America's Shrinking Labor Force

Michael J. Hopkins, Senior Executive Editor of *Inc. Magazine*, affirms that hiring and recruiting capable employees are two of today's threshold business issues.

"As a business person and employer, you've heard of the difficulties many companies face today in finding qualified employees. With a period of extended economic growth and a shrinking labor pool, it doesn't look as though this is a problem that will go away any time soon," he says.

"In the past fifteen years, the available supply of labor in the U.S. has shrunk by one-half its previous size. In 1983, the U.S. unemployment rate was almost 11%. Today it is less than 5%. The labor pool has grown only 1.3% a year from 1986 to 1996, and so farsighted companies have already begun adjusting to deal with this projected employee availability crunch. Since 1996, the number of people on the job or available for hire has increased at the anemic rate of 1.1% a year, a pace that should continue until at least 2006, presenting HR professionals with the tightest labor market in 40 years."

Recent business surveys by such organizations as *INC. Magazine*, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) document that the number one problem for business is finding qualified employees. A July 1997 article in *USA TODAY* reports that the National Association of Business Economics cites a record 47 percent of companies having trouble finding enough skilled workers to fill available jobs, a leap from 32 percent just three months ago. The NFIB June 1997 survey of small businesses found that 27 percent of employers reported difficulty in filling open positions. More members, in fact, worried about finding qualified workers than about government regulations. Employers know the high costs and profit losses associated with employee turnover.

The video "Discovering an Untapped Resource" and this guide try to address these concerns by focusing on people with cognitive disabilities as a source of qualified employees. In the video, employers describe their experiences in hiring people with disabilities, and their resulting satisfaction with this approach. This guide provides further information about how you as an employer can effectively pursue this strategy to add qualified workers to your labor force. In the following pages, information is provided on:

- the importance of focusing on ability, and not on disability, in the employment and retention process
- government-supported assistance for employers, from private community rehabilitation service providers and public vocational rehabilitation agencies for people with cognitive disabilities, in identifying qualified candidates through such processes as job matching and job sampling
- the nature of cognitive disabilities and how it relates to effective workplace performance
- national and regional resources to help you identify qualified candidates and make appropriate workplace accommodations
- strategies to promote continuing success for all employees, especially those with disabilities, through an ongoing standard-setting and accommodation-update process

A list on page 12 provides you with resources for recruiting, accommodation, technical assistance, and support.

People with Cognitive Disabilities: an Untapped Labor Source

With business facing a severe shortage of skilled and unskilled workers, employers are increasingly turning to nontraditional sources of labor. However, high unemployment rates continue for people with disabilities. The unemployment rate for people with severe disabilities is approximately 70 percent. Yet, of adults with disabilities who are receiving public assistance, 75 percent would rather be working. According to the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) 1994–1995 data:

- 26.1% of people with severe disabilities are employed
- 52.3% of all people with disabilities are employed
- 82.1% of the general population is employed

In view of the fact that approximately 82 percent of the total U.S. working age population works, it becomes clear how much further we must go before people with disabilities reach employment parity with the general population.

Spotlighting motivated, qualified, competent employees, in a variety of skilled positions, is the video "Discovering an Untapped Resource." In the video's opening sequence, we hear just a little of what their coworkers and supervisors think of them. What links these scenarios is that all those featured as exemplary employees are people with cognitive disabilities, including mental retardation.

People with disabilities comprise the largest minority in America—54 million people. As the population ages, so will the workforce. More than half the population over age sixty-five have a disability. In addition, approximately 20.3 million families, or 29.2 percent of all families in the United States, have at least one member with a disability. Employers need to address disability issues in the workplace if they are to remain competitive.

The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is seeking to expand and enhance employment opportunities for people with cognitive disabilities. Project **EMPLOY** focuses on developing and placing a qualified labor pool of people with cognitive disabilities, including mental retardation, in occupations that provide higher than the minimum wage, benefits, and promotional opportunities.

