OUR CHAT WITH
KEVIN LYNCH
President and Chief Executive Officer,
National Industries for the Blind

Edited by Ryan Burke
In October 2015, NCMA Executive Director MICHAEL FISCHETTI interviewed KEVIN LYNCH, president and CEO, National Industries for the Blind (NIB), to discuss the various roles NIB plays in ensuring employment opportunities for those who are blind and offering quality products and services to its U.S. federal government customers, as well as his views on leadership and professional development in the profession.

MICHAEL FISCHETTI: Please tell us a little about yourself. What is your current title and what are your responsibilities?

KEVIN LYNCH: I’m Kevin Lynch, the president and CEO of NIB, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. In conjunction with the NIB board of directors and our leadership team, I set the organization’s strategy and priorities, as well as oversee day-to-day operations in support of NIB’s mission.

Please tell us a little about NIB’s mission.
NIB’s mission is to help people who are blind live more independent lives by enhancing their personal and economic independence through purposeful employment—primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment. NIB and its associated agencies serve as the largest employer in the United States for people who are blind.

How does NIB achieve this mission? What challenges do you face?
NIB’s purpose is to transition people who are blind from dependence on government support to a new place of independence as wage-earners and taxpayers. We work with a nationwide network of 94 associated nonprofit agencies to create and sustain a variety of manufacturing and service delivery jobs in support of federal and commercial customers. NIB’s work is important, given that seven out of 10 working-age Americans who are blind are not employed.

Like any successful organization that’s been around for many years, we’ve adapted to changes in our customers’ needs and other external factors to continue to fulfill our mission. Advances in technology have not only led to tremendous growth in the products produced by people who are blind, but also the types of positions available. For example, NIB has been at the forefront of developing new opportunities for people who are blind in career-oriented services positions, from call center operators to contract closeout specialists.

What is your vision for the future of NIB?
With today’s technology, there are very few limits on what a person who is blind can do. We expect this trend to continue and are looking to grow employment in more career fields, such as the vitally important cybersecurity arena. Ultimately, our vision is to ensure that any person who is blind and wants a job has an opportunity.
How does NIB fit into the AbilityOne Program?
NIB was established in 1938 after the passage of the Wagner-O’Day Act. This law requires government agencies to purchase certain products and services produced by people who are blind under a program known today as AbilityOne. NIB is one of two central nonprofit agencies under the AbilityOne Program.

In our role as a central nonprofit agency, NIB coordinates efforts between the U.S. federal government and our associated nonprofit agencies that employ people who are blind in cities and towns across the country. NIB provides the expertise and support they need to develop, negotiate, and perform contracts; market and sell the products they produce; and keep abreast of developments in legislation and regulations that may affect their organizations.

Given the current federal budget scenario and economic austerity, what are NIB’s key initiatives to continue to grow employment for people who are blind as part of the AbilityOne Program?
Although we’re in a dynamic budget environment, NIB continues to anticipate and respond to our federal customers’ needs. Whether it’s launching innovative new products or offering cutting-edge services, our goal is to fulfill our customers’ requirements while at the same time creating jobs for people who are blind.

NIB’s contract management support (CMS) service is an excellent example of a win-win capability in the professional services business line. In 2008, as combat operations involving U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan continued, the Department of Defense (DOD), which was focused on awarding contracts to support critical warfighting missions, discovered it needed support to close out those contracts once completed. In response, NIB partnered with DOD’s Defense Acquisition University to offer training for qualified and educated people who are blind to perform contract closeout services. In this way, NIB developed a pipeline of qualified personnel and a business model designed to deliver “ready-to-close” contracts to government contracting officers. The CMS program focuses on non-inherently-governmental post-award actions, providing critical support to government contracting offices and freeing up DOD personnel to focus on critical, inherently governmental contracting functions.

The results of the CMS services have been truly impressive: To date, CMS contract closeout specialists who are blind have processed and delivered for sign-off more than 240,000 contracts and identified nearly $847 million in deobligated funds that could have been processed through the procurement system.

