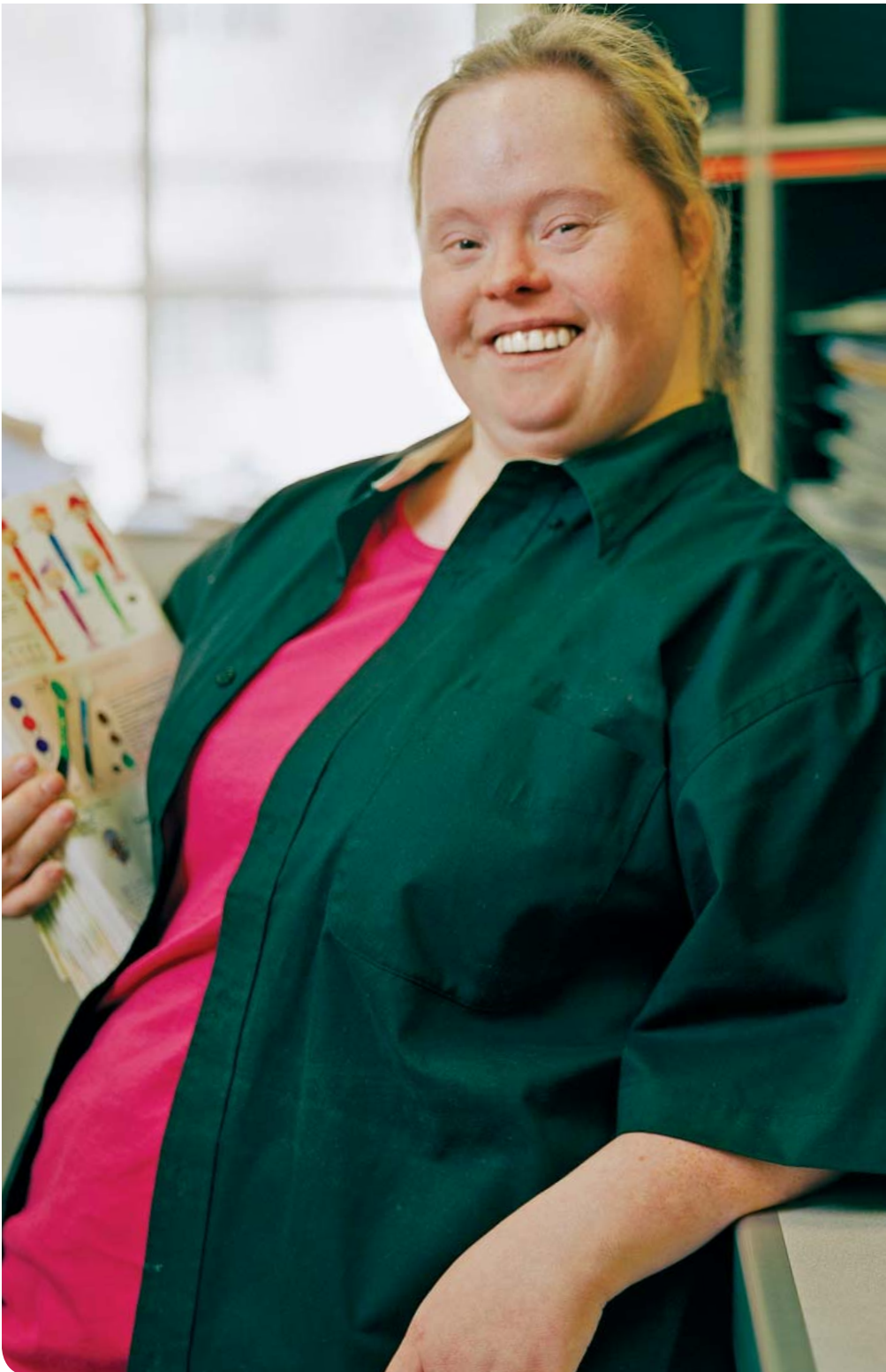


# Quality Work Environment

## GUIDEBOOK



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## GUIDEBOOK

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## Letter from QWE Steering Group

All AbilityOne non-profit agencies (NPAs) share a common focus: to provide our employees who are blind or who have other significant disabilities with opportunities to work in environments that maximize their wages and quality of life. We recognize that our efforts to improve the quality of our AbilityOne employees' work experience must be continuous. We must learn from our colleagues and others in the business community about best, most promising, and emerging practices that will enhance employment opportunities for the specific employee populations we serve.

When we were asked to serve on the AbilityOne Quality Work Environment (QWE) Steering Group by the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, we gladly accepted. We recognized this as an opportunity to launch a continuous improvement process that will facilitate our efforts to:

- ▶ Pause and take stock of our agency's employment practices,
- ▶ Learn about other NPA employment practices,
- ▶ Plan changes in a thoughtful informed manner, and
- ▶ Continue to develop a workplace culture and environment within our agency where employees who are blind or have other significant disabilities can maximize their employment potential.

### **When employees are satisfied, everyone wins—employees, the NPA, and the federal customer.**

So, after a year of research and discovery that included participation by 170 AbilityOne agencies and focused both inside and outside of the AbilityOne NPA community, we are pleased to share with you the *Quality Work Environment Guidebook*. This guidebook was developed by a team of NPAs, representatives from NIB and NISH, and others with employment practice expertise. The Guidebook will serve as a tool to help us continue our efforts to help employees reach their full employment potential.

It is our hope that all NPAs will embrace the QWE Initiative and participate in this process. All of the QWE Steering Group members have committed their agencies to conduct self-assessments and develop QWE Strategic Action Plans. We urge you to do the same and to join us in becoming model AbilityOne employers of choice for people who are blind or have significant disabilities.

Sincerely,

*John Miller*, Chair  
President and CEO, Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin, Inc.

*Robin Usalis*, Vice-Chair  
President and CEO, Clovernook Center for the Blind

## Preface

The Quality Work Environment (QWE) initiative provides a program-wide framework to implement AbilityOne Employer Best Practices, building on nonprofit agency (NPA) ongoing efforts to integrate best, promising, and emerging employment practices into their business operations. QWE is a continuous improvement process that can be tailored to the needs of each AbilityOne agency and its employees. While the QWE process is designed to enhance the employment opportunities of AbilityOne employees who are blind or have other significant disabilities, all of the employees will benefit from the quality employment practices implemented.

### A Continuous Improvement Process

This guidebook suggests approaches for implementing the continuous improvement process, and includes a step-by-step assessment and practice guideline tools to help determine your agency baseline and develop a QWE Strategic Action Plan. The completed QWE self-assessment is for your agency use only; you do not submit assessment scores to the central nonprofit agency (CNA), the Committee for Purchase from People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, or anyone else. It does not matter where you start, as the focus is on improving your agency's practices to better the lives of AbilityOne employees. In the process, your agency will improve business practices, increase service effectiveness and enhance the work environment.

