

## No Favors, No Thanks

By Gary Karp

11/12/12



Expert Forum



October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

My fear is that, for many employers, NDEAM echoes the clarion call that I heard growing up in the sixties: “Hire the Handicapped.”

That sounded like employers were expected to go out of their way to hire disabled people as a kind of sacrifice for the greater social good. The sacrifice being that they might not be as productive, but it’s the right thing to do.

I wonder how many employers react to the notion of hiring a person with a disability in the same manner today. How many imagine that they are being asked to accept a lower level of productivity? How many think that the person might not last long in the job? How many expect that they would not be able to communicate with — namely evaluate — an employee with a disability? How many fear that some — if not most — people in the organization would be uncomfortable just having them around?

We don’t have to go far to find out if employers are concerned about these things. The numbers are already in. In a November 2010 survey, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in the U.S. Department of Labor reported high numbers of employers with these very concerns.

For companies of all sizes, 45.7% of respondents were concerned that a worker with a disability may not be as productive as other workers. 40.7% were concerned they wouldn’t know how to evaluate their work. 30.8% would not be comfortable managing them. Just go to my [Research Page](#) to download the full report.

Honestly, I don’t fault them for this. Managers have a job to get done. They have major responsibilities. They have to be sure they’re going to meet expectations and goals. It’s no surprise that they would have these concerns. I just wonder how much these ideas are amplified — if not fostered in the first place — by the imperative to “Hire the Handicapped.”

I’m not interested in accusing anyone of being inappropriate. I just want to have an objective conversation about this. Isn’t that good business? — being committed to a clear understanding of the question at hand? In this case, that question is, “Who are people with disabilities in the 21st Century, and what do they have to do with the success of my organization?”

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On sincere inspection — or by inviting me in to speak or do training — you'll find that hiring someone with a disability is no sacrifice. You'll find that these understandable concerns in the ODEP survey don't fit the reality of what workers with disabilities are all about, or the potential they have to contribute to success in the workplace.

Disability simply doesn't equate with productivity. When someone is qualified for a job, and you hire them based on their goals and their personality and their capacity to contribute to organizational missions and goals, then that person is likely to perform as well as a person without a disability. It's a fact. Plenty of studies have proven it.

What's happening here is an over-identification with disability. Just focus on the person. Start with the usual — their qualifications and training, their goals, their personality, why they want to work for you. Then by all means ask how they'll perform the job if you're not sure how they will perform certain tasks. Nothing illegal about that. You don't have to ask about disability. Just focus on the person and the job.

It's the same reason why managers don't have to worry about evaluation. How did this person do on the job? Did they perform the essential tasks? If they fell short, then what guidance do they need to bring their performance up to speed? They just need good management, like everyone else.

So here's my imperative plea to employers: Please. Don't do us any favors

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Don't hire us out of a sense of social good. Don't edge out someone else for us unless we are at least equally qualified for the job. Don't think of hiring people with disabilities as a matter of good public relations. Don't hire us and then lower the bar on the assumption that we couldn't be as productive anyway. Don't hire us for jobs that are below our actual ability, and then deny us the opportunity that everyone else gets to prove ourselves — and grow in our careers to higher levels of achievement and leadership.

That's not doing anybody any favors, least of all you as an employer.

You don't have to do us any favors. And when you don't, when you hold people with disabilities to the same standards as everyone else, that becomes the bar they shoot for. You raise their level. Anyone who shows up with a sense of

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entitlement **shouldn't** get the job. (And no law says you have to give it to them if they aren't right for it.) This is how more of the truly emergent class of qualified workers who happen to have disabilities will actually get to contribute in the workplace — to **your** success.

The greater social good, in fact, comes from not doing them any favors. More people with disabilities working according to the same standards of quality and behavior as everyone else means fewer people collecting disability benefits, be it federal or private insurance. That means more people paying taxes. People who are active, working, and feeling good about being productive are healthier. They are far less likely to need costly (and unnecessary) healthcare that follows from weight gain, heart disease, and abusing chocolate. It means more family members free to pursue their careers and goals.

Doesn't **that** make economic and business sense?

This is not about charity. This is not about sacrifice. This is about bona fide employees whose abilities are being missed by employers because the very notion of disability is steeped in such negative assumptions.

Don't do us any favors. Don't take chances. Get the straight story, and do what you always do when you're looking for the right person for the job — look in the broadest pool of candidates you can, and choose the best one. Just don't leave out this exploding and significant pool of workers with disabilities because you're seeing them through old lenses.