

# Eliminating Barriers

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Jill Houghton, president and CEO of Disability:IN, a nonprofit in Alexandria, Va., that provides resources for businesses seeking to employ people with disabilities, says a growing number of well-known employers, including Amazon, 3M, Google and Disney, are tapping into the organization's recruitment pipeline. Over the last seven years, the number of organizations participating in Disability:IN's Disability Equality Index, a benchmarking tool that ranks businesses on their disability-inclusion practices, has increased to 319 from 80. Scott Wills, a research chemist at Dow Chemical in Collegeville, Pa., says he found a wellqualified pool of interns and potential full-time workers when he began recruiting at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a college within the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y. Dow began sponsoring NTID co-op students in 2011 and has hired six of them to work full time, mostly in chemistry and computer science jobs. Kari McHugh, senior director of consumer and community relations at Dunkin' Brands, was so impressed with Perkins' training that she hired one of its graduates to staff the doughnut and coffee purveyor's Canton, Mass., customer call center, which historically has struggled to recruit and retain qualified workers.

## FULL TEXT

### Headnote

As technology advances and attitudes change, job opportunities open for people with physical disabilities.

August 30, 2021

Customers visiting the Chase Bank in one trendy Washington, D.C., neighborhood are greeted by employees in two languages: English and American Sign Language (ASL).

That's because when the bank opened in late 2019, it took into account the proximity of Gallaudet University, a federally chartered private university for the education of the deaf and hard of hearing. Six of the branch's nine employees are fluent in ASL, including three who identify as deaf or hard of hearing. Bank employees who don't sign can communicate with deaf customers using the bank's video-interpreting service or by typing on a specially designed tablet. Sign language interpreters are on hand to assist employees who are deaf in working with customers who are not.

When the coronavirus pandemic forced many businesses to shutter last year, Chase opted to keep the deaf-friendly bank open, installing clear plastic barriers, limiting occupancy and taking other precautions to minimize spread of the disease.

"As a bank, we want to make financial services available to all customers, including people with disabilities and their families," says Jim Sinocchi, global head of the office of disability inclusion at JPMorgan Chase, Chase Bank's parent company.

Sinocchi isn't just interested in attracting new customers; he wants Chase to be the employer of choice for people with disabilities. "When people see a company that reflects themselves, they're more likely to purchase goods and services from that company," he says.

It's a credo that's backed by mounting research linking disability-inclusion efforts to increased innovation, lower turnover and reduced exposure to discrimination claims. A 2018 Accenture study found that companies actively looking to include people with disabilities in their organizations had 28 percent higher revenue, double the net income and 30 percent higher economic profit margins. The U.S. economy could get a boost of up to \$25 billion if

more people with disabilities were to join the labor force, the study found.

The 30-year-old Americans with Disabilities Act has helped expand job opportunities for individuals who are blind or deaf or who have mobility issues or other impairments. But significant barriers to employment still exist. In 2019, only 19.3 percent of people with disabilities were employed, compared with 60.8 percent of the general population, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The unemployment rate for disabled individuals—7.3 percent—was about double that of the general population.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on workers with disabilities, driving unemployment up to 12.6 percent in 2020 from 7.3 percent in 2019. By comparison, the unemployment rate for people without disabilities was 7.9 percent in 2020 and 3.5 percent in 2019, according to the BLS.

Despite the disheartening numbers, some disability advocates say there is cause for optimism.

Jill Houghton, president and CEO of Disability:IN, a nonprofit in Alexandria, Va., that provides resources for businesses seeking to employ people with disabilities, says a growing number of well-known employers, including Amazon, 3M, Google and Disney, are tapping into the organization's recruitment pipeline. Even with the pandemic ravaging the workforce, Disability:IN's members collectively hired almost 28,000 workers with disabilities last year, a 53 percent increase over 2019.

In addition, employers are increasingly interested in knowing how their disability-hiring programs stack up against their competitors', Houghton says. Over the last seven years, the number of organizations participating in Disability:IN's Disability Equality Index, a benchmarking tool that ranks businesses on their disability-inclusion practices, has increased to 319 from 80. The index is a joint initiative with the American Association of People with Disabilities.

"While we still have much further to go in terms of reaching equal employment rates between people with disabilities and those without, we see progress," Houghton says.

#### Finding Accommodations

Advancements in assistive technology are also helping to expand opportunities for workers with disabilities. Teleconferencing platforms that link deaf individuals to ASL translators and software that reads printed text aloud for those with visual impairments are among the growing array of services helping to level the playing field.

Scott Wills, a research chemist at Dow Chemical in Collegeville, Pa., says he found a wellqualified pool of interns and potential full-time workers when he began recruiting at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a college within the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y. Dow began sponsoring NTID co-op students in 2011 and has hired six of them to work full time, mostly in chemistry and computer science jobs.

While some Dow managers worried about their ability to communicate with the deaf students, those concerns evaporated once easy-to-use, no- and low-cost solutions were presented, Wills says. For instance, when deaf and hearing employees need to talk to each other by phone, they can call a free video-relay service that uses video equipment to link the deaf employee with a sign language interpreter, who translates both sides of the conversation. The deaf employee and the interpreter can see each other signing over a computer monitor.

During the pandemic, as all Dow employees work from home and rely on telephones and computers to communicate, such systems have become a "great equalizer," Wills says.

To help make sure it got the workplace design right, Chase partnered with Gallaudet University architects to optimize visual and physical communication throughout the branch. Several building features help ensure the safety of deaf workers and customers, including light indicators to alert workers when someone has entered the branch and reflective wall panels that allow deaf customers to see shadows and notice when someone is behind them. Additional consultants were hired to help interview deaf applicants to ensure that their American Sign Language skills and demeanor were up to snuff.