Let’s talk about you. You have had a successful career in nonprofit management and federal contracting. What previous experiences have you been able to leverage and bring forward into your current position as the president and CEO of NIB?
I’ve had the good fortune of working in support of NIB and the AbilityOne Program for 30 years. Before coming to NIB, I held leadership positions at two of our associated nonprofit agencies. This “on-the-ground” experience really helped me understand the intricacies of day-to-day manufacturing and service delivery operations. More important, however, I’ve been able to observe firsthand the incredible capabilities of people who are blind. Based on my own personal experiences, and countless examples from our federal customers, I know that people who are blind comprise a highly skilled and capable workforce.

As the president and CEO of NIB, how do you measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the services and products NIB provides to the federal government?
We work closely with our customers to understand their requirements and develop cost-effective solutions. Today’s federal buyers demand best-value solutions—affordable, high-quality products and services delivered when and where they’re needed. This requires highly efficient and effective processes on the part of suppliers like NIB. Most of our associated agencies are ISO-certified, and we leverage our nationwide supply chain to shorten delivery times. But more important, quality starts with a highly skilled and trained workforce. Our contract closeout specialists who are blind consistently receive 99-percent quality ratings on their work. Our employees working in call centers far exceed industry averages for key metrics such as call quality and average speed of answer. In addition, our employee turnover rate, a key cost driver, is far below industry averages.

Are there policy or regulatory challenges involved with regard to the AbilityOne Program?
One of the biggest challenges we face is federal agency compliance with the AbilityOne Program. When federal customers purchase commercial products or services that are equivalent to the mandatory AbilityOne products, it has a negative impact on the employment of people who are blind. Federal customers want to do the right thing and make smart buying decisions, but may not be aware of the AbilityOne Program and the requirement to purchase AbilityOne products. NIB makes a concerted effort to educate our federal customers on the AbilityOne Program to help alleviate this problem, but there’s more work that can be done.

What types of training does NIB provide acquisition and contract management professionals about the AbilityOne Program? How could it be improved?
Educating our federal customers about the AbilityOne Program and the capabilities of people who are blind is an important part of mission success for NIB. We deliver formal and informal training in many different venues and formats, including AbilityOne training events at federal agencies for purchase card holders, training at the Defense Acquisition University, and Federal Acquisition Institute webinars for federal customers. We’re always available to provide training on NIB or the AbilityOne Program to federal customers and commercial partners.

What are your goals for the near future for NIB?
NIB’s goal is to grow employment opportunities for people who
are blind. To do this, we’re focused on increasing sales in the federal market, but we’re also exploring new markets for our products and services. And we’re working hard to ensure that people who are blind have the training, experience, and skills needed to build successful careers in these new areas.

Another near-term goal of ours is to step up our outreach and engagement among federal customers, elected officials, and other stakeholders to ensure they’re aware of NIB and the important work we do. The NIB board has been extremely supportive in approving and funding innovative programs, such as our “Business Leaders” program, the contract closeout program, and a new cybersecurity pilot we’ve developed to meet an emerging critical need. I would like to continue these efforts to open up new career opportunities by helping to develop programs geared toward supporting individuals who are blind who would like to run their own businesses.

Considering your experience, what advice or guidance would you like to share for those just entering the contract management field, or who may be relatively new to it?

I think it’s helpful to gain experience and exposure to as many different facets of an organization as you can. I started in operations, but also worked in contracting, business development, marketing, and other areas. Gaining experience in various parts of the business helped prepare me for the challenges of leadership. Stepping out of your comfort zone into a different or unfamiliar position broadens one’s perspective and experience, builds confidence, and ultimately makes you more ready to assume positions of greater responsibility. Volunteer for those opportunities!

Your participation in this interview and Contract Management Magazine is an integral part of the professional development component for NCMA’s more than 20,000 members around the world. What are your thoughts on the importance of professional development?