### Alignment with Agency Goals

The Quality Work Environment Guidebook will help your agency become a leader in providing employees who are blind or have significant disabilities with opportunities to optimize their earnings and take advantage of opportunities for advancement, outplacement, or other community-based employment the individual selects through informed choice. QWE will support your agency's goals around competitive employee wages and benefits, employee skill development, employee advancement and employment supports.

### Path to Glory to Be a Model Employer

The AbilityOne QWE initiative will provide your agency with a framework to develop and showcase best, promising, and emerging employment practices as a progressive employer, dismantling others' outdated labels and perceptions of agencies and the AbilityOne Program. Our "path to glory" is a journey to become and continue to be model employers of choice for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities. Because what gets measured gets done, the self assessment and practice guidelines enable you to establish baselines, measure agency progress, and continuously improve your employment practices.

### Built by NPAs for NPAs

By participating in the QWE initiative, your agency can leverage expertise of other NPAs and over a year of research, development and collaboration. This continuous improvement process was developed by a team of AbilityOne executives from NPAs affiliated with National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and NISH, based on employment practices that were shared by 170 NPAs and identified through external research. The recommendations in the QWE Implementation Plan were affirmed unanimously by the Committee for Purchase from People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled.

## **Voluntary Participation**

The QWE initiative is voluntary and not part of any mandatory compliance audit or accreditation process. QWE is simply a standardized method for AbilityOne agencies to integrate quality work environment practices into business operations to create an AbilityOne program culture of maximizing the employment potential of employees who are blind or have other significant disabilities.

## **CNA Support and Assistance**

NIB and NISH are leading by example by adopting the QWE continuous improvement model within their operations. The CNAs are available to support your QWE journey. This may include rollout support, technical assistance, rehabilitation engineering support, ongoing training and communication of implemented practices. In addition, NISH is developing the Employee Research System to support voluntary collection of data about the NPA workforce and the employment outcomes achieved by employees who are blind or have significant disabilities. Feel free to contact the designated NIB or NISH QWE representative if and as needed during the self-assessment, plan development and mission achievement process.





## 1. Introduction

The purpose of the Quality Work Environment (QWE) initiative is to implement new practices and enhance existing practices to improve the quality of work environments to enable people who are blind or have other significant disabilities to achieve their maximum employment potential. This guidebook provides direction to AbilityOne nonprofit agencies (NPAs) in how to implement QWE. QWE is a continuous improvement process that integrates quality employment practices into your agency culture. This process provides AbilityOne workers with disabilities opportunities to attain the highest possible wages and take advantage of career advancement and outplacement into other community-based employment, consistent with the individual's informed choice.

### 1.1 Purpose of Guidebook

This guidebook is a reference to assist AbilityOne NPAs in understanding and implementing the QWE process and QWE practice guidelines, thereby contributing to achieving outcomes that enable employees who are blind or have other significant disabilities to achieve their maximum employment potential. This guidebook and related materials can help your agency:

- ▶ Develop a QWE continuous improvement process tailored to the needs of your agency
- ▶ Understand the spreadsheet tool available to support the QWE process
- ▶ Conduct a QWE self-assessment

*“This collaborative effort reflects the program’s shared vision to enable all people who are blind or have other severe disabilities to achieve their maximum employment potential.”*

— MS. TINA BALLARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMMITTEE FOR PURCHASE FROM PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND OR SEVERELY DISABLED

- ▶ Develop ideas and strategies for implementation
- ▶ Develop a QWE Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans
- ▶ Identify resources to help implement the plan
- ▶ Implement improvements in the work culture and environment

**Appendix A** provides a glossary that defines the QWE-related terms used in this document.

## **1.2 QWE Basics: The Practice Guidelines**

The QWE practice guidelines serve as the foundation of the QWE process. Using input from 170 NIB and NISH affiliated agencies, the QWE Workgroup identified 19 QWE practice guidelines in 4 categories. (See **Appendix B** for the members of the QWE Workgroup, including the Steering Group and the four subcommittees.). Each practice guideline has core and progressive elements, and examples of the core and progressive practices have been documented in each area. The core elements are those the QWE Workgroup judged to have been shown to deliver positive outcomes for employees, to generally be in common use and / or be proven or recognized by a third party such as the International Standards Organization (ISO) or Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and that can be applied across diverse AbilityOne agencies. The progressive elements build on the core elements and take an agency to the next level in terms of being more innovative or cutting-edge. The practice guidelines align to the QWE guiding principles established by the Committee for Purchase from People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled (See Ms. Ballard’s January 15, 2009 memorandum) and essentially serve as goals and objectives of the myriad practices at the NPA level.

### **1. Enhance Wages Through Productivity and/or Other Means**

- 1.1 Provide and improve accommodations and the use of assistive technology to increase employee access to work and productivity.
- 1.2 Design and implement a range of training programs to improve productivity and enhance wages.
- 1.3 Create a work culture that enhances productivity.
- 1.4 Enhance productivity and wages through both monetary and non-monetary incentives.
- 1.5 Offer flexible work options that align organizational and individual needs.

### **2. Create Opportunities for Work of Choice**

- 2.1 Conduct individualized career planning.
- 2.2 Provide training that helps optimize job success.
- 2.3 Provide opportunities for advancement and promotion.

- 2.4 Provide accommodations and other supports that optimize career advancement.
- 2.5 Develop diverse business opportunities that allow for choice and options, working alongside non-disabled employees.

### **3 Provide Access to and/or Navigation Toward Services / Supports / Training / Skill Acquisition**

- 3.1 Partner with organizations and peers in the NPA's local community to promote the capabilities of AbilityOne employees.
- 3.2 Develop relationships with community institutions providing secondary and post-secondary education and other employment training.

### **4 Provide Supports and Flexibilities in the Work Environment**

- 4.1 Incorporate universal design principles into the physical plant.
- 4.2 Provide a healthy environment for all employees.
- 4.3 Ensure the physical safety of all employees.
- 4.4 Promote accommodations and accessibility.
- 4.5 Demonstrate value of the employees.
- 4.6 Provide an inclusive culture through techniques used in the workplace.
- 4.7 Take responsibility for the development of supervisors.