#### Remote Work Helps

Widespread acceptance of work-at-home arrangements has been a blessing for some mobility-impaired workers who previously were excluded from corporate recruitment efforts because they had difficulty getting to an office. Before the pandemic, New York City-based financial services company Voya mostly limited its search for talent to

areas near its eight main offices.

"It had always been our expectation that work needed to be done in the office," says Lisa Fleury, senior vice president of talent acquisition and HR operations at the company.

Once it became clear that many jobs could be done successfully from home, Voya's recruiters began casting a wider net. The effort paid off, resulting in the hiring of six interns from across the country through the NextGen Leaders program at Disability:IN.

A dedicated employee relations team within the HR department stays in frequent contact with the workers to ensure they have the support they need, and efforts to provide that support are ongoing, Fleury says. For instance, the company is looking into ways to improve captioning and real-time speech-to-text technology for deaf and hearing-impaired workers.

#### Voice-Assisted Technology

For individuals with visual impairments, computers that quickly translate text to speech have been a game-changer.

In the early 1980s, Raymond Hepper, a retired energy lawyer in Maine who has been blind since birth, faced an uphill battle trying to convince employers to hire him-despite his Ivy League law degree and stellar grades.

An open-minded hiring manager at the U.S. Justice Department gave him his first big career break in law. But Hepper still recalls more than 100 unsuccessful interviews and the sting of being told by at least one law firm that he couldn't do the job. The inability to access printed materials was a major obstacle, he says.

Today, it's an entirely different story.

"I can get almost everything I need from a computer with text-to-speech technology, which is available for free or a minimal cost," says Hepper, who serves on the board of trustees for the Watertown, Mass.-based Perkins School for the Blind, which prepares young adults with visual impairments for college and employment through its College Success and Career Launch programs.

Kari McHugh, senior director of consumer and community relations at Dunkin' Brands, was so impressed with Perkins' training that she hired one of its graduates to staff the doughnut and coffee purveyor's Canton, Mass., customer call center, which historically has struggled to recruit and retain qualified workers.

"It's been a great match for us," says McHugh, who also has worked with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind to hire and place four additional visually impaired customer service workers.

Dunkin' hiring managers and supervisors worked closely with vocational counselors from Perkins and the commission to make sure various adaptive technologies that are supposed to be built into Salesforce, the database Dunkin' relies on to manage customer relations, work without a hitch, she says.

#### Moving Forward

While technology has made it far easier for workers with disabilities to do their jobs, its advantages can be blunted by websites that aren't designed with accessibility in mind. Finding a job is a challenge for visually impaired workers if job search websites and company application portals aren't developed to be accessible with a screen reader. Further, company sites that are used by employees also need to be accessible for visually impaired people to do their jobs.

"The challenge is demonstrating to businesses that designing accessibility into online platforms will benefit their recruitment, retention and customer satisfaction," Hepper says.

Job seekers with disabilities often wrestle with the question of when to disclose their disability to a potential employer since including the information on a resume or application could mean they'll be immediately disqualified. But catching a potential employer off guard by, say, showing up with an interpreter could also be self-defeating.

Employers' growing willingness to diversify their workforces goes hand in hand with more systematic, less chaotic ways of matching workers with disabilities to the right jobs, says John O'Neill, director of the Center for Employment and Disability Research at the Kessler Foundation in East Hanover, N.J. Until recently, charities and vocational rehabilitation groups often inundated employers with requests to place these workers but often had

little understanding of the employers' needs.

"The result was a high rate of failure," O'Neill says.

However, a growing number of faith-based and community groups, community colleges, workforce investment boards, and labor organizations now seek to aid both workers with disabilities and employers.

"There are organizations in every community that are preparing people [with disabilities] for employment," he says.

The key is finding the right match between the employee's skills and the job.

Rita Zeidner is a freelance writer based in Falls Church, Va.

## Sidebar

### DO'S AND DON'TS FOR INTERVIEWS

To create a welcoming atmosphere for people with disabilities-and avoid lawsuits- make sure hiring managers are clear about what they can and can't ask in a job interview.

The Americans with Disabilities Act specifically prohibits employers from asking questions that are likely to reveal the existence of a candidate's disability before they make a job offer.

\* The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) says these questions are off-limits:

\* Have you ever had a medical procedure related to your hearing or vision, such as a cochlear implant or eye surgery?

\* Do you have a condition that may have caused a hearing or visual impairment?

\* Do you use a hearing aid?

\* Do you use any prescription medications, including medications for conditions related to the eye?

Likewise, employers generally are barred from asking job applicants whether they will need a reasonable accommodation to perform the job, since the answer is likely to reveal whether an applicant has a disability, according to the EEOC.

But if the employer knows that an applicant has a disability and it is reasonable to wonder whether the disability might pose difficulties for the individual in performing a specific job task, then the employer may ask whether the applicant would need a reasonable accommodation to perform that task.

\* Employers may ask questions relating to the applicant's ability to perform the essential functions of the position with or without a reasonable accommodation, such as:

\* Can you respond quickly to instructions in a noisy, fast-paced work environment?

\* Do you have good communication skills?

\* Are you able to meet legally mandated safety standards required to perform a job?

Job applicants aren't required to tell a potential employer that they might need an accommodation to perform the job. There are pluses and minuses for doing so, according to vocational specialists.

On the one hand, discrimination is real, and some employers may never even consider an applicant with a disability. On the other hand, letting an employer know of an applicant's need for an accommodation during a job interview will allow the employer to make the necessary arrangements in advance. Accommodations could include a translator or video hookup for a deaf applicant, or print-magnifying equipment if an applicant with a visual impairment needs to take a qualifying exam. - R.Z.

## DETAILS

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