

A Compulsory Fresh Look

By Gary Karp

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Expert Forum



Is it fair to say that to succeed in business you must keep a clear view of the environment surrounding your organization? You need to understand the current state of your market, your clientele, and keep your eyes peeled for any resources which will help you achieve your goals.

It's a tough process, this keeping up with reality, especially given the ever-accelerating pace of our changing world. But however good a job you do of it, having a clear picture is not enough. To get aligned with changes—and embrace the new opportunities they represent—the very culture of your organization must adopt new core beliefs—and let go of old ones. That's the hard part.

Disability is just such an issue. A profound transformation has occurred around what disability is and what it means; a transformation that has yet to be seen clearly, much less integrated into workplace culture. For an already substantial—and growing—segment of people who can be considered to have a disability, prevailing societal beliefs simply don't fit the reality.

An objective look reveals clearly observable and undeniable changes which are still unfolding on a scale never before seen in our entire human history. Workers with disabilities are:

- More healthy (more are surviving, in fact)
- More mobile, including local transportation and travel
- Functioning in a much more accessible and adapted world
- More independent and active
- More highly educated, and therefore career-oriented
- And more empowered by technologies

... in our information economy where physical capacity is much less a requirement.

As a result:

- People with disabilities represent a substantial, fully capable, and untapped segment of the labor pool.
- People with disabilities have already-considerable and growing spending power. They are your clients and customers.

Yet, a combination of deeply ingrained stereotypical beliefs, combined with our own assumptions, continues to define our notions of disability. Through these lenses, the actual capacity and potential workforce contributions people with

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disabilities are in a position to make are grossly underestimated. They are real people with real abilities, real goals, and a real drive to excel. They possess the readiness to risk, and to be held to the same standards as any other employee—or leader.

This new model of disability is trickier to embrace because the word itself has powerful connotations in the workplace; disability literally equals “can’t work.” One “goes on” disability. This language disconnect is in direct contradiction to the notion of disability as a feature of an individual; much less an advantage. The objective fresh look I’m urging here will make that case; a disability does not define the whole of a person. A disability by no means automatically precludes someone having a great deal to contribute. They might accomplish it in a different manner with some different tools than someone else, but no less effectively. Even if one allows that disability doesn’t necessarily preclude the ability to work, then there is another layer to the problem: it means “accommodation” and compliance. Costs. Dollars. Any way you slice it, in the eyes of workplace culture, people with disabilities are less likely to be seen as aligned with the priorities of the workplace. They are too often thought to be expensive, productively and financially, or another compliance burden.

Reality simply doesn’t jive with these assumptions.

While there certainly are people with disabilities who are not capable of full-time work, to assign that conclusion to the overall category is a grave business error. If someone has gone to the bother of getting educated, setting goals for themselves, and seeking employment, they deserve to be objectively assessed for who they are and what they have to offer. And, are probably well able to perform. Getting this wrong is expensive.

You could miss a stellar employee, simply because a hiring manager is operating from obsolete models. IBM got it right when they hired a brilliant Russian mathematician named Dimitri Kanevsky who happens to be deaf and mute. Kanevsky had to fight in his native Russia just for the right to pursue his Ph.D. He has since been responsible for the creation of speech recognition technologies, which have brought IBM literally billions in royalties.

Yet, a U.S. Department of Labor study found that nearly half of employers surveyed had doubts about whether a worker with a disability has the skills or the ability to be productive. Such an organization will never see the potential of a Dimitri Kanevsky.

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There are plenty of stakeholders in your organization who get this. People on your Human Resources or Diversity teams not only understand the issue, but will tell you stories of frustration, having tried to hire or retain workers they know to be of value. They hit the disability assumption wall, and often report that direct hiring managers are the bottleneck. These people will urge that your workplace culture be nudged towards reality with quality training programs.

The presence of a disability is no longer a characteristic that limits. It is something to which one adapts, something which often fosters a creative, innovative, problem-solving spirit. Something which, as part of a whole person, is part and parcel of setting the boundaries of one's potential. It is part of life, and for the people with disabilities seeking work, it is truly and plainly just their normal. When your workplace culture is able to spot the people who fit this model, then your organization will benefit—very likely thrive—in new ways, thanks to the unique contributions workers with disabilities are inarguably ready and able to make.

This is not about “Hire the Handicapped” anymore. It's not about social sacrifice. It's about being current with the world around you. It's about good business.