

Disability is a Little Different

By Gary Karp



Expert Forum



As people with disabilities continue to take their place on the diversity spectrum, there are some unique characteristics worth considering that set them apart from other segments.

The first is that people with disabilities are not just part of the diversity spectrum, they contain the diversity spectrum. Race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation — people with disabilities parallel the general population in their own complete diversity.

Next, the disability club is one that anyone can join at any moment. You could become a person with vision or hearing loss or paralysis. You could lose a limb, or experience a disfiguring burn or skin disease. But wouldn't it be quite the trick for someone to make a transition from being an Asian man to being a black woman?

The exception to this, of course, is becoming transgender, another club anyone can join, though in that case, by choice. Very few people choose disability.

Dual citizenship is a given. If I have a disability I also qualify as a member of some other category. In my case, that would be male Caucasian, Jewish, middle-aged, balding jugglers with a nominal backgammon addiction.

There's one more thing that sets disability apart from the rest of the diversity spectrum — and this one is a problem. Disability is often directly equated with inability. The word itself evokes a sense of limitation and incapacity. And, ingraining this sense of inability even more deeply in the culture of the workplace, disability is something one "goes on" — meaning, they aren't going to (or can't) work.

This is not what happens for others in the diversity spectrum. If you're Gay or Hispanic, no one is going to claim that these characteristics, by definition, render you incapable of performing successfully in the workplace. Yet in surveys of employers, doubts that someone with a disability could be productive continue to show up in significant numbers.

Things have changed. People with disabilities are surviving in larger numbers and living more active, healthy lives in a world which is more accessible and adaptable, empowered by technologies, achieving high levels of education, with civil rights protections on the books. They are simply able to participate and contribute on a scale that is significant, only recently possible — and continuing to grow.

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The fact of disability alone by no means precludes success, which flows from the same things that lead to success for anyone else — preparation and experience and qualifications and goals, and being placed in a properly defined job that fits one's abilities. That process can be profoundly disrupted when the culture of a workplace remains stuck viewing someone principally through a skewed, outmoded lens of disability rather than seeing someone for the whole person they really are.

As the diversity world continues its process of recognizing and embracing the bona fide place on the spectrum of people with disabilities, it needs to put a high priority on challenging this assumption of limitation. The culture of the workplace will too often fail to recognize the potential of a great employee who happens to have a disability until it gets the right frame on what disability really means in this modern, transformed society.

Seeing diversity within the disability population is pretty cool. Knowing you could be among them should make you care about fostering a culture where you won't be denied your potential. Doubting the capability of someone with a disability on that basis alone is just plain bad business.