of which will be led by UW–Madison's Fong Chan, the Norman L. and Barbara M. Berven Professor of Rehabilitation Psychology. The overall project, which is being led by VCU Professor Paul Wehman, runs through 2021.

In recent years Chan, Tansey and colleagues within the department have been working with partners in Wisconsin and across the nation on major research projects that aim to assist state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. The state-federal VR program serves about one million individuals per year and spends more than \$2.5 billion in helping people with disabilities achieve their independent living and employment goals.



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— UW–Madison Assistant Professor Timothy Tansey

But this new project will give the UW–Madison researchers and their partners an important opportunity to examine and facilitate employment outcomes for people with physical disabilities in the private sector.

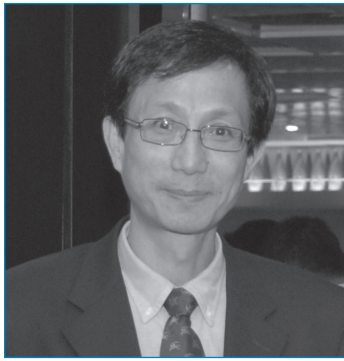
The two projects led by Chan at UW–Madison are:

- ④ An analysis of effective measures utilized by employers to assess outcomes for hiring, retention and advancement of individuals with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to develop and validate a comprehensive employment outcome measure to track hiring, retention, workplace integration, career advancement and quality of employment for people with disabilities.
- ④ A review of literature and in-depth case studies of successful business practices, both in the U.S. and across the globe, to identify key factors in employment outcomes of people with disabilities. As part of this study, researchers will conduct a qualitative case study with nine companies of different sizes that are identified as highly successful employers of people with disabilities.

For example, earlier this year the researchers from UW–Madison conducted a case study of an innovative partnership between apparel manufacturer Hart Schaffner Marx and the company Autism Workforce. The two organizations worked together for more than a year to educate current workers and retool the Hart Schaffner Marx production facility in Des Plaines, Ill. Rather than requiring people with autism to figure out how best to adapt to a typical factory floor, this retooling helped make the workplace a better fit for how people with autism live and think.

A few of the adaptations included: Replacing harsh fluorescent light bulbs with LEDs; painting yellow lines on the floor to help people more easily find their way around the factory; and customizing job descriptions to better explain whether a position takes place in an environment where sounds are loud or requires fine motor skills.

"We consider our company a laboratory of sorts, a place to learn about the best ways to help autistic adults be successful in



“We are working closely with companies of all sizes to learn more about what they are looking for in workers and to study practices that are effective in hiring, training and integrating workers with disabilities into successful businesses.”

— UW–Madison’s Fong Chan, the Norman L. and Barbara M. Berven Professor of Rehabilitation Psychology

the workplace — and then inspire others to do the same,” says Doug Williams, co-owner and CEO of the W Diamond Group Corporation, which is the licensee for Hart Schaffner Marx. Williams has a son with autism.

Another key element at the Des Plaines plant is an exercise room, where employees with autism work out for 30 minutes with a coach prior to their shift. In addition to the health-related benefits, exercise can help calm and reduce stress for people with autism, allowing the workers to stay more focused on the task at hand.

“We feel strongly that what we’ve done in partnership with Hart Schaffner Marx is special,” says Autism Workforce President David Geslak. “We’ve heard it from families and from people who have toured the facility. But having the researchers from UW–Madison examine this is wonderful because we want to find ways to make what we are doing even better and develop this into a more turn-key operation that other businesses can follow.”

Since September of 2016, Geslak says five individuals with autism have been hired to work in four different units within the Hart Schaffner Marx factory under a true competitive employment scenario.



Employees with autism work out for 30 minutes with a coach prior to their shift at the Hart Schaffner Marx facility in Des Plaines. IMAGE ABOVE AND ON COVER CAPTURED FROM AUTISM WORKFORCE VIDEOS.

“Autism Workforce and Hart Schaffner Marx have developed an inclusive, accommodating work environment that provides young adults with autism the opportunity for competitive, integrated employment,” says Tansey. “The benefits of this partnership go beyond the empowerment of individuals with disabilities to other employees who have realized a greater knowledge of autism and a sense of pride to work for a socially responsible company.”

In addition to Chan and Tansey, two other faculty members from UW–Madison’s School of Education are playing key roles with the projects: Brian Phillips, an assistant professor with the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education; and Travis Wright, an assistant professor with the Department of Counseling Psychology. In addition, five UW–Madison doctoral students are gaining valuable experience working on the initiative as project assistants.

The two other studies backed by the research grant are being led by VCU, with the largest of the four involving Bon Secours Virginia Health System, which is regarded as a leader in the hiring of people with disabilities. This project will provide an intensive study of the large health system’s business practices to promote employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

In the years to come, this consortium will be assisted in planning, implementing and disseminating new research knowledge by a range of national partners and consultants that are leading experts on improving the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities.

“We are working closely with companies of all sizes to learn more about what they are looking for in workers and to study practices that are effective in hiring, training and integrating workers with disabilities into successful businesses,” says Chan, who chairs the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education.

