



Tapping into Unrealized Potential: The Advantages of Employing People With Disabilities

Merritt Carey, Esq.
Owner
GraffamSolutions

Larry Glantz
Senior Policy Analyst
Muskie School of Public Service
University of Southern Maine

INTRODUCTION

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in disability issues by the business community. Do consumers and employees with disabilities represent a challenge to business in Maine or an opportunity? Is engaging people with disabilities something to be avoided, or would increased understanding in this area provide a valuable business advantage?

People with disabilities comprise one-fifth of our nation and they represent \$220 billion in discretionary income. This population should be an important marketing target for business — both as customers and employees.

Yet as employees, people with disabilities are severely underutilized. In Maine, 15.4 percent of working-age people have a disability.¹ Despite being one-sixth of the employable population, only 38 percent of Maine residents with disabilities are employed, and of these, only 20 percent are working full-time.

“Working Together” is the branding name for a group of Maine businesses and organizations that have come together to help Maine employers capitalize on this untapped source of employees. Our message is simple: ***Employing people with disabilities makes good business sense.*** The *Working Together* effort is promoting this message through marketing,

research, education, outreach and by example. *Working Together* seeks Maine employers interested in leading by example and shaping the future of our workforce.

THE MAINE CHALLENGE

There are key developments in Maine that elevate the importance of including more people with disabilities in the workforce. These include:

Maine's Aging Workforce

Maine has the oldest workforce in the country and our state is continuing to get older at a higher rate than the rest of the nation. In 2005, the median age of Maine residents was 41, compared to 36 for the rest of the country. This number is expected to climb to 43 by 2015 and to 47 by 2030.

There are two important issues raised by these startling statistics. One, retiring workers need to be replaced — potentially creating a workforce shortage. Two, as the population ages, disabilities increase. “People near the retirement years account for nearly a third of all people with disabilities,” report James T. Brett and William E. Kiernan, of the New England Council and the Institute for Community Inclusion. “As the boomer generation ages, with less support from Social Security, more of this population will be in the workforce.”²

Businesses that ready themselves for the effects of these trends will be better poised in the marketplace. One of the ways employers can begin preparing both for the workforce shortage and the aging population is by bringing people with disabilities into their businesses now.

Returning Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans

In Maine, returning veterans are facing a number of issues as they readjust to home, community and work life. A recent study³ found that at least 13 percent of Iraq veterans in Maine would qualify for a diagnosis of PTSD. Other problems faced by these veterans include alcohol abuse, depression and, to a smaller extent, physical disabilities. The effect of these issues in the workplace is only just emerging.

However, the employers represented at job fairs catering to veterans indicate a willingness by companies to employ our returning troops. This trend by large corporations —

such as Home Depot, U-Haul, General Motors and ESPN — exemplifies how companies are seeking to help all veterans re-integrate into civilian life.

Inability to Find Qualified Employees

In a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, the number one workforce issue was finding and retaining qualified employees.⁴ People with disabilities represent a qualified and underutilized source of employees in Maine.

While employers have anecdotally expressed concerns that an employee with a disability may not be able to do the job, a study by DuPont, conducted over 35 years, has shown that employees with disabilities consistently perform as well, if not better, than their non-disabled colleagues. Specifically, the study made the following findings in three key areas of employee performance:

- Attendance: 86 percent of workers with disabilities were rated average or above average.
- Performance: 90 percent of workers with disabilities were rated at average or above average.
- Safety: 97 percent of workers with disabilities were rated average or above average.⁵

Employing people with disabilities is not unlike employing non-disabled people: some will be successful and some will not. Through conversations with employers, *Working Together* has found that the success or failure of employing a person with a disability has very little to do with that person's disability and everything to do with whether that person is a good fit for the company. The risk of failure in hiring a person with a disability is no greater than the risk of failure in hiring an employee without a disability.

SOLUTIONS AND BENEFITS FOR MAINE BUSINESSES

Some of the business benefits of hiring people with disabilities are discussed below. Of course, these will not apply to all businesses in Maine, but the range of benefits suggests that most businesses, even smaller ones, will profit by employing people with disabilities.

Increased Diversity

Maine lacks the cultural and ethnic diversity found in many other states. Yet, as part of a global community and economy where diversity of thought, culture and people is the consumer expectation: *consumers expect that companies will embrace diversity.*

Furthermore, diverse workplaces are thought to be more dynamic and quick to adapt to changing needs. People with disabilities are an often overlooked population that can help businesses diversify their workforce. Companies can benefit directly from the innovative ideas employees with disabilities bring to the workplace, in particular the consumer interests and needs of this target population.

