



The FORUM

A Newsletter for Illinois Corporate Partners

September 2010

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

Talent Has No Boundaries: Workforce Diversity Includes Workers With Disabilities - 2010 Theme for NDEM

Congress designated each October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). This effort to educate the American public about issues related to disability and employment actually began in 1945, when Congress enacted a law declaring the first week in October each year “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. In 1988, Congress expanded the week to a month and changed the name to “National Disability Employment Awareness Month.”

United States Office of Disability Employment Programs

Has the Americans with Disabilities Act Made a Difference?

“Many of our fellow citizens with disabilities are unemployed. ... They want to work, and they can work,” said President George H.W. Bush when he signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law on July 26, 1990.

Nearly 20 years later, President Barack Obama said in a September 30, 2009, National Disability Employment Awareness Month proclamation, “We must seek to provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Only then can Americans with disabilities achieve full participation in the workforce and reach the height of their ambition.”

Yet for some the dream of meaningful employment remains as elusive in 2010 as it was in 1990. And there is some evidence that the ADA might have made things worse.

“Analysts have noted a decline in the employment rate of people with disabilities in recent years, and some evaluations of the ADA indicate that, rather than increasing employment, the Act may have reduced employment for those with

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In August 2010, the percentage of people with disabilities in the labor force was

22.0

By comparison, the percentage of persons with no disability in the labor force was

70.2

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics

DHS/DRS Mission

The Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) is the state's lead agency serving individuals with disabilities. DRS works in partnership with people with disabilities and their families to assist them in making informed choices to achieve full community participation through employment, education and independent living opportunities.

Illinois Corporate Partners Mission Statement

The mission of DRS' Illinois Corporate Partner initiative is to create a strong partnership between the Illinois business community and DRS to assist Illinois residents with disabilities at the local level in attaining stable employment that leads to economic self-sufficiency.

Illinois Corporate Partners will:

- Lead the way in providing job opportunities in the marketplace for persons with disabilities.
- Invest in the untapped and unused labor resources provided by DRS.
- Re-invest in the community by providing an opportunity for Illinois residents to become productive and responsible taxpayers.
- Receive the benefits of qualified employees while providing career opportunities to those individuals with work abilities.
- Give serious consideration to hiring qualified persons with disabilities and encourage other businesses to tap into this pool of talented employees.

disabilities,” noted the November 2008 edition of the Monthly Labor Review published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

“Although the ADA was intended to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination in the workplace and by requiring employers to accommodate the needs of workers with disabilities, economic theory is more ambiguous,” the BLS publication continued. “The major argument economists have made is that if employers perceive the costs of accommodation to be high, they will refrain from hiring workers with disabilities.”

As of June 2010, less than 22 percent of people with disabilities of working age were employed—compared to 70 percent of people without disabilities—according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many Face Bias

People with disabilities face the same biases today that they faced before the ADA was enacted, according to Mike Purkey, executive director of ICON Community Services, an employment service that specializes in placing people with disabilities. “We’ve come a long way, baby, but we’re not there yet,” he told SHRM Online.

The ADA was “a much-needed piece of legislation,” Purkey said. “It made people a lot more aware of people with disabilities and the fact that they are in the workforce.” But he said that many employers lack understanding and hold preconceived notions about people with disabilities—whether they acknowledge them or not.

“I don’t think the employer wakes up in the morning and says ‘I am not going to hire people with disabilities because they are trouble,’ “ he said. “But [the ADA] scares businesses, who fear they will get sued.”

Kate Cullen, a human resource professional in the Washington, D.C., area, said education can help hiring managers overcome ignorance and risk aversion, which she said are the biggest obstacles to the full employment and integration of people with disabilities into the life of an organization.

An Open Mind

“Half the battle is having an open mind. Realize that you have many folks working for you who have mental health challenges right now,” says Susan Loynd, SPHR, director of human resources for Washington County Mental Health Services (WCMHS) in Montpelier, Vermont, an agency that helps people with disabilities find employment. “I work with these folks every day—there is no difference between folks that have a mental disability and anyone else.”

“While we should not let disability be a barrier to employment, we also need to be mindful that we don’t hire an applicant ‘because’ of their disability,” noted Paul Miller, program director of the Green Mountain Workforce’s supported employment program at WCMHS. “Applicants are not their diagnosis.

“We need to remind all staff and community members to think outside of the disability,” Miller said. “Ideally, we should be treating everyone the same. Everyone is important but not necessarily unique or special.”

When Mike Purkey meets with business leaders he sometimes asks them what a person with a disability looks like, or to name a person with a disability. He then uses examples such as former Sen. Bob Dole—whose war wounds left him with limited use of only one hand—and Sen. John McCain—who cannot lift his arms above his shoulders—to illustrate that people with disabilities are everywhere and can hold positions of power.

“If we stop looking at disability as something scary, abhorrent, we can look at it as ability,” he said. “We all have things we do really well and things we don’t.”

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is an online editor/manager for SHRM.

Disability: Disclosure vs. Privacy

As workers with **invisible disabilities** struggle over whether to reveal their conditions to their employers, some companies seek to promote a culture of understanding.

