

Employing Individuals of All Abilities – A Guide for Employers

The following are excerpts from the EmployAbility Toolkit, compiled by a consortium of agencies and disability organizations to assist employers with information on employing people of all abilities, dispelling myths, and helpful tips to get started.

The Business Case

The business case hiring a qualified person with a disability brings greater benefits beyond filling an open job. There's solid business case, too. Here are just a few of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities:

Reason #1: Return on Investment. Businesses that employ people with disabilities turn social issues into business opportunities. These opportunities translate into lower costs, higher revenues and increased profits. Capitalize on the ROI of employing people with disabilities:

INCREASE REVENUES

- Access new markets
- Improve productivity through innovative and effective ways of doing business

REDUCE COSTS

- Reduce hiring and training costs
- Increase retention

ENHANCE SHAREHOLDER VALUE

- Capitalize on opportunities to meet business goals

Reason #2: Marketing. Customers with disabilities and their families, friends and associates represent a trillion dollar (that's \$1,000,000,000,000. TWELVE ZEROS) market segment, according to the U.S Dept. Of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy's AskEarn.org. They, like other market segments, purchase products and services from companies that best meet their needs. A large number of Americans say they prefer to patronize businesses that hire people with disabilities.

Another benefit of employing people with disabilities is increasing your opportunity to gain a lasting customer base. Very often these are employees who will stick with you through thick and thin, as long as you stick with them.

CAPITALIZE ON NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

- Mirror the market to attract a wider customer base
- Increase your market share

DEVELOP NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Respond to marketplace needs
- Lead your market
- Increase profitability

Reason #3: Innovation. Innovation is key to the success of your business. Employees with disabilities bring unique experiences and understanding that transform a workplace and enhance products and services. As part of

your team, these employees can bring these experiences to bear, helping to build your business and lead your company into the future, together.

WORKPLACE INNOVATION

- Create more efficient and effective business processes
- Develop and implement management strategies to attract and retain qualified talent
- Use technology in new ways to increase productivity

PRODUCT AND SERVICE INNOVATION

- Stimulate new product and service development through disability-inclusive diverse teams
- Customize products and services to increase profitability

DEFINE THE FUTURE

- Foster the development of next-generation products and services (Sources: ThinkBeyondtheLabel.com, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy)

What Do We Mean by the Term "Disability"?

Disability includes a wide range of conditions. A few examples:

- paralysis
- blindness or visual impairment
- deafness or hard of hearing
- intellectual or developmental disabilities
- learning disabilities
- psychiatric disabilities and mental health conditions
- epilepsy
- chemical sensitivity
- head injuries
- cerebral palsy
- HIV/AIDS
- and many others

Disability impacts people's lives in a wide variety of ways, and the level of impact can range from minimal to extensive. In some cases, a person's disability is a minor inconvenience, something that is controlled through medication, or requires some simple adaptations. In other cases, a person's disability plays a major role in their lives, impacting their ability to earn a living, to participate in activities in the community, and to do many of the things that many non-disabled people take for granted in their daily lives.

Disabilities are often not apparent. Learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis are just a few of the many disabilities that are often hidden. Never presume that someone doesn't have a disability just because you can't see it.

Disability is a natural part of the human existence. Plain and simply: disability is only one part of a person's identity. It is not something to be fixed or looked down upon. People with disabilities have the same right as anyone else to full participation in society.

Legal definitions vary considerably. A person may be considered disabled under the Americans with Disabilities Act but not by their state's vocational rehabilitation agency. Also, particular conditions specify the criteria that a

person must meet in order to have that condition. For example, not all people who wear glasses have a visual impairment. The following are some important legal definitions of disability:

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual;
- A record of such an impairment; or
- Being regarded as having such an impairment.

Social Security

- The inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The term individual with a disability means any individual who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment which for such individual constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment and
- Can benefit in terms of an employment outcome from vocational rehabilitation services.

Dispelling Myths

Have you heard some of the common misconceptions about hiring individuals with disabilities? Industry reports consistently rate workers with disabilities as average or above average in performance, attendance, and safety (DuPont report). When it comes to employee retention and reduced turnover costs, research has found that workers with disabilities are not “job hoppers.” On the contrary, they are inclined to remain in their jobs longer than the general workforce.

The following dispels some of the common myths.

Myth: Individuals with disabilities do not have the right skills for business. Employees with disabilities have strengths, traits and qualities that make them valuable to the workforce, including perseverance, problem solving, goal setting and determination. Often their unique characteristics and skills are well-suited to a particular business. For example, while some employees may find repetitive work boring, others thrive on routine and predictability. Often, too, there are many untapped educated minds in the pool of candidates with disabilities.

Employees with disabilities can take advantage of many training opportunities to help them acquire the skills needed. In addition, some people with disabilities can benefit from job developers and job coaches who assist them while they are learning.

Additionally, a Harris poll discovered that 82 percent of managers said it isn't any harder to supervise employees with disabilities than it is employees without.

There are extensive benefits to a company that employs people with disabilities, such as having reliable and loyal workers, diversifying the talent pool and even saving money.