Never underestimate the value of professional development. Any training or education—formal or informal—can pay dividends for career success. I realize we all have busy schedules, but I encourage my staff to always make time for learning. So many excellent resources are available nowadays—particularly with the Internet—and the opportunities to grow your knowledge base are nearly limitless.

I briefly mentioned our “Business Leaders” education program before. This program helps agencies develop their high-potential employees who are blind for positions of greater responsibility. Also, within NIB itself, we’ve initiated an internal development program for mid-level managers to give them the tools they need to help make our organization even more effective.

I think it’s vitally important to invest in professional development.

In your opinion, how can NCMA, as the professional organization for contract management professionals, better help you meet your responsibilities and challenges?

As contract management professionals working in the federal marketplace, we’re all facing the same challenges, such as shifting budgets, changes in procurement policies and regulations, and potential government shutdowns. NCMA’s timely insights on the ever-changing contract management landscape provide us with guidance and best practices for dealing with the profession’s biggest challenges. NIB leverages NCMA’s educational opportunities—such as its World Congress, webinars, and other events—to stay current on today’s emerging issues.

ABOUT KEVIN LYNCH

KEVIN A. LYNCH has served in various leadership roles at NIB since joining the organization in 1994. He was appointed to his current position as president and CEO by the NIB board of directors in August 2008. Since then, NIB and its network of associated non-profit agencies have greatly increased employment opportunities for people who are blind. He has also overseen the expansion of SKIL-CRAFT® product development, the creation of new services, the growth of the “Base Supply Center” (BSC) program with 150 stores nationwide, and a long-term integrated strategic planning effort.

Previously, as senior vice president of marketing and operations, he oversaw the development of products and services for addition to the Federal Procurement List, in addition to contract administration, pricing support, marketing, military commissary and exchange
programs, and commercial distribution partner relationships. Under his leadership, NIB developed several major channels of distribution, including e-commerce business and BSC retail operations in the United States and its territories.

Prior to joining NIB, he served as the executive director of Georgia Industries for the Blind and as the director of manufacturing for the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired of Greater Rochester, New York.

Send comments about this interview to cm@ncmahq.org.

ENDNOTES

1. Editor’s note: See www.nib.org for more information.
2. Editor’s note: NIB utilizes a network of associated nonprofit agencies nationwide. Currently, this network consists of 94 associated nonprofit agencies. NIB-associated agencies provide people who are blind with employment and rehabilitative services, and offer the federal market a variety of services offerings, as well as SKILCRAFT® and other AbilityOne products. For more information, see www.nib.org/associated-agencies/find-agency.
4. Editor’s note: NIB was first incorporated 77 years ago in 1938. (See, generally, note 5.)
5. Editor’s note: NIB was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) private, nonprofit corporation on August 10, 1938—shortly after the Wagner-O’Day Act was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 25, 1938. (This law would eventually be expanded into the Javits-Wagner-O’Day Act by the 92nd U.S. Congress in 1971.)
6. Editor’s note: NIB operates under the AbilityOne Program, established by the Javits-Wagner-O’Day Act (41 U.S.C. 46, et seq.), which was designed to assist those who are blind or have significant disabilities find employment. The program is administered by the Committee for Purchase from People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, an independent federal agency, with assistance from NIB and SourceAmerica. See www.nib.org, www.sourceamerica.org, and www.abilityone.gov for more information on NIB, SourceAmerica, and the AbilityOne Program (respectively).
7. Editor’s note: The other being SourceAmerica (see ibid.).
8. Editor’s note: For more information on NIB’s CMS service, see www.nib.org/services/contract-management-support.
9. Editor’s note: I.e., certified with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). (See www.iso.org.)
10. Editor’s note: See www.nib.org/careers-training/business-leaders-program.
11. Editor’s note: I.e., NIB’s CMS service, see note 8.
12. Editor’s note: See note 10, op cit., for more information.