

Businesses, Hiring Managers Unaware of Positive Impacts of Employees with Disabilities on Business Bottom Line

By Tarra Nystrom, MBA



There is no more important conversation in disability inclusion than the ROI of Disability Employment—the Return on Investment AND the Return on Influence. Of equal importance is that businesses and hiring managers engage and participate fully in this conversation. Recently, disability inclusion conversations have expanded to policies and action items for large corporations and small businesses alike from the decades-old tales of heroism in the face of hardship or with the exclusive tone of pity. “Hiring and engaging people with disabilities isn’t about being nice, or being charitable. It’s smart business that can positively impact your bottom line and your talent needs from the mailroom to the boardroom,” affirms Kristine Foss, Managing Director of Disability Solutions. The conversations have also expanded from curriculums exclusively within the confines of vocational rehabilitation programs to headlines and initiatives throughout communities and on the national front, without vilipend. Recognizing the pros of employees with disabilities and corresponding policies, in addition to realizing that the cons are refutable, are key topics in these conversations. The conversations conclude with the fact that businesses with greater disability inclusion financially outperform the less-engaged competition.

Many businesses and hiring managers are unaware of the positive impacts of employees with disabilities. I do not think the lack of awareness stems from conscious opposition, but more from a lack of familiarity. Let me offer a personal, historical perspective. In 1972, a small business in Columbus, Ohio, did sheet metal fabrication along with heating and air conditioning systems installation. The office manager was retiring, and the owners sought a qualified individual to process work estimates, invoices, payroll, and perform office related activities. The individual they chose based on her hard and soft skills, in other words, the most qualified candidate, happened to be in a wheelchair. And did I mention this was a female, about 40 years old? Remember this was 1972, almost 20 years before the Americans with Disabilities Act was implemented. Without legislated mandates or tax-related incentives, they lowered a countertop for her workspace and widened a bathroom door so that she would not have to ask the other employees (of an all-male staff) to assist her getting in or out of the bathroom. The building itself was not what we would term as (wheelchair) accessible. The solution was simple. When she arrived at work in her car, she simply honked the horn, and one of the men in the fabrication shop met her in the gravel parking lot. He retrieved the aluminum wheelchair from the trunk of her car and helped her into it. He pushed her wheelchair across the gravel to the sidewalk, and

she did the rest. In anticipation of writing this article, I inquired with the employer about the accommodations they made to hire this woman. The current business owner, who was an apprentice at the business in 1972, estimated the cost of the lowered counter and widened doorway at less than \$100; in today's monetary terms, less than \$500.00. She retired from that company in 2000.

It is noteworthy that during the almost-30 year employment:

- There were no turnover costs for the employer.
- There were no additional costs to the employer's health care plan due to the employee's disability.
- The employee earned a living wage with healthcare benefits with no reliance on SSI/SSDI or other government assistance programs.
- The employee with a disability contributed to the local and national economies through her disposable income.
- The coworkers were oblivious to the disability and wheelchair.

The pros of workplace disability inclusion are obvious.

Following any list of noteworthy pros should be a list of noteworthy cons. Are there any cons to this story? No, there are none to this particular experience. However, that is not always the case.

Cons of concern to a business or hiring manager are exacerbated by:

1. A lack of familiarity with disability inclusion
2. The perceived absence of a good fit between job candidate/employee and employer, including the company culture
3. Insufficient understanding of accommodation of disabilities
4. And perhaps most urgently is the scarcity of time to become acquainted with the ROI of disability inclusion and related information

The last mention on the list, scarcity of time to become acquainted with the ROI of disability inclusion and related information is a human resources and business owner velleity and is universal. Businesses, especially small businesses, are inundated with many tasks to simply keep the doors open and maintain a balance sheet that allows the owner to sleep at night. Time and energy are arguably the biggest deterrents for business owners and hiring managers in creating a more comprehensively represented workforce. The expanded conversations about disability inclusion can only benefit these businesses. The more information that is available, and the frequency with which that information appears in the news media and social media, the more cognizant businesses and hiring managers become. And because knowledge is power, employees with disabilities will no longer be an untapped pool of talent for employers. Looking more closely at the first items on the list will help alleviate the burden of the last item on the list.

The population in the U.S. is changing. And it is in every employer's interests to ensure their workforce reflects that change. Not just because a more diverse workforce will help you connect more effectively with your increasingly diverse customers and vendors, but also because there is strong evidence proving businesses with greater diversity, including disability inclusion, financially outperform the competition. Business leaders whose companies trail blaze in disability initiatives have found that people with disabilities build a more authentic, loyal and creative (workplace) culture, and increase profitability. People with disabilities also represent an almost untapped talent pool who bring a wide range of education, experience, expertise and perspective to the workforce. Creating an inclusive workplace environment is challenging, thought-provoking, and rewarding. It is a continuous process, one that evolves and responds to changes in the environment or policies.

For more information, read [*The DisABILITY A-Player Plan*](#).