## **1.3 Online Resources**

A variety of resources are available online that will be useful in developing and implementing the Strategic Action Plan. The following resources can be found on the NISH Institute for Economic Empowerment website at [www.InstituteforEmpowerment.org](http://www.InstituteforEmpowerment.org):

- ▶ This guidebook, including appendices.
- ▶ The QWE Spreadsheet, the Excel tool described in this guidebook.
- ▶ The Practice Guidelines, in downloadable form. They also are described in the QWE Section of the Institute website under Practice Areas.
- ▶ The QWE Implementation Plan and its appendices. This plan was approved by the Committee for Purchase in January 2010 and serves as the roadmap for implementation of the QWE initiative at the central nonprofit agency (CNA) level.
- ▶ Memoranda and press releases regarding the QWE initiative from the Committee for Purchase, including:
  - January 15, 2009 memorandum from Ms. Tina Ballard, the Committee's Executive Director, which charged the CNAs with collaborating with the Committee staff and NPAs participating in the AbilityOne Program to identify and implement employer best practices to enhance the quality of the work environment for AbilityOne employees who are blind or have other significant disabilities
  - March 24, 2009 memorandum from Ms. Ballard announcing the appointment of the QWE Steering Group
  - January 15, 2010 press release, "Committee Approves Quality Work Environment Initiative"



- February 1, 2010 memorandum from Ms. Ballard to NPA executives announcing that the Committee voted unanimously to affirm the recommendations in the QWE Implementation Plan
- ▶ NPA Funding Streams and Uses of Funding: Reference List, dated October 30, 2009. This document serves as a reference list and resource guide to a myriad of funding resources, including federal, state, and local funds; private contributions and donations; foundations; grants; and programs such as Medicaid and Medicare.
- ▶ The QWE Clearinghouse, a clearinghouse of information on assistive technology, rehabilitation engineering, and successful management and business practices. Practices are organized by practice guideline and are also searchable using a full text search. Note: Information will be added over time based on information:
  - Submitted in 2009 by NPAs during the development of the QWE initiative
  - Submitted in the future as NPAs share additional outstanding practices

The catalog of training courses available to both NISH and NIB agencies can be found at [http://www.nish.org/trainingcatalog/which\\_courses.html](http://www.nish.org/trainingcatalog/which_courses.html).

A variety of QWE-related resources targeted to NIB-affiliated agencies are available on the NIB website at [www.nib.org](http://www.nib.org).

In addition, NIB developed a short video to introduce the QWE initiatives to NIB-affiliated agencies. This is publicly available on YouTube:

- ▶ *Quality Work Environment Introduction – Jason Bryn, NIB*, YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZqk2E085bY>

## 1.4 Points of Contact for Further Information

Answers to questions and additional information can be obtained by contacting your CNA:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>For NISH-affiliated NPAs, contact:</b><br/>           Martin Gerry<br/>           Executive Managing Director,<br/>           Institute for Economic Empowerment<br/>           and Workforce Development<br/>           NISH<br/>           8401 Old Courthouse Road<br/>           Vienna, VA 22182<br/>           (703) 584-3939 office<br/> <a href="mailto:mgerry@nish.org">mgerry@nish.org</a></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>For NIB-affiliated NPAs, contact:</b><br/>           Jason J. Bryn, J.D.<br/>           Workforce Development<br/>           Program Director<br/>           NIB<br/>           1310 Braddock Place<br/>           Alexandria, VA 22314<br/>           (703) 310-0467 office<br/> <a href="mailto:jbryn@nib.org">jbryn@nib.org</a></li> </ul> |
|---|---|



## 2. The Process: Implementing QWE

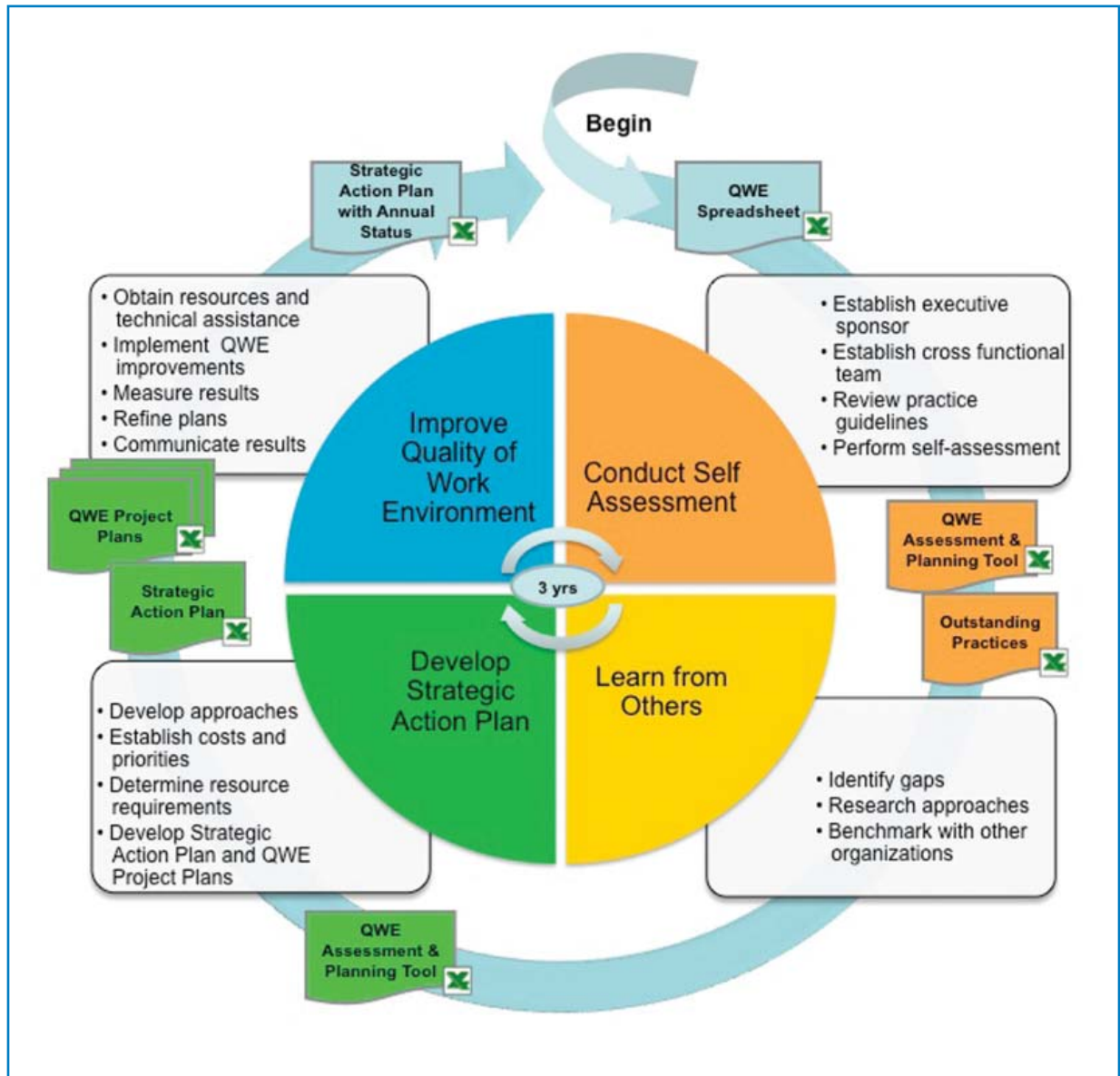
This section describes an overall QWE planning and implementation process; the following section provides specific guidance on how to use the tools that support the process. Each step in the QWE process is intended to add value to the process. You may have already completed some steps, and some may be more important to devote time and energy to than others. This guidance is not intended to be prescriptive; it is provided to assist you in getting started and developing an approach tailored to work for your agency.

