



Perceptions about people with disabilities often stand in the way of employers leveraging a large, skilled and willing talent pool.

By Nadine Vogel

What's so scary about a **wheelchair?**



Every day, people with disabilities have to battle societal assumptions about themselves and their abilities. Popular culture often portrays them as heroes who must fight to overcome their disabilities. Sometimes they're seen as victims of tragic circumstances, or they're used in television and film as villains — “Dr. Strangelove” — or to scare audiences — “Shutter Island.”

Though the media is beginning to include more positive and “normal” representations of people with disabilities, they are seldom portrayed as successful, working adults. This large segment of the population has as much to offer employers as other employees do, sometimes more. So why is it that disability seems to trump possibility?

It may be a fear of the unfamiliar. The inclusion of people with disabilities is fairly new to society. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, just 20 years ago. Prior to that, people with disabilities weren't guaranteed civil rights or access to facilities, programs or employment. Now, more people with disabilities are out and about, in stores, in the public eye and in the job applicant pool. Since the pas-

sage of the ADA, more people with disabilities take part in American society because they can.

Myths and Truths

Like any group that has lived on the fringes of society, people with disabilities have to struggle to be included, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the employment arena, where old attitudes and myths often obstruct progress and participation.

Here are some of the more common myths surrounding people with disabilities and employment.

Myth: People with disabilities contribute to negative turnover and higher absenteeism rates than employees without disabilities.

Truth: There is actually less turnover among employees with disabilities. A 2002 study by Darlene Unger, “Virginia Commonwealth University Charter Business Roundtable’s National Study of Employers’ Experiences With Workers With Disabilities,” found that workers with disabilities remain in their jobs longer than employees in the general workforce.

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These same truths were realized more than a decade ago in a 1998 article in *Fortune* magazine. Pizza Hut stated the turnover rate in its Jobs Plus Program — geared toward people with cognitive disabilities — was 20 percent, compared with a 150 percent turnover rate among employees without disabilities. In the same article, Carolina Fine Snacks, a nutritional snack company in Greensboro, N.C., reported that since hiring people with disabilities, employee turnover dropped from 80 percent every six months to less than 5 percent; absenteeism dropped from 20 percent to less than 5 percent; and tardiness dropped from 30 percent to zero.

With regard to absenteeism, a 2007 study from DePaul University confirmed that participants with disabilities had fewer scheduled absences than typical employees.

Myth: People with disabilities need expensive and unwieldy accommodations.

Truth: Nearly half of all accommodations cost nothing. In a 2006 survey conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a service of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, 46 percent of the employers surveyed reported the accommodations employees and job applicants with disabilities needed were free. More noteworthy were the benefits employers reported to JAN, which included retaining valued employees, improving colleague interaction and increasing overall company productivity by 56 percent. According to the employers who participated in JAN's study, for every dollar they put into making an accommodation, they got back more than \$10 in benefits on average.

Myth: Employees with disabilities are less productive than their counterparts without disabilities.

Truth: In addition to the aforementioned Unger study, industry reports consistently rate workers with disabilities as average or above average in performance, attendance and safety.

Myth: People with disabilities don't have the training or credentials needed for many positions.

Truth: According to a 2007 U.S. Census report, 33 percent of people with disabilities are college graduates, compared to 43 percent of those without a disability.

One of the most pervasive myths is that outsiders can tell what a person with a disability is capable of doing. Consider these assumptions and facts from the Office of Disability Employment Policy in the U.S. Department of Labor.

Assumption: A person with a developmental disability and difficulty with fine motor control is unlikely to be able to handle complex operations on the production line of a manufacturing plant.

Fact: A person with this combination of functional limitations was hired at a bottling company for a production job labeling, filling, capping and packing a liquid product. The only accommodation needed was a plywood jig that enabled the worker to hold the bottle steady for correct labeling.

Assumption: A person who is blind and has a missing right hand cannot perform a job as a machinist.

