

AN EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO HIRING
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:
THE UNTAPPED WORKFORCE



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OVERVIEW

Thank you for your interest in promoting accessibility and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Did you know that people with disabilities represent one of the largest untapped human resource pools? Nationally, there are over 15 million unemployed working-age people with disabilities. Two-thirds, 10 million, want to be employed.¹

In these times of high demand for competent employees who will stay on the job and advance, people with disabilities prove to be a rich human resource for jobs at all levels.

Deciding to employ people with disabilities either as an outsourced and supervised workforce or as individual employees is a sound business decision.

People with disabilities offer companies the opportunity to hire qualified, motivated, productive, and reliable employees while enhancing their stance on affirmative action, workforce diversity, and community improvement; and your firm may be eligible for financial tax incentives.

Hiring people with disabilities is a commendable commitment when considering the rewards of productive employment:

- Self-sufficiency and social empowerment
- Development of new skills
- Heightened self-esteem and dignity
- Higher degree of integration
- Opportunities for advancement

¹ *Business Week*, "The New Workforce: A Tight Labor Market Gives the Disabled the Chance to Make Permanent Inroads" March 20, 2000

WHAT IS DISABILITY?

A person with a disability is any person who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment which limits one or more major life functions;
- Has a record of such an impairment; or
- Is perceived as having such an impairment.

Life functions cover a broad spectrum of activities and include: thinking, eating, running, processing information, listening, seeing, hearing, breathing, and walking. The types and degree of limitation are as varied as grains of sand on the beach. A person's limitation in one area does not necessarily affect other areas.

In reality, how a disability affects a person's life and the ability to work and live independently primarily depends on three factors:

1. How the person views him/herself;
2. How others view the person;
3. The physical environment in which the person exists.²

Living with a disability is a social phenomenon resulting not only from medical considerations like disease and impairment, but also from the interactions of a person with society at work, in recreation, and in social situations, which can either help or hinder access to support³

² Minneapolis Commission on Civil Rights/Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights

³ *Business Week*, "The New Workforce: A Tight Labor Market Gives the Disabled the Chance to Make Permanent Inroads" March 20, 2000

COMMON MYTHS AND FEARS

Myth: People with disabilities are a small segment of the U.S. population.

Fact: People with disabilities are the largest single minority group in the country.

Myth: Disability is an unusual, pathological condition.

Fact: Disability is a part of life, experienced at some time by almost everyone. “Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the rights of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers, and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural and educational mainstream of American Society.”⁴

Myth: Job performance and productivity of workers with disabilities will be lower than that of workers without disabilities.

Fact: Workers with disabilities are often more proficient, productive, and efficient than their peers without disabilities according to researchers. “Job performance by workers with disabilities was equal to or better than fully functioning peers,” noted a 30-year DuPont study.⁵

Myth: The attendance and safety records of workers with disabilities will be poor.

Fact: Employees with disabilities have had 90% above-average safety and attendance records, far above the norm. People with disabilities can often be far more loyal to the employers who hire them and are less likely to be lured away by a bigger paycheck.⁶

Myth: People with disabilities are limited in the work they can do.

Fact: The National Disability Council reports a 50% jump in requests for workers with disabilities from firms as diverse as Merrill Lynch to Microsoft, explained Microsoft director of diversity, Santiago Rodriguez.⁷ “Workers with disabilities do everything from working on the production line to operating high technology equipment,” explained Philip Kosak, president of Carolina Fine Snacks in Greensboro, North Carolina.⁸

Myth: People with disabilities will substantially increase employers’ insurance costs.

Fact: The Work Incentives Improvement Act, passed in December 1999, quells this concern by allowing workers with disabilities to continue their federally funded Medicaid benefits, even when privately employed.

Myth: Workers with physical or mental impairments are so different from the rest of the workforce that they will not integrate well, and there will be resentment among other employees.

Fact: “Our experience has been that once a person with a disability is working with other people, the human element enters in... There aren’t a lot of things we all agree on, but one of them might be helping people to do their best and have integrity and pride in their work. When they see the human element, people who may have been adversaries become allies.” (Article on employing people with disabilities in the Great Falls Public Schools, Personnel, January ’88.

⁴ Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended in 1992

⁵ *Business Week*, “The New Workforce: A Tight Labor Market Gives the Disabled the Chance to Make Permanent Inroads” March 20, 2000

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Business Week*, “The New Workforce: A Tight Labor Market Gives the Disabled the Chance to Make Permanent Inroads” M:

⁸ *Nations Business*, “A Very Able Workforce” October, 1998

INTERVIEWING A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

It's perfectly normal to experience uncomfortable feelings about interviewing a person with a disability. It's hard to know if you should open the door for a person in a wheelchair, communicate in a special way to a person with mental illness, or extend your hand in customary handshake fashion to a person with an artificial hand.

Most of us like to think that disabling conditions happen only to other people, yet we confront the real fear that it could happen to us each time we come face to face with a person with a disability.