The QWE process is a continuous improvement cycle that incorporates planning, project management, and quality improvement concepts. The diagram following shows the four general phases:

1. Conducting the self-assessment
2. Learning from others
3. Developing the Strategic Action Plan
4. Improving the quality of the work environment for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities.

This is a three year cycle, with the all four phases occurring in the first year, and annual updates of the Strategic Action Plan in the second and third year. For each high level phase, the diagram lists the detailed steps you may take as part of the process. The diagram also shows the Excel spreadsheet tools available to support and document your work.

## QWE PROCESS



### 2.1 Conduct Self-assessment

QWE implementation is similar to other continuous improvement processes; it begins with a self-assessment that enables you to pause and take stock of your agency's current employment practices and environment. The resulting score will provide a baseline of the extent to which the agency has already implemented the concepts underlying the QWE practice guidelines. This score will serve as the starting point for the focused improvements the organization plans to undertake, and enable you to measure actual forward progress. The assessment and scores are intended for agency information and internal use only. As you learn more and develop the QWE process, you can focus energies and resources on the areas with the most potential to add value for the workforce and your organization. Success should be measured through both a positive trend in the self-assessment score over time and measurable positive outcomes for employees with disabilities.

**TIP: One approach is to have the senior leadership team serve as the QWE team. This provides an opportunity for leadership to work together to review the agency in a holistic way.**

Specific steps that can be taken in conducting the self-assessment include:

1. **ESTABLISH EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP FOR THE PROCESS.** Initiatives have a much greater potential to yield positive results if they have executive leadership support. A member or members of the executive team could serve as the QWE champion responsible for receiving progress updates, keeping the rest of the executive team apprised, removing obstacles to progress as needed, etc.
2. **ESTABLISH A CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAM.** While there is no magic formula for determining the right team size or composition, you may want to include someone from rehabilitation, someone from business operations, and several other key individuals. Also consider how to include members of the AbilityOne workforce in the process, whether as member(s) of the team that conducts the self-assessment or in later phases of planning and implementation. Designate one person to provide day-to-day management for the team and the QWE process.
3. **FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE PRACTICE GUIDELINES.** The 19 QWE practice guidelines are organized into four categories, with core and progressive elements for each practice guideline, and examples of the core and progressive practices in each area. The QWE team should review the practice guidelines to become familiar with them and to begin thinking about how they apply to your agency. Tab 1 of the QWE Excel Spreadsheet tool described in detail in Section 3 can be printed to provide a hard copy version of the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool which includes the complete practice guidelines. (See Appendix C.1.)
4. **PERFORM THE INITIAL SELF-ASSESSMENT.** The goal of the self-assessment is to establish an accurate baseline upon which to base the improvement planning and implementation. The QWE team conducts the self-assessment using Tab 1, QWE Assessment and Planning Tool in the QWE Excel Spreadsheet tool described in detail in Section 3. If you want to share your success stories, complete Tab 2, Outstanding Practices Worksheet, and send it to the CNA.

## 2.2 Learn From Others

An important step in the QWE process is to learn from others about approaches and employment practices that have worked well in similar environments. Other NPAs are an excellent source of good ideas. Specific steps in learning from others could include:

1. **IDENTIFY GAPS AND QUESTIONS.** Before you can learn from other NPAs, you should determine the focus and identify the questions you are trying to answer. Studying key data for the agency can help identify gaps in knowledge. If your agency has elected to be a participant in the collection of employee data through the NISH Institute's Employee Research System (ERS), ERS reports will be a valuable resource.
2. **RESEARCH APPROACHES.** Having developed a focus and goals for research, there are a number of resources available to assist agencies in conducting research. The QWE Clearinghouse on the NISH Institute for Empowerment website (see [www.InstituteforEmpowerment.org](http://www.InstituteforEmpowerment.org)) has articles about effective QWE practices employed by both

**TIP: If funding to support the costs of implementing improvements is a concern, you may wish to focus upon obtaining additional funding sources. NISH sponsored research on funding sources to support QWE implementation. The resulting document, *NPA Funding Streams and Uses of Funding: Reference List* is referenced in Section 1.3, *Online Resources*, and is available on the Institute website.**

NISH and NIB NPAs. You also might focus on identifying possible sources of funding to support implementation.

3. **BENCHMARK WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS.** Comparing your agency's employment outcomes to those of other NPAs can help in both the assessment of priorities and in the development of planned actions. Reviewing content in the QWE Clearinghouse and making a few phone calls could provide you with valuable information. Data collected through ERS will help you identify both what constitutes outstanding results in a particular situation, and who you could benchmark with to learn more.

## 2.3 Develop Strategic Action Plan

The third step in implementing QWE is to plan and describe how you will bring about change to achieve specific outcomes. The Strategic Action Plan is a high level summary or executive summary of the key actions your agency plans to take to improve the quality of the work environment for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities. Other than the list of outstanding practices, it is the only document created in the entire QWE process that you are asked to share outside your agency. Send it to your CNA to assist them in understanding the status and resource requirements of QWE implementation.

Specific steps that you may take in planning and developing the Strategic Action Plan include:

1. **DEVELOP APPROACHES TO IMPROVEMENT.** Your QWE team should identify actions needed to improve your work environment consistent with the concepts underlying the practice guidelines. The approaches proposed should fit the culture and situation of your agency. Tab 1, QWE Assessment and Planning Tool in the QWE Excel Spreadsheet tool provides a simple tool to capture ideas for possible actions, as described in Section 3.3.
2. **DETERMINE COSTS AND PRIORITIES.** The QWE team should determine the approximate cost of implementing each of the candidate improvements and establish the priority your organization intends to place on improvements in each area. Tab 1, QWE Assessment and Planning Tool in the QWE Excel Spreadsheet tool supports analysis on expense and priorities, as described in Section 3.3.
3. **DETERMINE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S RESOURCE NEEDS.** As part of the planning process the QWE team may want to consider your agency's resource needs. This could be done as part of conducting the self-assessment, developing the plan, and after the plan has been developed as an early step in implementation. You may plan to take advantage of not only resources available



in your community but also technical assistance, financial assistance, and training (courses, webinars, and conferences) provided by your CNA. The CNAs are committed to supporting NPAs in their QWE journeys and working with them to expand the availability of training and other resources. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 explain the technical assistance and training the CNAs have available to support the QWE process.

