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Employers Reluctant to Hire Workers With Disabilities Miss Top Talent

Frank Kalman - 2/14/12

A recent study found hesitation among employers in the U.S. hospitality industry to hire workers who have disabilities. This untapped labor pool holds many skills and is underutilized.

Many employers in the U.S. hospitality industry are reluctant to hire workers with disabilities due to preconceived notions that they are unable to perform the essential functions of the job, according to a recent study.



Researchers from the University of New Hampshire found in a survey of 320 U.S. hospitality companies that these firms believed "persons with disabilities would not have the requisite skills or be as productive" and that supervisors are uncomfortable managing them.

It also found larger companies to be more likely to actively recruit people with disabilities, saying that those that do are not as concerned as mid-sized and smaller firms about the potential costs and safety concerns that may come with hiring these workers.

With unemployment still high and companies showing an increased demand for skilled workers, people with disabilities represent a relatively untapped talent pool. The national unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 12.9 percent for January 2012; while it was 8.7 percent for people without disabilities.

"I think awareness is a very important part of it," said Valentini Kalargyrou, assistant professor of hospitality management at the University of New Hampshire and a co-author of the study, "People with Disabilities: Employers' Perspectives on Recruitment Practices, Strategies, and Challenges in Leisure and Hospitality." The study was also authored by Andrew Houtenville, an associate professor of economics and research director of the Institute on Disability at the Whittemore School of Business and Economics at the University of New Hampshire.

The findings suggest that diversity leaders and talent managers of all industries should increase efforts to hire people with disabilities. Doing so, the study said, "Would enhance their hiring prospects, particularly since those with disabilities constitute a loyal and stable pool of workers with a long record of satisfactory job performance."

Aside from being equally capable of performing many — if not most — jobs, workers with disabilities "are more conditioned, committed and innovative" employees, said Nadine Vogel, president of Springboard Consulting LLC and the author of *Dive In: Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity, and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce*.

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Here's a bold thought, why not approach respective businesses with a pilot program, beginning with a single individual, structured support from partnering disability providers (of which there are many !) and run this assessed program for an agreed period of time. I truly believe this avenue of working a hands on approach will lessen "suspicions and apprehensions" mentioned in the article above ... Many of us don't think we need more laws, studies, research, conferences, symposiums, workshops, etc. We already know what the problems are. We need interactive and hands on programs to win over skeptics.

What do we have to lose?
I tell what we have to lose, a whole new generation of people needing our immediate help.

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In my opinion the work we do through our lifetime defines us and builds not just our financial stability but our place in our community. It is up to each of us to protect these rights because someone we know and love either has a disability or will have one in the future.

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Because people with disabilities may have greater challenges or obstacles to overcome in their everyday lives, they show up to work more motivated and resourceful and may end up being more loyal employees as a result, she said.

Many major U.S. companies have already found ways to embrace the unique skills workers with disabilities bring to the table. Steve Pemberton, chief diversity officer of Deerfield, Ill.-based Walgreen Co., said the drugstore chain employs a large number of people with physical or cognitive disabilities in its distribution centers.

Specifically, Pemberton pointed to the productivity and performance of workers in these distribution centers who have certain classifications of autism, a developmental disorder of impaired social interaction or communication. Pemberton said the formal schedules these distribution centers operate on mesh well with autistic workers, many of whom perform better in an environment that is highly standardized and even competitive.

Vogel cautioned that employers take care in how they define disabilities, adding that not all disabilities stem from developmental issues; many are acquired suddenly or over time.

"What about the CEO who gets into a car accident and has a physical disability?" she asked. "Is he or she no longer able to be the CEO?"

First published in Cornell Hospitality Quarterly, a publication of the Center for Hospitality Research of Cornell University, the study also cites Verizon Wireless and Marriott International as organizations that also have programs geared toward supporting employees with disabilities.

Verizon, for instance, has implemented a program for its employees who acquire a disability during their employment that integrates technological accommodations and training thereafter, the study said. The company estimated the costs of the program to be about \$60,000, while the expenditure in recruiting, hiring and training new employees would be about \$160,000.

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Aside from increased retention among workers, the study said hiring people with disabilities has the potential to improve workforce morale and provides a greater link to profitability.

"They make us a better company," Pemberton said. "Plain and simple."

Frank Kalman is an associate editor of Diversity Executive magazine. He can be reached at fkalman@diversity-executive.com.

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