How do you get past all of these human feelings and get on with the business of conducting an interview?

- Recognize that your fears are not uncommon. Accept them and don't let them present a barrier to the opportunity to hire a qualified candidate.
- Remember that a person with a disability is not "unable". A disability in one area does not affect all other areas.
- It's okay to simply ask the person if he/she needs assistance. Follow the lead of the person with the artificial hand when deciding whether or not to handshake. Use both common sense and sensitivity.
- Base your job requirements on a valid job description that includes information about mental requirements, environmental conditions, and physical activity, as well as the identification of the job's essential functions.
- Ask questions that will help you determine if the applicant can perform the functions of the job.
- Remember that disabilities may affect the way the person speaks or appears in an interview, but may have no bearing on the person's ability to do a good job. Don't let a disability persuade you to reject an otherwise qualified candidate.

Read the Americans with Disabilities Act and subsequent interpretive guidelines to be sure to conduct a completely legal interview.

INTERACTING WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

WHAT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SAY

Individuals with disabilities tell us that they want to be treated as other employees. They want to follow the same rules and regulations. They want to be treated fairly, with the same opportunities for growth and development. They want to be told when they are doing a good job and when they are not doing a good job.

In order for a person with a disability to perform the job, some type of modification may be necessary. This is called job accommodation. Identifying and utilizing a job accommodation is often the difference between not being able to perform the job, and being able to perform the job. Most accommodations typically can be made at minimal costs.

The accommodation quickly becomes a “natural support;” emphasis is focused on performance and ability, not disability.

HOW SHOULD I REACT TO A PERSON WITH A VISIBLE DISABILITY?

It’s okay to discuss the disability when the person does. Asking if a person wants help opening doors or maneuvering allows the opportunity for a “yes” or “no” response, eliminating any guessing. People with disabilities want to be as independent as possible, and usually don’t want special attention.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY?

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect for privacy as you would the rest of your employees. Your entire workforce doesn't need to know specific disabilities of individual persons, but the worker's supervisor and human resources department may need to know what accommodations, if any, are necessary. If the details about the disability are important to understand, the individual's supervisor and/or others who may need to know should be informed.

WHAT IS THE (ADA) AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT?

The passage (8/90) of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in Congress redefined disabilities and discrimination. It has introduced the idea of “reasonable accommodation” and “undue hardship” into the private sector. Formerly, under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, federal contractors, hospitals, schools, municipalities, and social agencies were the only employers expected to make accommodations.

The ADA has required companies to become accessible to people with disabilities in terms of physical accessibility and employment policies and practices. Every company that has more than 15 employees is subject to the regulations of the Act. In addition to indicating what essential tasks or duties are involved in a job, job descriptions should state the degree and type of physical activity (lifting, e.g.) mental requirements, and the environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, e.g.) required or involved on the job. With an accurate description available, rational decisions can be made regarding the degree to which reasonable accommodation is possible.

The ADA also impacts public services, public accommodations and services operated by private entities, telecommunications, and public transportation.

WHAT IS THE WORK INCENTIVES IMPROVEMENT ACT?

The Work Incentives Improvement Act, passed into law in December 1999, quelled employers' fears that hiring people with disabilities would adversely affect insurance rates. The law enables persons with disabilities to retain their Medicaid benefits after obtaining private employment.

WHAT ABOUT JOB ACCOMMODATION?

The majority of accommodations necessary cost virtually nothing. Almost 70% of people with disabilities say they need no special equipment to perform their jobs. Nearly 20% of accommodations cost nothing, and another 50% cost less than \$500⁹. Employers have found their investments in reasonable accommodations to be returned multifold with dependable and productive long-term employees.

The following exemplify typical accommodations for workers:

- Flexible Scheduling
- Support During “Learning Curve” Periods
- Extra Breaks
- Job Coaching
- Commensurate Wage Pay System
- Increased In-Depth Training
- Buddy System For Emergency Evacuation
- Purchase Of Stools To Allow For Individuals Needing To Alternate Sitting And Standing Postures
- Keyboard And Table Height Adjustments
- Intermittent Trainer Support For Competitive Placements

⁹ *Nations Business*, “A Very Able Workforce” October, 1998

JOB ACCOMMODATION RESOURCES

Job Accommodation Network
President's Committee on Serving People with Disabilities
1-800-526- 7234
janweb.icdi.wvu.edu

National Easter Seal Society
312-726-6200
www.eastersealchicago.org

Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board
202-272-5434
www.access-board.gov

IBM Accessibility Center
www-3.ibm.com/able

Office of Disability Employment Policy
US Department of Labor
202-376-6200
www50.pcepd.gov/pcepd

Jewish Vocational Service
952-591-0300
www.jvsmn.org

THANK YOU

Thank you for the priority you place upon hiring people with disabilities. Your actions create win-win-win benefits for people with disabilities, your company, and the community.