4. **DEVELOP STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN AND QWE PROJECT PLANS.** The QWE team should identify the 8 to 12 highest priority actions to be undertaken during the next three years and document them on the Strategic Action Plan. They should then develop a QWE Project Plan for each of these high priority actions that provides the specifics of implementing the action. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 provide detail on how to develop the Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans. When it is complete, please send your Strategic Action Plan to your CNA.

## 2.4 Improve the Quality of the Work Environment

After completing the planning and research, the next step is implementation of the Strategic Action Plan. Specific steps that you may take include:

1. **OBTAIN RESOURCES AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.** Some elements of the practice guidelines can be implemented with existing resources, while others may require new resources. Having identified needed implementation resources in the Strategic Action Plan, take the steps necessary to secure those resources. This could involve a wide range of activities such as seeking assistance from NIB or NISH, pursuing grants or donations, obtaining training, or purchasing new technology.
2. **IMPLEMENT QWE IMPROVEMENTS.** Using the Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans, supplemented with research results, your agency should implement the improvements outlined in your plan. You should establish timelines, designate responsibilities, and apply resources to bring about change.
3. **MEASURE RESULTS.** As your agency implements change, it is important to measure progress and results on a regular basis. This enables you to determine the impact of change efforts using facts rather than anecdotes. Measurement tools include ERS, employee feedback and surveys, and productivity time studies. The Strategic Action Plan can be used to track high level status.
4. **REFINE PLANS.** Implementation should be a dynamic process. It may be appropriate to make mid-course adjustments to refine your Strategic Action Plan and/or QWE Project Plans as you measure progress, learn from experience, and identify changes necessary to improve outcomes for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities.
5. **COMMUNICATE RESULTS.** It is important to communicate the outcomes achieved through your QWE process. You should communicate successes both internally to employees and externally to key stakeholders such as donors and government customers. We encourage you to share your successes with your CNA and other NPAs by sharing outstanding practices as described in Section 3.2, submitting stories to the Clearinghouse, or posting to the Forum on the Institute website.

## 2.5 Continuous Learning Process

The QWE process is a continuous learning cycle. You may find that a three year cycle with an annual review is appropriate for your agency's QWE journey. In the first year of QWE implementation, your agency will go through the whole cycle. Subsequently, you may conduct an annual review to review key performance measures for leading and lagging indicators, assess the results being achieved, make mid-course adjustments to the Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans, and provide the updated Strategic Action Plan to your CNA. Every three years may be sufficient for the full cycle of self-assessment, learning from others, developing plans, and implementation.

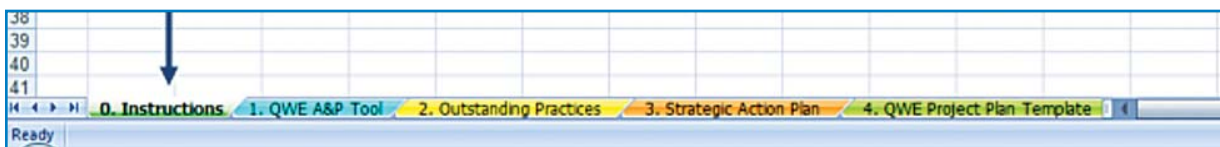
As part of the journey of continuous improvement, the practice guidelines and this QWE Guidebook will be reviewed annually. NPAs are encouraged to provide input and feedback to your CNA on how to refine:

- ▶ The overall QWE process for continuous improvement and establishment of a quality work environment within an agency
- ▶ This guidebook, which provides assistance to NPAs in how to implement a QWE process
- ▶ The practice guidelines, 19 specific strategies to create quality work environments for employees



### 3. Tools to Support QWE Process

This section provides specific guidance on how to use the computerized tools that support the QWE process. These tools are provided as a single Excel spreadsheet file with multiple worksheets or tabs. Please also see Volume 2—Tools for Success.



The tools support the process as follows:

**Conduct self-assessment and preliminary planning:**

- ▶ Complete the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool (Tab 1).
- ▶ Complete the Outstanding Practices Tab (Tab 2).

**Develop Strategic Action Plan:**

- ▶ Complete the Strategic Action Plan (Tab 3).

**Develop QWE Project Plans:**

- ▶ Use Insert / Worksheet and copy / paste to create as many sheets as you have QWE Projects.
- ▶ Complete the QWE Project Plan Template (Tab 4), for each Priority Action / QWE Project.

**TIP: Establish a master file or a location on the network to store and share files related to the QWE process.**

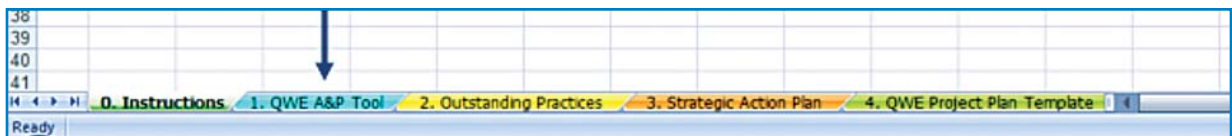
**Send the following documents to your CNA:**

- ▶ Strategic Action Plan
- ▶ Outstanding Practices, if appropriate

The electronic spreadsheet is available on the Institute website as described in **Section 1.3, Online Resources**. Print versions of the tabs or worksheets in the spreadsheet are provided in **Appendix C. Appendix D** provides samples of the worksheets with notional scoring and planning data that illustrate what completed forms might look like.

### 3.1 Assess Using the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool

Tab 1 in the spreadsheet is the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool. This worksheet enables your team to work with the practice guidelines in an integrated manner by allowing you to enter self-assessment scores, ideas for improvement and change, and priority and cost data in a single place, aligned by practice guideline.



The self-assessment is the first step in the QWE process. The team should review and become familiar with the practice guidelines before actually scoring the agency.

Tab 1, the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool is organized by practice guideline. To begin the process, enter the name of the agency and information on the people on the assessment team at the top of Tab 1. The body of the form has section headers for each of the four practice guideline categories:

1. Enhance Wages through Productivity and/or Other Means
2. Create Opportunities for Work of Choice
3. Provide Access to and/or Navigation Toward Services / Supports / Training / Skill Acquisition
4. Provide Supports and Flexibilities in the Work Environment

For each practice guideline, the core elements and examples are listed first, followed by the corresponding progressive elements and examples of the progressive elements. Each element is unique and has its own focus. The examples of the core and progressive elements are provided for illustrative purposes only and are not intended to be a complete list of possible approaches to accomplishing the underlying objective of the practice guideline and element. You may find that some of the examples are relevant and others are not for your agency and your QWE journey.