Fact: This year, one such applicant persuaded a northeastern community college to train him as a machinist and was finally given a job on a trial basis. From the first day, he broke production records and caused others to do the same. His only modification was to move a lever from the right side of the machine to the left.

Assumption: It is unlikely an amputee missing most of his right leg can perform the duties of a warehouseman that requires loading and unloading trucks, standing, lifting, bending and delivering supplies.

Fact: A person with this type of amputation was hired to work in a southeastern paper warehouse. He worked out so well that the company moved him to operating heavy equipment as a log stacker. He was able to climb ladders and the heavy equipment without any problems and without any accommodations.

The World's Largest Fastest-Growing Minority

The truth behind another common myth is eye-opening. Many people assume the disability community is relatively small. In reality, people with disabilities comprise the world's largest minority. In the U.S., results from surveys conducted over the past 15 years vary depending on the survey's intent, the people surveyed and the questions asked, but somewhere

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between 51 million and 54 million Americans have identified themselves as having a disability. That's nearly 20 percent of the population, and that number is growing due to better medical technology and an aging population.

Add to that the people with impairments or disability-related issues who do not identify as such — for example, people who may have acquired hearing loss, but don't consider themselves hard of hearing. Add again people with age-related impairments, veterans who have returned home with service-related injuries or people with hidden disabilities, all of whom seldom identify themselves as having disabilities. However we tally the total, the numbers and potential are significant.

Putting People With Disabilities to Work

Many employers are beginning to look past the myths and recognize the value of this large, untapped talent pool. Some have recognized it for years. IBM hired its first employee with a disability in 1914. Others have jumped on the bandwagon more recently, but have embraced the community wholeheartedly. Adecco, a global human capital solutions company and one of the largest employers in the U.S., is so committed to hiring employees with disabilities that its annual disability-specific diversity accomplishment report, "Disability Recruitment Partnerships, Events and Activities," contains 19 pages of information about Adecco's partnerships with organizations such as the U.S. Paralympics.

These relationships are a key factor in Adecco's success in recruiting and accommodating employees with disabilities. In *Dive In: Springboard Into the Profitability, Productivity, and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce*, William Rollack, Adecco's diversity manager said, "Through our partnerships with national organizations, the perception of our company has gained a great deal of value: We're seen as an employer of choice to the disability community. We get calls on a weekly basis from organizations who want to partner with us. They see Adecco as a valuable resource for employing people with disabilities."

Partners also help Adecco to better accommodate employees. The Helen Keller Institute helped the company find and

place a deaf-blind employee and accommodate the person at no cost — all that was needed were large-print materials, orientation to the building, instant messaging, paper and a pen.

Build Support and Awareness

Forward-thinking corporations look beyond accommodations and recognize that employees with disabilities value acknowledgement and support for their unique life situations. Accounting giant KPMG provides this recognition and encouragement in a work-life group. "Beyond acknowledging the unique challenges that people with disabilities face in the workplace, and the additional responsibilities that parents of children with special needs may have, the group raises awareness among all of our people about the needs and talent of people with disabilities," said Barbara Wankoff, director of workplace solutions for KPMG.

Awareness can benefit everyone in an organization. "Individual members have told us how appreciative they are," Wankoff said. "They see that KPMG has acknowledged their special needs and unique challenges, which makes them feel included in the KPMG culture. That translates into more productivity and increased morale, not just for the one individual, but for all of their colleagues who see that we acknowledge and recognize the needs of individuals. Everybody is an individual: People appreciate knowing that no matter their need, they may be recognized and supported by this firm."

KPMG, Adecco and others recognize the value in hiring people with disabilities. So why did the U.S. Census report in 2007 that the number of working-age people with disabilities is just 56 percent, when 88 percent of those without a disability were employed? Perhaps the assumptions and myths are more prevalent than we think. If so, knowing the truth behind those myths and appreciating the successes of in-the-know employers may be enough to help organizations and hiring professionals see beyond the wheelchair to the ability and potential of the person using it. So, in the end, what's so scary about a wheelchair? The answer should be nothing. «

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