

PROTECTED TOMORROWS

WHY WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES ARE OFTEN A COMPANY'S BEST ASSET

BY CICILY CORBETT

1776 was the year our country achieved its independence. It was also the year in which the great economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*. In it he observed, "By pursuing his own interest [an individual] frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it." In other words, by doing well, a person will end up doing good.

Businesses shouldn't be faulted for paying attention to the bottom line. In a capitalist economy, if they don't make money, they won't be able to survive. Unfortunately, business owners and managers don't always understand best practices and how to implement them.

A company is only as good as its workforce. Most hiring managers will speak to the necessity—and usually the difficulty—of finding employees with competitive skills, superior productivity, and low rates of absenteeism. Once these workers are located and hired, the problem becomes retaining them. The ultimate challenge is getting everyone in the workplace to operate as a team.

In many cases, workers with disabilities may be the solution to hiring problems, but employers are not aware of it. Lack of familiarity with people with disabilities has nourished negative attitudes concerning their employment. The facts show that these workers are often a company's best asset.

Competitive skills are of course the basic requirement for job competence. Employers should not focus on an applicant's *disability*, but rather on his or her *abilities*. The use of a wheelchair or a braille reader, for example, does not mean the person does not have education, training, or experience. In fact, many persons with disabilities have had more training than their counterparts without disabilities.

Every state has a Public Vocational Rehabilitation program which is jointly funded by federal and state governments. In Massachusetts, for example, it's the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Non-profits like Goodwill Industries also exist for training people with disabilities.

"We've been around for fifty years," said a spokesperson from one of the state agencies. "We have to do a good job of training and placement or employers won't come back." These agencies provide diagnostic evaluations, interest and aptitude testing, college or

vocational training, and skills training. Graduates of their programs are prepared to work in fields they like and for which they're not only trained, but well suited.

“We have 45 people on our Business Advisory Council,” the representative continues. “It’s not pure altruism on their part to volunteer. By participating in the Council, they have access to qualified individuals for their own hiring needs.”

Catherine Capek is Vice President of Industrial Services for Goodwill Industries of the Springfield/Hartford Area, Inc. One of her responsibilities is finding contract jobs for her teams of workers with disabilities. She recalls trying to get a contract with Baystate Medical Center, one of the top 100 integrated health care networks in the country. Capek was turned down—told that the hospital had very rigorous standards and their own certification program.

“Come and teach us to clean according to your standards,” she challenged them. A member of the hospital staff accepted the challenge. Soon Capek’s team will be able to tell potential employers that they have been trained to Baystate Medical Center’s exacting standards. And perhaps they’ll eventually win a contract with the hospital itself.

Along with competitive skills goes the need for productivity. Here again, workers with disabilities excel. People who face and overcome challenges on a daily basis are great problem solvers. According to studies dating back to the 1950s at DuPont, “employees with disabilities equal or exceed coworkers without disabilities in job performance, attendance and attention to safety.”

“Individuals with disabilities are among the most valued employees because they put their skills to good use,” says Brenda L. Moore, Director of Connecticut’s Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. “They have more barriers to contend with; i.e., prejudices. We try to break down barriers so they are seen as equal. If given that chance they probably are a very valued commodity to the employer.”

Many managers will state that keeping good employees is harder than finding them in the first place. The cost to search for and train workers is high, so retention is important. Perhaps the greatest positive attribute that workers with disabilities bring to the workplace is loyalty. If they’ve arrived at a job through a vocational counseling service, they have the added benefit of follow-up and mentoring by the agency to troubleshoot any problems that arise.

“We’ve all had a shot—someone gave us a chance,” says one job coach. “We need to give others a chance. Many people with disabilities have had frustrating experiences finding work. When someone gives them an opportunity to show what they can do, they try to repay that trust.”

“I can tell you that the people you hire with disabilities, you keep for life,” says Capek. “Sometimes you just can’t train work ethic. When you provide a supportive work

environment and an adaptive environment, you get loyalty and retention. They've been through something and it brings out the best in them.”

Lastly, of course, employees with disabilities add one more facet of diversity to a workplace. Diversity in the workplace is not only about protection of individual rights—it's about the bottom line. Whenever a variety of styles and approaches is embraced, teamwork is enhanced. Teamwork has become an essential element for the success and survival of a business. People coming together to solve problems, produce goods and render services is what a vibrant workplace is all about.

Resources:

The Health and Human Services Department of the Federal Government has many resources for people with disabilities:

<http://www.hhs.gov/specificpopulations/index.shtml#disabilities>

eSight Careers Network[®], a service of The Associated Blind, Inc., a privately funded, 501(c)(3) non-profit agency, provides online information and guidance for job seekers, career counselors, job developers and prospective employers about what works best for a range of disability employment issues:

<http://www.esight.org>

Goodwill Industries is one of the world's largest nonprofit providers of education, training, and career services for people with disadvantages, such as welfare dependency, homelessness, and lack of education or work experience, as well as those with physical, mental and emotional disabilities:

<http://www.goodwill.org>

(800) 741-0186

The Job Accommodation Network, a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the U.S. Department of Labor, is a toll-free information and referral service on job accommodations for people with disabilities; on the employment provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act; and on resources for technical assistance, funding, education, and services related to the employment of people with disabilities:

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

800-526-7234 (V)

877-781-9403 (TTY)

Sources (in addition to the above sites):

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