The intent of the self-assessment is to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation of the 19 practice guidelines. To assist you in assessing the multiple facets of each practice guideline, the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1, supports evaluating both the practice guideline as a whole, and each core element within the practice guideline. If your agency is doing things to address the concept underlying the practice guideline that are not reflected in the core elements, you may elect to only score the overall practice guideline. Alternately, you may find that scoring each element facilitates determining an overall score for the associated practice guideline. For 2010, only core elements are intended to be scored. The QWE Assessment and Planning Tool lists both the core and the progressive elements, but the column for the score is grayed-out for the progressive elements.

Your team should evaluate each practice guideline and, if useful, each core element and assign an appropriate score. While the score for the practice guideline can be the average of the individual scores for the core elements that make up the practice guideline, if some core elements are more important than others in creating a quality work environment in your agency, reflect that in the score.

As you score your organization for the first time, recognize that it is not the score itself that is vital; **it is progress in creating a quality work environment that counts.** A realistic self-assessment is a better launching point for real improvement than scores that are not reflective of the current situation. Realistic scores give your team useful information on where to focus valuable resources of time, money, and energy to yield the best improvements for the workforce.

Each element or practice guideline should be scored on a standard scale. The QWE Assessment and Planning Tool provides a suggested scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest score and 5 being the highest:

1. We have no knowledge in this area or do not do/apply it.
2. We do a little of this, but are unsystematic about it.
3. We have or use some of these practice elements.
4. We widely use practices in this area and are better than average.
5. We are cutting edge or best in class in this area.

For convenient reference, the scoring scale is shown near the top on right side of the form. If an element or practice guideline scored a “5”, it should both be in place throughout the organization, and be superior or “best in class.” A score of 5 implies your agency has fully implemented the practice and is achieving outcomes as a result. A score of 5 is reserved for those instances in which your use

***TIP: The scores on the self-assessment can serve as the baseline for the year and can be used by the agency to track improvements over time.***



**REMINDER: The scores are for internal use and will not be shared external to the organization. The focus should be on how to improve the work environment for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities.**

of the practice has either been recognition from an entity outside your organization, or where there is demonstrable evidence that the approach to the core element yields repeatable, exceptional results, which would not have been achieved otherwise. Conversely, a score of 1 implies the agency either does nothing related to the core element in question, or does not use/apply that element.

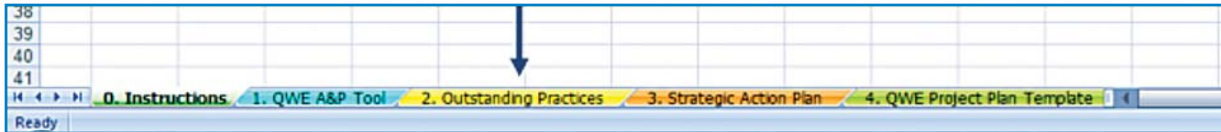
When determining a score, consider both the breadth and depth of the evidence provided. Many organizations have “pockets of excellence” that could be replicated in other areas. For example, you might find that an initial assessment of employees for job fit and use of adaptive tools is done on some contracts but not all. This would be an opportunity to standardize the successful practice to ensure that an assessment is done every time for all employees. Alternately, you might find that an initial assessment is done for each employee, but ongoing period evaluation of the success of the adaptations is not performed systematically. This could be incorporated into your Strategic Action Plan and work practices. Each practice element affords NPAs the opportunity to examine themselves and identify many possible improvements. There are many improvements can be achieved at *little to no cost*, and will yield big dividends in the long run.

One approach to conducting the self-assessment is to apply the following steps to each practice element to be scored:

1. Determine who will assign the initial score to each item. You may wish to divide up the practice guidelines among team members by topic area or some other factor. Alternately, you may decide to do the scoring together as a group. It may be useful to print the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1.
2. Identify any evidence to support analysis and assessment of each practice guideline or core element. Examine policies, procedures, and practices. For those that require direct observation, go to the location(s) where the element applies, observe, and talk with leadership staff **and direct labor employees** where appropriate.
3. Using the 5 point scale, assign a preliminary value to the item. Make any observational notes to help in finalizing the score and planning improvements.
4. Bring the preliminary findings back to the group and hold a follow-up meeting with the scoring team. Discuss what you observed. For those items for which the team feels comfortable finalizing a score, do so. For those that require additional data collection, analysis, or follow-up, gather that additional information and finalize the rest of the scores with the team. Complete the scores on the spreadsheet using Tab 1, the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool.
5. Capture any ideas for improvement or possible actions the team discussed. These will be used in the planning phase, so they can be captured in the *Possible Actions* column on Tab 1, the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool. Save the spreadsheet, scoring notes, and any other pertinent information.

### 3.2 Document Outstanding Practices

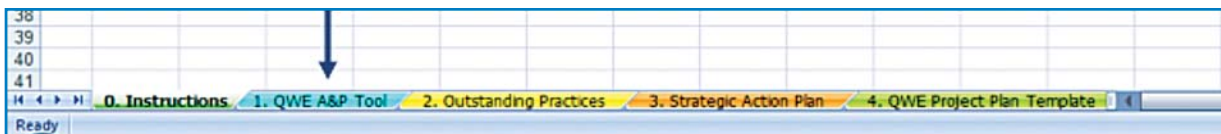
If your agency has created a quality *work environment* as reflected by a score of 5 for a particular practice guideline or element, you have implemented an outstanding practice that might be of interest to other NPAs. If your agency is willing to share ideas, expertise, practices and/or knowledge with others, your success can be leveraged to create quality work environments for employees across the AbilityOne Program. Note that this is not mandatory; this is an optional step to assist other NPAs and in the process obtain some visibility for your agency's hard work.



To begin the process of sharing your success, complete Tab 2, the Outstanding Practices worksheet. Note the number of the relevant practice guideline and element(s), and provide a brief summary of each practice and how it contributes to a quality work environment. Provide this worksheet to your CNA for follow-up; include a point of contact that will be able to provide more information about each practice submitted. The CNA will evaluate the practice for inclusion in the QWE section of the Institute website, as well as consider other approaches to sharing the information with the AbilityOne NPA community.

