

People With Disabilities: The Talent You're Missing

By Barbara Frankel, DiversityInc.com, January 21, 2010

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Which group has the largest rate of increase of college graduates by far? Which group has a continuously high rate of [retention](#) of loyal employees across all industries? Which group benefits most by technical advances and accommodations that are occurring at lightning speed these days? Which group has great potential to create innovative solutions to organizational and external problems but is most ignored?

The answer is clearly people with [ADA-defined](#) disabilities. (ADA stands for the Americans with Disabilities Act.)

At the suggestion of Deborah Dagit, vice president and chief diversity officer at [Merck & Co.](#) (No. 8 in [The DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity](#)) and a leading advocate for people with disabilities, DiversityInc recently convened a roundtable of corporate and government experts in Washington, D.C. The purpose was to explore what inhibits organizations from hiring and developing talented people with disabilities and what solutions progressive organizations can offer. Although we hold frequent roundtables, the robust discussion and the substantive solutions made this one stand out, and we'd like to share them with you.

Why Should You Hire Employees With Disabilities?

The emphasis in [hiring](#) this group needs to move away from philanthropy and must be on the business benefits it brings, the panelists found. That's the critical way to convince senior leaders of the value of these employees.

Like the LGBT community, people with disabilities—and their friends and relatives—are very loyal customers. "It's been demonstrated that companies that do a really good job of servicing people with disabilities not only get the benefit of brand loyalty but others who do not have a disability view those businesses in a more positive light," says Dagit.

Kathy Martinez, assistant secretary of labor, U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy, emphasizes the need to make the hiring of people with disabilities a bottom-line issue, one that organizations cannot ignore because it can affect everyone. "Disability is part of the human condition," she says. "Often, people become disabled when we're adults. I always tell people that the ADA was not necessarily passed for someone like me, who was born blind. I know how to be blind; being blind is normal for me. But for someone who happens to lose their vision or get shot or have an accident, we want the same sort of services we had previously."

Lori Golden agrees, emphasizing that many workers have non-visible, so-called "hidden" disabilities, and the prevalence of people with disabilities in the workplace is impacting the way companies operate. Golden is the leader of AccessAbilities at [Ernst & Young](#) (No. 3).

"Many of us baby boomers who had hoped to retire now cannot afford it," Golden says. "We're staying at work longer and we now have a lot of medical advances that allow people with serious illnesses and chronic health conditions to continue working. We also have technology advances that allow people to work virtually. If you don't realize that you have more people with disabilities in the workplace already and adjust to that and become inclusive, you're undermining productivity and you're not fully leveraging your investment in talent."

Technical Advances Change the Workplace

At [IBM](#) (No. 10), the manager of diversity and employee experience, Julie Baskin Brooks, says, hiring people with disabilities is "clearly a business strategic imperative. There is a war for talent, and if we're not inclusive of this increasing share of our population and talent pool, we're missing an opportunity. IBM is a technology company, and this is a business opportunity by providing IT company accommodations." Baskin Brooks is manager of diversity and employee experience.

The panel notes that this is a transformational time for progressive companies as they become more technically advanced and create more opportunities for telecommuting and virtual workplaces. Luke Visconti, CEO of DiversityInc, points out that the average one-time cost of [accommodations](#) for an employee with an ADA-defined disability is \$200, a figure Starnes verifies.

Why then, with the 20th anniversary of the ADA approaching on July 26, 2010, is there still such a high rate of unemployment for people with

disabilities when compared with the general population (44 percent versus 12 percent)?

Martinez says the answer is simple: fear of engagement. Able-bodied people don't want to have reminders of their own potential for disabilities in front of them.

As Dagit, who has osteogenesis imperfecta, says: "For every job I've ever gotten, I've been turned down 20 times at least just when someone walked into a room and saw what I looked like. And that's even after they flew me across the country first class because the résumé was exactly what they needed. I walked into the room, the position was closed, and I got back on another flight."

Awareness

The federal government is looking to corporate America to provide leadership on disability awareness, Martinez and Starnes say.

[Nancy Starnes](#), director of external affairs for the [National Organization on Disability](#), advises companies to look at their commercials, their annual reports, their web sites—all the key external-facing branding they have—and see if they include images of and content about people with disabilities. And then look at stockholder meetings, at client conferences, and make sure the accommodations are there.

Golden notes that there is a term used in the United Kingdom called "disability confidence." What she's really talking about is education and awareness. "This should be part of our standard toolkit. It is not all about people with disabilities; it's about each of us, knowing that we can interact competently with anyone we meet," she says.

She cites the poster Ernst & Young prepares for National Disability Employment Month every year that this year included a photo of a person behind a desk, who apparently is a client. Two people are facing this person and the question asked is "Are You Prepared?" The copy says that if you don't know whether to look at the interpreter, then you're not prepared.

She also tells us that Ernst & Young has created disability-awareness quizzes, including what to do if you were faced with a situation involving a client. "Young people very quickly get that they should know this stuff," she says.

Baskin Brooks notes that IBM is working to ensure that all its employees globally are sensitive to words and microinequities, small gestures that can easily offend others.

Dagit adds: "When you sit with a group of people, you know right away whether they are disability friendly."

Ninety-two percent of the DiversityInc Top 50 now have employee-resource groups for people with disabilities, compared with 28 percent five years ago.

Employee-Resource Groups

These groups have provided extremely valuable sources of finding talented employees with disabilities, getting the message out that the organization has an inclusive corporate culture, helping to provide accommodations and assisting in the on-boarding process.

At IBM, the [disability employee group](#) has been key in developing a new global initiative called Accessibility & Disability Central, which features a tool to help identify accommodation needs, options and sources, and then to track them to make sure they are working well and are cost-effective. A pilot program is getting under way.

Partner With Disability Organizations

Starnes cites the programs NOD runs to bring more talented employees with disabilities into corporate America, such as the Start on Success program with about 51 corporate partners that is helping to build the pipeline and work with schools by pairing high-school students with corporations in three-year paid internships.

Eighty-five percent of the students in this program go on to higher education, she says. Starnes also mentions [Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities \(COSD\)](#), which finds internships for college students with disabilities, and work-force recruitment programs such as Project SEARCH, a career-development program to help high-school students with disabilities "find their dream jobs."

A key factor, which also applies to other traditionally underrepresented groups, is to get them while they're young and work with schools.

"You really need to start the outreach at the seventh grade because it affects whether or not middle-school education prepares them to get into college-prep courses in high school, which prepares them to get into colleges

and universities," says Dagit. "If students feel fully included and a part of the classroom, they achieve their goals. But there is a crisis of low expectations."

The Final Words: It's Personal

Martinez recalls her childhood, in a large Latino family, where her house was always the house where everyone hung out. Martinez and one of her sisters are blind and "the kids would be kind of uncomfortable for the first two seconds, but then they'd see how our siblings dealt with us and they got right over it."

"You can't legislate attitude, but you can change people's comfort levels," says Martinez.

[Click here](#) for more key insights from DiversityInc's Disabilities roundtable that appeared in the [November/December 2009 issue](#) of DiversityInc magazine.

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