Myth: Supports in the workplace would be too costly. According to the National Center on Workforce and Disability (NCWD) the majority of employees— at least 73 percent—don't require any type of accommodation. Of the ones that do, 51 percent cost less than \$500. For some excellent examples of accommodations, visit the National Center on Workforce and Disability (NCWD). And as an added bonus, these accommodations have been found to benefit other employees without disabilities.

The most requested accommodation is a flexible work schedule, which costs nothing.

According to Bradley Bellacicco of the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce, “Any operation that has more than a handful of workers is going to have to make accommodations. This might include not asking an employee with a

bad back to lift a heavy box or not requiring an employee with poor eyesight to read fine print. You're not doing something unusual. You're accommodating the people you work with without even thinking about it."

Finally, the federal government offers tax incentives to help employers pay for any accommodations or modifications that will make their businesses accessible to persons with disabilities. (Studies indicate, however, that the number one reason employers hire people with disabilities is NOT the tax credits or incentives; it is because employees with disabilities are loyal, dependable and remain on the workforce longer than other employees.)

Myth: Employees with disabilities can be easily offended. Common etiquette can avoid hurt feelings. Many people worry that they may say the wrong thing to a person who has a disability, but people with disabilities know that others may not know the appropriate language. People with disabilities are people first. Using language that puts the individual first (i.e., person with a disability, not the disabled; or someone who uses a wheelchair, not wheelchair-bound) is common sense. If you are unsure, don't be afraid to ask the individual what he or she prefers.

There are a number of things employers can do to include people with disabilities in your workforce. The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) recommends several strategies including:

- Conduct training for employees including discrimination prevention and ADA-specific training for managers and supervisors.
- Committing to diversity and equitable employment for all individuals regardless of their disabilities.
- Surveying employees to understand their perceptions of inclusion or bias.
- Offering mentoring opportunities and including employees with disabilities.
- Focus recruiting and retention efforts on employees with disabilities.
- Include diversity and inclusion effectiveness as part of supervisors' job responsibilities.

Myth: Coworkers may not want to work with people with disabilities and their productivity will decrease. People with disabilities who have overcome challenges and who demonstrate a strong commitment and loyalty to the employer are often a positive influence on their coworkers.

Myth: Getting information on hiring and working with people with disabilities is expensive and time consuming. There are a number of available financial resources for employers. Although most employers do not consider financial incentives and tax credits as their main reason for hiring individuals with disabilities, employers that hire individuals who have a disability can trim their labor costs through many available workforce and economic development programs through their respective states. Employment-based tax credits may also save your business money by cutting federal or state tax liability. In addition, The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a federal tax credit that benefits businesses that hire and retain workers with various barriers to employment.

Myth: Hiring people with disabilities makes businesses vulnerable to litigation. There is no evidence that supports this, as very few businesses experience disability-related claims.

Myth: Supporting people with disabilities can adversely affect the business's bottom line. It's actually the opposite. Hiring people with disabilities provides businesses with a competitive advantage. Research has shown that people have a more favorable view of businesses that employ people with disabilities and would prefer to patronize these businesses. People with disabilities are also customers who spend billions of dollars annually on purchases. Disability friendly businesses earn the patronage of individuals with disabilities, their families and their friends. In addition, some of the accommodations that benefit people with disabilities, such as automatic door openers, talking ATMs and accessible websites also benefit people without disabilities, and as our population ages, the need for greater accessibility also increases.

Myth: Hiring workers who have disabilities increases workers compensation insurance rates. Insurance rates are based solely on the relative hazards of the operation and the organization's accident experience, not on whether an employer has hired workers with disabilities.

Improve Your EmployAbility

When you're looking at hiring qualified employees with disabilities, here are some tips from successful employers to help you get started:

- Learn about local available resources for training, awareness and support.
- Create opportunities for job shadowing where a new employee can learn the job by watching and working alongside a coworker who can teach him or her.
- Conduct informational interviews.
- Host a Disability Mentoring Day.
 - Participate in the U.S. Department of Labor's National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).
- Embed disability components into training for HR and new employees, and include disability in diversity training.
- Participate in job fairs.
- Create internships.
- Join the Business Leadership Network in your state.
- Connect with Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies in your state and work with them on how you can participate; distribute position announcements to them.

Helpful Websites

- US Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy (www.dol.gov/odep/)
- Americans With Disabilities Act (www.ada.gov/)
- Think Beyond the Label (www.thinkbeyondthelabel.com/)
- AskJAN (www.askjan.org/)
- Disability.Gov (www.disability.gov/resource/national-disability-institute-ndi/)
- Institute for Community Inclusion (www.communityinclusion.org/)
- National Center on Workforce and Disability (NCWD) (www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=59)
- Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) (www.askearn.org/)
- Northeast ADA Center @ Cornell University (www.northeastada.org/)
- Internal Revenue Service (www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/tax-benefits-for-businesses-who-have-employees-withdisabilities?_ga=1.205889808.2068179500.1435337635)