



Barriers for Disability at Work

By Catherine Komp, The NewStandard

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Impressing a potential employer during an interview and getting a good job offer is difficult for many. But for those with disabilities -- who must prove they are as qualified as non-disabled candidates -- finding any job has its own challenges.

When Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 15 years ago, supporters hoped the equity legislation would increase disabled peoples' opportunities for employment. But, according to researchers at Cornell University, the employment rate for people with disabilities peaked around 25 percent in the 1990s before dropping below 20 percent by 2004.

The Department of Labor attributes this low employment rate, in part, to the misconception that accommodating people with disabilities in the workplace is prohibitively costly. In fact, research indicates that the opposite is true. The Labor Department's Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which helps employers hire, retain, and promote people with disabilities, has found that most workplace accommodations can be implemented at little or no cost. Since cost is not the main barrier, say disability advocates, more needs to change than simply architecture and ergonomics.

"Most disabled people would tell you that the bigger concerns they have around the workplace are not around physical accessibility," said Andrew Imparato, president of the American Association of People with Disabilities. "They're more around attitudes. I think it's easier to legislate and see change around bricks and mortar than it is around attitudes."

Low-cost, high-impact

The JAN survey, which will continue through September 2007, released preliminary findings last month based on feedback from 778 employers that had contacted the agency for information about employing people with disabilities.

The vast majority of the employers surveyed had called because they were interested in learning how to retain their employees, who on average had been employed for

seven years and were paid about \$13 per hour.

About half reported that implementing workplace adjustments came at no expense, and about 43 percent reported a one-time cost that averaged around \$600.

"Many employers tell us it's as simple as making a flexible schedule [for an employee]," said Anne Hirsch, director of services for JAN and co-author of the study. She told *The NewStandard* that many accommodations are similar to those commonly purchased to make it easier for non-disabled employees to do their jobs, like telephone headsets or specialized computer software that can aid people with vision or range of motion impairments.

Cassie James, self-services coordinator at Liberty Resources, a Philadelphia-based advocacy group for people with disabilities, said many employers wrongly assume that adaptive improvements will be pricey. James, who uses a wheelchair comfortably at her office, said there are many obstacles that need simple fixes rather than state-of-the-art solutions.

She gave the scenario of needing to adjust desk height for someone in a taller wheelchair. "If I went out and thought about how can we make this, I might be able to get one of those long working tables and put it on a couple of bricks and it's just as good," James said.

The law firm Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman is one company that found cost-effective ways to create a better work environment for disabled employees. The internationally-based firm, which employs over 1,000 people, discovered that minor adjustments -- like using instant messaging for some office communications and moving desks so that employees' backs were not facing the door - could help accommodate two employees with hearing loss.

"With the deaf employees, that was something new for us, and we actually went to them and asked, 'What can we do to make life easier and help you communicate with us and help us communicate with you?'" explained Britta Stromeyer, human-resources manager at the firm.

Pillsbury law has joined other large companies, including Cingular, Embassy Suites Hotels and IBM, in working with the Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network (EARN), a federally funded accessible-technology company that helps connect businesses to people with disabilities who are looking for work. Stromeyer said she initially used EARN's services because of problems finding quality candidates through traditional labor recruiting sources, but discovered added benefits beyond simply attracting qualified employees. "It makes a difference in teamwork in general when

you really have a diverse pool of opinions and ideas," Stromeyer told *TNS* .

The JAN report found that of the employers surveyed, nearly 9 in 10 reported retaining a valued employee through better workplace accommodations. In addition, three-quarters cited increased productivity, and over half said they eliminated the costs of hiring and training a new employee.

Employers also reported indirect benefits like improved interactions with co-workers and customers, increased company morale and improved workplace safety. Report co-author Hirsch said that all of these results are nothing more than the product of good management skills. "Employers who are proactive look at [workplace accommodations] as how can we use this to improve work for everyone," she said.

Attitudes must follow

While the results of JAN's survey indicated that many employers of people with disabilities found little cost and great benefit, survey respondents were limited to companies that had sought out the agency to help them accommodate employees.

Advocates for people with disabilities interviewed by *TNS* shared a common concern that in the larger market, stereotypes and discrimination present greater hurdles.

"The biggest barriers are still attitudinal," said Linda Richman, deputy executive director of Liberty Resources. In her view, many employers mistakenly believe that hiring a person with a disability means that "you're automatically compromising somehow on the quality or volume of work."

"That means that workers that really want to work [might not] have the right exposure to the business world," she explained, "and it also means employers... are still carrying around a lot of misconceptions about what it would really be like to work with a person with a disability every day."

Richman, who runs an intensive 18-month job-training course for people with disabilities, added that in today's economic climate, they are lucky if one student per month is hired. "We really have the decks stacked against us a lot of the time," Richman said. "[The economy] makes it hard because our folks are all entry level, and most companies these days have a glut of really experienced people that are taking entry level jobs because they don't have anything else."

In addition to a tight job market and employer misconceptions, people with disabilities are sometimes hindered by their own apprehensions about the employment process,

according to Kristen Stern, an employment consultant at the Milwaukee-based education, advocacy and independent-living-services organization Independence First.

"A lot people that have disabilities may be afraid to go back to work. If it's a [newly acquired] disability, they might not know if they can do the job, or they might not have the confidence needed to do the job," Stern told *TNS*.

Imparato, of the American Association for People with Disabilities, stressed the need for more fundamental change to increase employment rates and financial independence for people with disabilities.

"The ADA is an equal-opportunity law," Imparato said, "so it works well for people with disabilities who have skills and who are qualified for jobs that are open." But, he added, "we still have a lot of barriers in terms of our education system, our rehabilitation system, where there are a lot of people with disabilities who are not competitive in the modern labor market, and the ADA is not going to change that."

The possibility of losing Social Security benefits and access to reliable transportation has also prevented some from venturing into the job market, Imparato noted.

Imparato is currently serving on a federal advisory panel to develop recommendations to reform Social Security benefits that would permit people with disabilities to both work and receive federal assistance for medical bills and other supportive needs.

"I believe we've defined eligibility for that program based on outdated attitudes about what people with significant disabilities are capable of doing in the workplace," said Imparato. He advocated revising eligibility requirements to give more weight to the degree of functional impairment, which would allow more opportunities for people to both work and receive benefits.

For Babs Johnson, national spokesperson for American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT), one of the organizations that pushed for passage of the ADA, the issue of employment rates among people with disabilities relates directly to the organization's mission of fighting against the institutionalization of people with disabilities and enabling them to attain greater independence.

"I believe that it's healthy for everybody to [work]," said Johnson. "We all need to feel like we are contributing to society, and employment is one of the main ways that people do that."

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