She has fragile skin. Bruises and scars, hidden by clothing, cover her legs. And she suffers from chronic joint pain. “To meet me, you’d have no idea that I have any physical challenge,” says the Ernst & Young human resources coordinator who suffers from a connective tissue disorder. “The truth is that every day I am in pain—every day—and I just live through it.”

She is one of the scores of Americans with **invisible disabilities**, chronic health conditions that are not immediately obvious, such as diabetes and cancer, sensory impairments such as reduced vision, mental illness such as bipolar disorder and depression, and learning disabilities. The accounting and consulting firm asked that her name not be used to avoid discrimination by insurance companies or others. Those concerns underscore the challenges that employees with non-visible disabilities face when balancing privacy with disclosure.

No study has identified how many Americans have non-visible disabilities, but more than 18 percent of Americans report some level of disability, U.S. Census data show.

Ernst & Young introduced a handbook in July to provide a basic level of understanding of non-visible disabilities among employees in hopes of fostering an environment “where everybody is limited only by talent, skills and energy,” says Lori Golden, who leads AccessAbilities, Ernst & Young’s initiative to build an inclusive work environment. “We really want others to get educated about this so we can all do it better.”

The 17-page handbook defines terms such as “disability,” “non-visible disability” and “reasonable accommodation”; explores the pros and cons of disclosure; and addresses questions that employees with disabilities and their managers might have about how much information to share, how to handle questions about accommodations from co-workers, and how to deal with resentment or backlash from colleagues who perceive an accommodation as special treatment. “One of the most difficult decisions an individual with a non-obvious disability has to make is whether to inform people or not,” Golden says.

Companies might not understand why employees choose not to disclose their disabilities. “Some employers feel like, ‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ “ says Barry Taylor, legal advocacy director at Equip for Equality, which advocates for children and adults with disabilities in Illinois. “They don’t understand that you’re not required to disclose.”

Ernst & Young’s Golden sees risk in three areas—health, safety and performance—in not disclosing non-visible disabilities after being hired. “We feel that it’s really important that people with non-obvious disabilities understand that there are risks to not informing the organization about a disability,” Golden says. “If we don’t know that there is a disability at work and we haven’t had an opportunity to develop any accommodations and that person’s performance is not up to par, the disability does not afford protection.”

A recent study for the Kessler Foundation and the National Organization on Disability provides insight into why some workers choose to share information about their disabilities. The most common reasons: It was a visible disability (32 percent), it hurt job performance (33 percent) or the employee simply felt that others should know about it (49 percent), according to the survey conducted this year by Harris Interactive. Respondents could select more than one reason, so the total exceeds 100 percent.

Securing reasonable workplace accommodations, of course, requires open communication, says Kathleen Lee, project coordinator and business outreach specialist at Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute. “Reasonable accommodations are actually less about the law and more about just good common sense and about ensuring that employers enable employees to be productive in the workplace and maximize their potential.”

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Houston's Methodist Hospital System

The BUZZZ August 2010

The Methodist Hospital System, based in Houston, Texas and home of the late heart surgeon Dr. Michael De Bakey, has extended the world-renowned clinical and service excellence of its founding entity, The Methodist Hospital, through a network of community based hospitals. The System has been named as one of FORTUNE's "100 Best Companies to Work For".

(Excerpts from an interview with Mr. Willie French, Director of Talent Acquisition for Methodist)

Q. How many employees do you have (Worldwide and/or North America)?

A: We have over 12,000 employees who directly or indirectly serve our patients in the Greater Houston Area.

Q. Why is it important to have a diverse company?

A: In order to provide the best possible care for our patients, we feel that it is vital to reflect the diversity of our communities and understand the unique needs of our patients.

Q. How does hiring people with disabilities fit into your company's overall plan to have a diverse workplace?

A: People with disabilities can sometimes be overlooked as a portion of the population within which to find talent. But by reaching out to this group, we can find many talented individuals to join our workforce. Again, we want to reflect the makeup of our communities.

Q. Why is hiring people with disabilities good for business?

A: We understand that there is a positive correlation between patient satisfaction and our bottom line. Therefore we strive to hire talented individuals who will help us relate to and meet the needs of our diverse patient population, which includes people with disabilities.

Disability: Disclosure continued from previous page

Ernst & Young's handbook largely avoids traditional wording such as "disclosure" and "accommodation" in favor of "inform" and "adjustment." Golden believes that "disclosure" implies purposeful concealment and that "accommodation" connotes a favor, whereas "adjustment" suggests a slight modification in how things are done. "We're not trying to follow the dominant thinking but to shape it in ways that will work for our people and that will open up opportunities for people with disabilities in the wider marketplace," she says.

Martha Artiles, global chief diversity officer for temporary staffing firm Manpower Inc., likes what she calls the forward-thinking terminology. She plans to adopt the handbook and share it with clients. "When you think about the fact that most people aren't comfortable disclosing their disability unless they have to ask for an adjustment," Artiles says, "they exist much more than we know."

Todd Henneman, a freelance writer based in Los Angeles

The Forum is a bi-monthly publication for the Illinois Corporate Partners. We welcome any news or suggestions for the newsletter. We also welcome photos in tif or jpg format. For more information contact Tom Lowery at: 309-798-6844 (V) 888-340-1004 (TTY) or email at tom.lowery@illinois.gov

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