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October 2005

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Diverse Perspectives: People With Disabilities Fulfilling Your Business Goals

Abstract

[Excerpt] By fostering a culture of diversity, or a capacity to appreciate and value individual differences, in all aspects of their operations, employers benefit from varied perspectives on how to confront business challenges and achieve success. Although the term is most often used to refer to differences among individuals such as ethnicity, gender, age and religion, diversity actually encompasses the infinite range of individuals' unique attributes and experiences. As the nation's largest minority—comprising almost 50 million individuals—people with disabilities contribute to diversity, and businesses can enhance their competitive edge by taking steps to ensure they are integrated into their workforce and customer base.

Keywords

disability, accommodation, workplace adjustment, diversity

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DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES FULFILLING YOUR BUSINESS GOALS



By fostering a culture of diversity, or a capacity to appreciate and value individual differences, in all aspects of their operations, employers benefit from varied perspectives on how to confront business challenges and achieve success.

Although the term is most often used to refer to differences among individuals such as ethnicity, gender, age and religion, diversity actually encompasses the infinite range of individuals' unique attributes and experiences. As the nation's largest minority—comprising almost 50 million individuals—people with disabilities contribute to diversity, and businesses can enhance their competitive edge by taking steps to ensure they are integrated into their workforce and customer base.

■ IN THE WORKFORCE

Perhaps more than any other group of people, individuals with disabilities have the ability to adapt to different situations and circumstances. As employees, they add to the range of viewpoints businesses need to succeed, offering fresh ideas on how to solve problems, accomplish tasks and implement strategies. Hiring people with disabilities can positively impact a business's bottom line. Recruiting and retaining workers with disabilities is one strategy to counter the effects of the aging and shrinking workforce. This untapped labor pool can offer a source of skilled employees and can contribute to increasing retention and reducing turnover. In addition, tax incentives and technical assistance can assist with accommodations, which are often relatively easy and inexpensive to implement. To gain these benefits and others, employers should take steps to attract and retain employees with disabilities, such as:

- Seeking out qualified candidates with disabilities for job openings
- Establishing a system for educating all workers about the value people with disabilities bring to an organization
- Incorporating a disability focus into any diversity training program
- Ensuring that internal professional development programs are available to people with disabilities
- Providing employees with disabilities with candid and prompt feedback on their performance in the same manner as provided for individuals without disabilities
- Making certain that training and other off-site activities are accessible to employees with disabilities
- Taking advantage of tax credits and education resources to provide accommodations for both new employees with disabilities and employees returning to work following an illness or injury

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■ IN THE MARKETPLACE

A business's commitment to diversity is also reflected in its customer base, and companies are beginning to recognize the value of people with disabilities as a target market. Organizations such as the National Organization on Disability estimate that Americans with disabilities represent more than \$200 billion in discretionary spending—not including their extended families and support networks, who are also a significant market segment. When deciding how to spend this money, individuals with disabilities have the same standards as all customers—they want quality products and services at competitive prices. To tap this market, businesses should take steps to ensure their marketing efforts convey that people with disabilities are valued as customers. Such steps may include:

- Incorporating people with disabilities into the business's marketing strategy
- Testing proposed marketing tactics among people with disabilities
- Implementing promotional tactics specifically targeted to people with disabilities
- Ensuring that communication channels for advertising and promotion reach people with disabilities
- Incorporating people with disabilities in advertising and other promotional activities
- Recognizing that the disability market is a diverse one in and of itself and that one size does not fit all
- Defining how and why the disability market needs the business's products and services
- Including people with disabilities in product development, keeping in mind that products created to meet the needs of people with disabilities often turn out to have widespread applicability
- Devising simple modifications to make existing products and services accessible to people with disabilities

■ RESOURCES TO ASSIST

Building partnerships is critical to incorporating individuals with disabilities into diversity goals, and a number of resources are available to help employers in their efforts, including:

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)

www.dol.gov/odep

1-866-ODEP-DOL (1-866-633-7365) (V) or 1-877-889-5627 (TTY)

ODEP is a U.S. Department of Labor agency that provides national leadership to increase employment opportunities for adults and youth with disabilities.

Employer Assistance and Recruiting Network (EARN)

www.earnworks.com

1-866-EARN-NOW (1-866-327-6669) (V/TTY)

EARN is a free service that connects employers looking for quality employees with skilled job candidates. EARN, which is a service of ODEP, can also provide technical assistance on general disability employment-related issues.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

www.jan.wvu.edu

1-800-526-7234 (V/TTY)

JAN is a free consulting service from ODEP that provides individualized accommodation solutions and technical assistance regarding the ADA and other disability-related legislation. It also educates about self-employment options for individuals with disabilities.

State Governors' Committees on Employment of People with Disabilities

www.dol.gov/odep/state/state.htm

State committees on employment of people with disabilities can provide guidance to employers on how to recruit and retain qualified individuals with disabilities.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/vrpractices/busdev.html

State VR agencies can help employers identify qualified, job-ready candidates with disabilities to fill their workforce needs.

Centers for Independent Living (CIL)

www.virtualcil.net/cils

CILs are community-based, nonprofit organizations that improve opportunities for people with disabilities to live independently and productively.



Office of Disability Employment Policy • U.S. Department of Labor • 200 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20210
Voice: 1-866-ODEP-DOL (633-7365) • TTY: 1-877-889-5627 • Fax: 1-202-693-7888 • www.dol.gov/odep