### 3.3 Plan Using the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool

Not all practice guidelines and elements should, or even could, be worked on at the same time with the same diligence. Once your team has scored the elements as part of the self-assessment, the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1, can be used to analyze and prioritize opportunities for improvement and determine your areas of focus for the next year. If your organization scores highly in the core elements of an important practice guideline and wants to improve further, the progressive elements provide the opportunity to apply cutting-edge concepts or 'best-in-class' approaches.



Your team should complete *Possible Actions, Expense, and Priority*: columns F, G, and H on Tab 1. A simple scale that can be used for *Expense* is one, two or three dollar signs (\$, \$\$, or \$\$\$). The definition of these categories may vary by agency and budget. For example, a large NPA with a large operating budget may consider an expense of \$50,000 as very manageable and a reasonable undertaking given the anticipated improvement, while another agency may determine that the same sum is beyond consideration given their financial and operational situation. Select an expense scale that works for your organization.

You may record *Priority* as High, Medium, and Low, but again, feel free to select a scale that works for your organization.

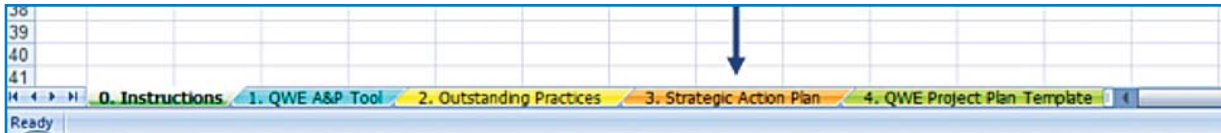
***TIP: Plan to have periodic touch points with the executive sponsor(s) throughout the process. You may want to involve the sponsor in key parts of the process, such as planning and priority setting, or you may want to brief the results of planning for sponsor approval.***

The following steps are one approach to using the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool to analyze possible actions and set priorities:

1. Gather the QWE team. Review the completed self-assessment; this can be done by reviewing the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1.
2. Capture the team's ideas about what actions to take to implement each core or progressive element of each practice guideline. Based upon the self-assessment score and any notes on possible actions for each core element documented during the self-assessment, determine what actions the organization might take to improve. If your organization scored high in the core elements, you may also want to consider the progressive elements for a particular practice guideline.
3. Decide what scale to use for cost and estimate the rough order of magnitude expense associated with implementing the improvement for each element.
4. Based on the practice guideline and element, possible actions and associated expense, determine the priority of making improvements in each core element. If you identified improvements in progressive elements, prioritize these also.
5. Refine priorities by reviewing the information for all of the elements within each practice guideline and across guidelines. Determine if there are any areas in which your organization is particularly lacking or that represent strategic opportunities at this time and thus may be areas of focus.
6. Determine your agency's strategic priorities for improvement for the next one to three years. Some prioritized actions will require more time to implement than others. Identify the most important 8 to 12 actions on which to focus agency resources and energy. Usually, the elements that received the lowest scores in the self-assessment will lead to priority actions, but not always. Sometimes, the team may realize that moving from a 3 to a 4 in one practice guideline will leverage more long-term positive results than moving from a 2 to a 3 in a less vital area. Each of these priority actions will become a QWE project.
7. Review the completed QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1, with the team and executive sponsor to be sure that there are no inconsistencies in the approach to prioritization. Priorities should be viewed in light of the agency's mission, vision, values, business plan, strategic goals and objectives, Board of Directors' philosophy, etc.

### 3.4 Develop Strategic Action Plan

The Strategic Action Plan, Tab 3, provides an easily updated summary of the most important actions that your agency is taking to improve the quality of its work environment for employees who are blind or have significant disabilities. The overall process is one of sustainable, continuous change; the Strategic Action Plan can be used as a tool to support communication and change management as your agency implements improvements.



Tab 3, the Strategic Action Plan has one row for each of the 8 to 12 highest priority actions identified on the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool. It is not intended to capture all of the improvement actions that the organization plans to undertake; instead it should reflect agency priorities and areas of strategic focus. Each row on the Strategic Action Plan represents a priority action or project and should have a supporting QWE Project Plan (See Section 3.5) that lays out the specific tasks and responsibilities associated with implementation.

#### Quality Work Environment - Strategic Action Plan

NPA:  
Point of Contact:

Date:

QWE Project #	Practice Guideline(s)	Element(s)	Desired Outcomes	Name/ Brief Description of QWE Project Plan	Resource Needs	Timeframe	Status

**REMINDER: Note that one priority action may support several elements in one or more practice guidelines. Likewise, one practice guideline element may be addressed in several priority actions.**

The following steps can be used to develop the Strategic Action Plan:

1. Review the completed QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1.
2. Based upon the priority and anticipated expense assigned to the elements of each practice guideline, identify 8 to 12 priority actions from the *Possible Actions* (Column F on the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool). These should be the highest priority actions to be initiated in the next year. Each of these actions becomes a QWE project.
3. Complete one row on the Strategic Action Plan, Tab 3, for each of the priority actions identified above.
  - ▶ Assign a QWE project number to each priority action to track it to the associated QWE Project Plan.
  - ▶ Record the practice guidelines and core elements (or progressive elements) to which the priority action applies.
  - ▶ Describe the desired outcomes of implementation; what is your vision of the impact this change will have?
  - ▶ Provide the project name with a brief description of the actions to be taken; this should summarize what will become the QWE Project Plan.
  - ▶ Describe the resources needed for implementation, **including those needed from the CNAs.**
  - ▶ Specify the timeframe for implementation.
  - ▶ Provide a brief summary of the status of the priority action. For example, some work may already be underway or a priority action may be on hold until funding has been secured.
4. Review the Strategic Action Plan, Tab 3, with your executive sponsor(s) and finalize the plan.
5. Provide the completed Strategic Action Plan to your CNA. To create an electronic version, copy the tab to a new Excel workbook and save it.
6. Update the Strategic Action Plan on an annual basis, noting the status and making any necessary adjustments.

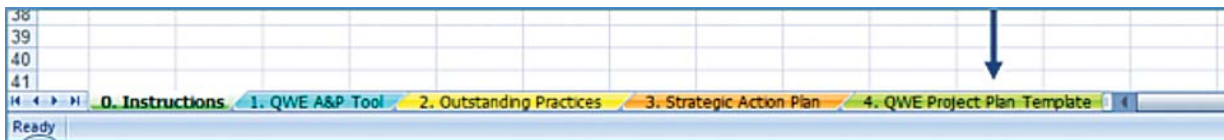
As you review the QWE Assessment and Planning Tool, Tab 1, you may find that some of the possible actions, while not of the highest programmatic priority, may cost your organization very little in the way of time, money or effort to complete. While these lower priority actions may not require QWE Project Plans, completing these early in the process could show some “early wins” in your QWE journey.



