

Not Charity

By Gary Karp



Expert Forum



The once-popular phrase was “Hire the Handicapped.” Its tone was pretty undeniable: since having a disability is such an unfortunate thing, we should give those poor people jobs as a socially-charitable gesture.

The underlying message is that compassionate generosity should be the core drive for employing people with disabilities. Employers should make the sacrifice because it’s the right thing to do.

Well, we’ve come a long way. The term “handicapped” now appears only in certain final vestiges, mainly with regard to a type of parking spot.

The phrase we see commonly now with regard to employing people with disabilities is to “create opportunities” for them in the workplace. A great improvement, to be sure, but I need to beg the question of whether the charitable model of disability still lurks in there – albeit less overtly.

“Creating opportunity” is certainly a good thing – for everybody. We better understand that a diverse spectrum of people deserve the chance to contribute and thrive on the job. We need to start on the assumption that people with disabilities are no less a part of that pool of qualified workers.

But there’s always been an extra edge when it comes to disability. No one would question someone’s capacity to succeed at work based on being a woman or Asian or transgender, right? Disability is the only characteristic that gets equated by its nature with less productivity and success – borne out in more than one survey of employers.

What does “opportunity” mean, then, if we are thinking of a population for which we have lowered expectations? If the cultural model still has, as its foundation, that we don’t expect them to perform as well as someone without a disability, then isn’t “opportunity” still essentially a gesture of charity?

I’m not suggesting that people overtly believe these things. Not most people, at least. These attitudes persist on a very subtle level, so every one of us would do well to look more deeply, asking these more delicate questions about our view of disability and employment.

What people with disabilities deserve – and what will help the culture of any

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workplace tap their substantially untapped talents – is to be seen through the lens of capability and high expectations. They deserve the chance to prove themselves – and to have those standards at their tails to motivate them. No favors.

Are some people with disabilities at a disadvantage? You bet. But that disadvantage is usually not specific to the disability itself. If a wheelchair user can't get into a building or use its bathroom, that's an issue with the building, not their inability to walk. If a student doesn't quite get the "soft skills" of the workplace, understanding professional standards and behaviors, then it's probably because they didn't get to work as a teenager or have access to internship in college, not because of whatever impairment might be an aspect of their greater whole. The opportunity they need is to catch up.

Do people with disabilities need some resources that are a little different? Well, some do, yes. But it's a mistake to think of assistive technologies or accessible ("universal," being the more accurate term) design as a costly burden – which some employers think of as anything but "reasonable." Giving someone the tools and setting that fits their needs and style is not charity. It's how you score a loyal and meaningful contributor.

We need to liberate ourselves from the notion of "helping" people with disabilities. That suggests that people with disabilities are only able to work by the grace of others, that they are dependent – as compared to worthy of investment. As long as that quality is at all part of an employer's orientation to disability and employment, their efforts to draw on that untapped but fully-qualified resource are likely to be compromised.

We need to think only in terms of what makes it possible for capable people to make self-responsible choices to pursue their talents and interests. The "opportunity" they need is precisely the same as everybody else's – to get the chance to develop themselves and prove who they are and what they've got to offer.

Anyone with clear potential is worth the investment – whatever it takes. It's not charity. Creating opportunity for workers with disabilities is selfish, good business. As it should be.