

Opening Doors for Workers with Disabilities

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As employers struggle to find workers for critical jobs, many companies are taking a fresh look at non-traditional sources of labor. One such group, whose workplace skills have not been fully appreciated, is people with disabilities.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, of the 33 million adult Americans with disabilities, nearly half are unemployed. An applicant's disability should not keep managers from seeing the whole person and recognizing the jobseeker's other valuable work skills. For example, an individual whose disability disqualifies them from lifting heavy boxes in a warehouse may still be a gifted employee when handling customers, accounting, or computer services at the same firm.

Mistakenly, too many businesses are wary of hiring disabled workers. A 2002 survey of 500 U.S. employers by Rutgers' Heldrich Center for Workforce Development revealed why companies don't readily hire the disabled: Nearly one in five employers admitted they have a "general reluctance to hire workers with disabilities. They complained about the potentially high cost of making their workplace accessible, expressed fears about liability issues, said that people with disabilities cannot effectively perform the work conducted in their company, or that the disabled generally lack sufficient skills and education to be successful..

There is mounting evidence, however, that employers who have hired employees with disabilities have very successful results. A growing body of best practices is now available, and several organizations and government agencies are educating companies about the benefits of recruiting people with disabilities..

The NJ State Chamber of Commerce has partnered with the Henry H. Kessler Foundation to launch a New Jersey Business Leadership Network: an employer-led coalition that promotes best employment practices and publicizes competitive job opportunities for skilled candidates with disabilities. The Business Leadership Network (www.njchamber.com) offers access to a national job network, www.AccessibleEmployment.org, and directs New Jersey employers to online resources that can help them fill important job openings with qualified applicants.

The Business Leadership Network is helping employers increase workforce diversity, fill high-demand jobs, and promote career education, mentoring, internships opportunities for students with disabilities.

Employers will also benefit from an initiative launched by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. A national research center, led by the Rutgers' Heldrich Center, is examining strategies that will increase the employment of adults with disabilities. The \$2.3 million multi-state consortium also includes researchers from the Washington-based Center for Workers with Disabilities, the University of Delaware, UMDNJ , and Rutgers' School of Management & Labor Relations.

With new information and resources, New Jersey employers looking to fill job openings should actively recruit disabled jobseekers -- a promising and proven source of talented workers.