



Supported Employment Services

Helping businesses find the missing piece to their productivity puzzle by hiring individuals with cognitive disabilities.

The Last Ones Picked for the Team: Individuals with Disabilities Seek Inclusion

By Jenny Pecht

Workplace diversity has become a financially and socially pertinent issue for many organizations. However, the definition of diversity under which they operate typically excludes one significant demographic – people with disabilities. This population seems to fly under the diversity radar screen, even though its members are both under-represented and under-served in the community.

Employers might be surprised to learn that individuals with disabilities comprise the nation's largest minority, numbering more than 33 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 64, according to U.S. Department of Labor statistics. So, why are people with disabilities often excluded from companies' workplace diversity efforts? And how does hiring these individuals help employers achieve their diversity goals and enhance their performance?

Making the Connection between Diversity & Disability

Unlike other variations that define difference from the majority population, such as gender, race and ethnicity, disability is considered abnormal – a random misfortune. Instead of viewing people with disabilities as a minority group that contributes to the productivity and diversity of an organization, then, employers may simply pity them. Operating under this mindset prevents companies from tapping into a skilled, capable, eager portion of the workforce – and denies people with disabilities the opportunities they deserve.

A 2005 Dallas-area United Way study indicated that 37% of adults between the ages of 21 and 64 who have a disability are not employed. However, as a national Harris poll indicated, nearly 70% of adults with disabilities want to work.

Workplace discrimination can be defined as denying people opportunities for advancement based on differences that are irrelevant to their ability to perform the job. In the April 2006 issue of *Dallas HR Horizon*, a 2005 survey by law firm Jackson Lewis indicated that 40 percent of legal claims against employers cited disability discrimination as the chief complaint.

All of these data lead inevitably to the following conclusion: if individuals with disabilities are a minority population that suffers discrimination and oppression based on its difference from the majority, and diversity is defined as a difference from that majority, then clearly disability is a component of diversity.

People with Disabilities Benefit Workplaces

Armed with an understanding of how people with disabilities fit into the diversity spectrum, employers can begin to include them in workplace diversity efforts. In addition to simply enhancing staff diversity, individuals with disabilities bring unique benefits to employers, such as:

- Reduced absenteeism and higher staff morale
- Recruitment and selection from a wider talent pool
- Increased creativity and innovation
- Improved service and client satisfaction
- Positive community image

It is critical that companies with a commitment to diversity understand the business value that people with disabilities bring to the workplace – one of which is the ability to meet corporate diversity goals. Including disability in the diversity spectrum benefits both employers and the people with disabilities who seek to work for them, ensuring these organizations a “home run” with respect to their diversity scores.

About Special Care & Career Services

Special Care & Career Services is a non-profit organization that helps children and adults with developmental disabilities to gain independence. The agency's Supported Employment program helps adults with cognitive disabilities to obtain competitive work and educates employers about disability as a component of workplace diversity. Contact Sherri Barrett (972) 991-6777, x161 or visit www.specialcarecareer.org to learn more.

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