### 3.5 Develop QWE Project Plans

A QWE Project Plan should be developed for **each** of the priority actions (QWE projects) included in the Strategic Action Plan. These plans should identify the champion for the priority action and be specific and realistic to ensure effective implementation of the QWE practice guidelines.

The plans should identify the tasks to be done, the target date for completion of each task, the team member responsible for each task, the resources required, as well as status and comments. Tab 4 of the QWE Spreadsheet provides a template for the QWE Project Plan. You may copy the tab to insert as many new tabs (worksheets) into the QWE Spreadsheet as you need to have one for each project. Alternately, some NPAs may prefer to use a project management tool such as Microsoft Project.



The following steps are one approach to developing each QWE Project Plan:

1. Involve a diverse group in the development of the QWE Project Plan, including staff members with various organizational perspectives (e.g., production, quality, sales), employees with disabilities, and subject matter experts as appropriate.
2. Identify one individual who will serve as the champion for the project and have overall accountability for the development and successful implementation of the QWE Project Plan.
3. Starting with the desired outcomes on the Strategic Action Plan, review and finalize the desired outcomes for the project. Identify the vision, in terms of its potential impact on current and future employees, behind the priority action and identify one or more specific, measurable outcomes that are anticipated.
4. List the specific tasks which must be accomplished successfully to achieve these outcomes and identify target completion dates for each task.
5. Determine who will be responsible for completing each task and what resources are needed to accomplish the task by the target completion date.

After developing the QWE Project Plans, you should have a process to monitor progress in implementing each plan. The general steps include:

1. Develop a protocol for tracking tasks and measuring progress (e.g., are tasks falling behind, on target, or ahead of target). The QWE Project Plan template has columns for status and comments to support this process.
2. Determine what training may be needed by the organization and provide or obtain it.
3. Hold regular meetings, track actions, and measure and report on progress in implementing the plan.
4. Modify and update the QWE Project Plans as appropriate within a context of continuous improvement.



## 4. Assistance and Support

This section describes the assistance from NISH and NIB available to support NPAs as you implement QWE processes and improve the quality of work environments for employees. Please avail yourselves of these resources as needed to help ensure successful implementation.

The CNAs are committed to supporting NPAs in your QWE journeys. NIB and NISH will analyze the resource requirements identified on agency Strategic Action Plans to determine how to expand available resources, including possible financial assistance.

### 4.1 Technical Assistance

Technical assistance will be available to support your agency in working through the assessment and planning process and with the implementation of the Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans. Based upon the self-assessment you may identify needs for technical assistance to build capacity and capability to provide quality work environments for employees in accordance with the QWE Practice Guidelines. Assistance will be available in the following areas:

- ▶ Implementing the QWE process, including:
  - Using this guidebook
  - Understanding the practice guidelines

- Conducting the self-assessment
- Developing the Strategic Action Plan and supporting QWE Project Plans
- ▶ Implementing action plans, including:
  - Rehabilitation engineering support
  - Other direct technical assistance
- ▶ Measuring results through participation in the ERS data collection

NIB Workforce Development will visit each NIB affiliated agency to assist in the rollout of the QWE process.

Additionally, for those agencies that have started the QWE journey, the CNAs have committed to visit each participating agency at least once every three years (upon invitation from the NPA) to provide additional on-site assistance and to provide an opportunity for the NPA to showcase unique or cutting edge practices that could be shared with the rest of the NPA community.

## 4.2 Training Resources

As you develop the Strategic Action Plan and QWE Project Plans, you may identify training needs. Using the available training resources, consider creating regular training programs and training plans to support career paths that apply to the AbilityOne employee population.

NISH and NIB provide a variety of training opportunities that may be relevant to your projects and overall QWE implementation. There are approximately 50 QWE-related training courses that exist or are being developed by the CNAs to support your agency in its QWE journey. **Appendix E** provides a training plan that lists the available and planned training courses that support the QWE practice guidelines.

NISH training opportunities are designed to impact the lives of people with significant disabilities by increasing NPA organizational capability and capacity. The NIB programs are designed to help advance the careers of individuals who are blind. To review the list of recommended courses by audience or the entire catalog of training courses available to both NISH and NIB agencies, visit:

[http://www.nish.org/trainingcatalog/which\\_courses.html](http://www.nish.org/trainingcatalog/which_courses.html)

## 4.3 Awards and Recognition

As agencies start their QWE journeys, NISH, NIB, and the Committee for Purchase intend to recognize your efforts and achievements.

A Blue Ribbon Panel, made up of representatives of the CNAs and the QWE Steering Group, will be formed to review “levels of achievement” of agencies as they progress toward mastery of the QWE practice guidelines, and develop their Strategic Action Plans and QWE Project Plans. The Committee For Purchase will work with NIB and NISH to bring public recognition to each NPA for the milestone achievements below through various venues, publications and other media opportunities.

The four levels of attainment that will be recognized are described below:

**LEVEL ONE: QWE JOURNEY BEGUN.** The NPA will be acknowledged for developing a formal Strategic Action Plan and QWE Project Plans and beginning their QWE journey. The trigger that an agency has reached this milestone is when the CNA receives a completed Strategic Action Plan from the agency. Upon receipt of a Strategic Action Plan, the name of the agency will be placed in the appropriate CNA publication and website.

**LEVEL TWO: QWE JOURNEY PROGRESSING.** The NPA will be acknowledged for demonstrating the deployment of one or more core practices in each of the four practice areas.

**LEVEL THREE: QWE CERTIFICATE OF ATTAINMENT.** The NPA will be acknowledged for demonstrating proficiency in applying the core practices in each of the four practice areas.

**LEVEL FOUR: RING OF QUALITY.** The NPA will be acknowledged for demonstrating the development and application of progressive and/or cutting edge practices in addition to proficiency in core practices.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Committee, NIB, NISH, and the QWE Steering Group will review all core and progressive elements of the practice guidelines and update them as needed. As a result, elements that are considered progressive today may become standard core elements in the future, thus reflecting that QWE is a continuous improvement journey.

#### **4.4 Sharing of Outstanding Practices**

The QWE Section of the Institute website will be used to tell NPAs success stories and share outstanding and effective practices among NPAs. When an agency scores a practice guideline or element as a 5 and submits an Outstanding Practices worksheet, NIB or NISH will evaluate the practice for inclusion on the Institute website and in QWE related communications such as newsletter articles. Articles on the website and in newsletters will recognize the contributing nonprofit agency.



# Quality Work Environment

## GUIDEBOOK

The Quality Work Environment initiative is a collaborative effort among the Committee For Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, National Industries for the Blind, NISH – Creating Employment Opportunities for People With Significant Disabilities, the National Council of Work Centers and the National Association for Employment of People Who Are Blind.