Diversity in the workplace can reduce the risk of lawsuits, boost creativity, and increase marketing opportunities and business image.⁶ The data shows that businesses that excel at leveraging diversity experience better financial performance in the long run compared to organizations that do not treat diversity as an opportunity.⁷

Consumer Goodwill

American consumers prefer socially responsible businesses. People with disabilities represent more than \$200 billion in discretionary spending—not including family and support networks, which comprise a significant market segment as well.⁸ A 2006 University of Massachusetts Boston study reported that there are “overwhelmingly positive attitudes among consumers toward socially responsible companies, and in particular toward those that hire individuals with disabilities.” Among surveyed consumers:⁹

- 92 percent felt more favorable toward companies that hire people with disabilities.
- 87 percent said they would give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities.
- The employment of people with disabilities ranked third as an indicator of a company’s commitment to social justice.
- 98 percent of respondents who had been served by a worker with a disability were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the service they received.

Low Turnover

Employee turnover is expensive. In fact, it can cost one-and-a-half times an employee's salary to replace him or her. When questioned by *Working Together*, Maine employers indicate that by hiring people with disabilities they can drastically reduce turnover costs. This is because employees with disabilities tend to have a lower rate of attrition than employees without disabilities.¹⁰ Other employers report similar experiences. For example, Carolina Fine Snacks in Greensboro, N.C. "turnover dropped from 80 percent every six months to less than 5 percent" as the result of hiring people with disabilities.¹¹

A survey conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) shows the positive influence hiring workers with disabilities has on employee turnover:

- 96 percent of employers reported they saved money by hiring or retraining people with disabilities and by making necessary job accommodations. As a result of their efforts they reduced employee turnover.¹²
- 15 percent of employers reported savings up to \$5000, while 20 percent said they had saved between \$20,001 and \$50,000 in employee replacement costs.¹³

Additionally, research has shown it is far more cost effective to make an accommodation for a disabled employee than it is to try to find a replacement for that same employee. The JAN study found that for every dollar spent in making an accommodation companies received \$34.58 in benefits.¹⁴

You Are Invited...

People with disabilities are the nation's largest minority, and the only one that any person can join at any time. Businesses that understand the value of recruiting and accommodating a diverse group of workers — including workers with disabilities — will be more successful during the projected workforce shortage.

Working Together is helping Maine businesses network and strategize to employ more people with disabilities. We invite you to become a business partner. By becoming a partner, you will receive affiliation with a cause that receives a great deal of national and local media attention. Additionally, you will be able to network and strategize with other like-minded businesses interested in employing people with disabilities, improving consumer goodwill and becoming strategically positioned themselves to adapt to Maine's changing workforce.

For more information please contact: Merritt T. Carey of Graffam Solutions, *Working Together's* Director of Marketing and Outreach, at (207) 828-4882 or merritt@ExpandingMainesWorkforce.com.

Disability Information Resources:

The Job Accommodation Network, a free service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. JAN represents the most comprehensive resource for job accommodations available. <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

HireVetsFirst has a comprehensive career website for hiring veterans of America's military. Managers and human resources specialists can find the resources needed for matching employment opportunities with veterans. <http://www.hirevetsfirst.gov/>

The Maine CareerCenter is a place to find workers, the resources to help train them, and other information you need to compete in today's economy. <http://www.mainecareercenter.com/>

E-Sight Careers Network is a global, cross-disability online community addressing disability employment issues. <http://www.esight.org/>

¹ The 15.4% Maine rate contrasts with the national average of 12.6%. Data from the 2005 American Community Survey (ACS). More information about the ACS is available at: <http://www.DisabilityStatistics.org>.

² Brett JT, Kiernan WE. *The worker in N.E.'s future*. Boston Globe. November 15, 2004:(Op-Ed);A.15.

³ Wheeler E. *Self-reported mental health status and need of Iraq war veterans in the Maine National Guard*. Portland, ME: Community Counseling of Maine, Inc.; 2007.

⁴ Rath J, Ross L, Child W. *Focus groups with private sector senior executives and human resource professionals re: Employer Assistance Referral Network (EARN)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network; 2005.

⁵ Virginia Commonwealth University. *Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention. Untapped resource--Pool of qualified potential employees*. [Web Page]. 2006. Available at: <http://www.worksupport.com/training/browBag.cfm/16>. Accessed April 10, 2007.

⁶ Green KA, Lopez M, Wysocki A, Kepner K. *Diversity in the workplace: Benefits, challenges, and the required managerial tools*. (EDIS document HR 022). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; 2002. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hr022>

⁷ U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission. *Good for business: Making full use of the nation's human capital*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; 1995. http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/key_workplace/116/

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. *Diverse perspectives: People with disabilities fulfilling your business goals*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy; 2005. <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/diverse.htm>

⁹ Siperstein GN, Romano N, Mohler A, Parker R. A national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 2006;24:3-9.

¹⁰ Hawthorne, Nan. *High turnover antidote: Hire employees with disabilities*. [Web Page]. Available at: <http://www.esight.org/View.cfm?x=478>. Accessed April 10, 2007.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *Job Accommodation Network*. [Web Page]. July, 1999. Available at: <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Stats/BenCosts0799.html>. Accessed April 10, 2007.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*