References

M. Adams, "The Stream of Labor Slows to a Trickle," *HR Magazine*, October 1998, p. 85.

D. Hale, "Bonus of Full Employment for US," *Financial Times*, 14 April 1997.

R. Hershey, "U.S. Jobless Rate Declines to 4.7%, Lowest Since 1973," *New York Times*, 8 November 1997, p. 1.

FOCUS

Disability is not inability. Every day, our lives intersect with people who have abilities to varying degrees.

How can that person alphabetize so quickly?

Why can't I seem to remember phone numbers?

Where did she learn to do math in her head like that?

We often focus on disability as an insurmountable barrier to an individual's ability to work, not as a hurdle to be overcome if the individual is to play a valued role. People with disabilities have been viewed as a cost, rather than as contributors, to all elements of society, including business and the economy. But that is changing. Employers are starting to recognize individuals with disabilities as an important addition to the job market, a key element in building a competitive workforce. As the accompanying video portrays, with a period of extended economic growth and a shrinking labor pool, new sources of capable workers are needed. People with cognitive disabilities can be a source of competent and committed workers not previously tapped.

As employees with cognitive disabilities become more prominent in the workplace, we learn that their functional limitations are best framed as needs for support or reasonable accommodation. For example, people who can't reach a book on a top shelf are not rendered unemployable by their lack of height. They have a need for basic support such as a box or ladder to maximize their ability to perform the job. A person who has difficulty remembering daily tasks jots down a to-do list. Similarly, employees needing cognitive support can be successful in a wide variety of jobs if three basic elements are present: a chance, proper training, and support that addresses their specific needs in fulfilling the job requirements.

INITIATIVE

Hiring qualified individuals with cognitive disabilities starts with recognizing what a valuable pool of untapped labor they represent, committing your firm to a diversified workforce, and taking the first steps to demonstrate the ultimate benefit to your workplace. Many schools, public and private vocational rehabilitation agencies, and placement agencies provide support services to employers who are willing to give it a try.

Here are a few successful strategies that schools, community agencies, and businesses have used to make employment a reality for people with disabilities.

Job sampling offers employers an opportunity to expose individuals to an array of jobs available in their work's particular environment. Even when sampling does not produce a good fit, this hands-on exposure can play a positive role by helping candidates better understand the skills and qualifications various jobs require. Many will be better prepared to enter the workforce later on.

Job shadowing is a human resource development tool that helps employers and prospective coworkers assess the interests, preferences, and abilities of a candidate who has not had significant prior employment experience. Shadowing allows a person to observe an employee doing the work. The typical period of time and degree of effort allocated to shadowing are longer than those devoted to job sampling, though not as lengthy or intense as mentoring or internships.

Situational assessments and work trials are typical features of government employment programs. Without a long-term hiring commitment, they allow an employer to evaluate a candidate's ability to perform a specific job and allow candidates to assess their ability and interest in pursuing a specific field or position. These may be paid or unpaid and are time-limited. Many states also offer special work-trial incentives to employers who allow individuals with disabilities to gain work experience, affording both candidates and employers the chance to decide if they are a good match.

Mentoring is another important tool that aids an employer in developing the organization's own human resource potential. This is accomplished through creating work-based learning experiences. Typically, employees volunteer to mentor applicants or new employees who are interested in positions similar to theirs. The mentoring option allows the candidate to experience the job firsthand, lets the company assess whether the job matches the candidate's skills, and can give the mentor a rewarding experience.

Internships are primarily coordinated by educational institutions and range in length from a semester to a complete academic year. Internships are similar to mentoring programs, but often carry academic credit for the participant, whose course requirements combine school- and work-based learning experiences. The employer enjoys the benefits of a trained, entry-level individual working on-site.

Supported employment creatively promotes employment of people with disabilities, traditionally excluded from the workplace. Approaches include giving employees with disabilities some on-site support from coworkers or from a human-resource/

vocational rehabilitation professional, called a job coach or employment specialist. In most cases these support personnel are assigned by a school or community service agency to support the existing human resource (HR) practice in an employment site. These services are not to supplant an employer's responsibility to manage the diversity posed by cognitive disability in the workplace, but rather to enhance an employer's ability to do so, along with enhancing the organization's existing HR practices. This approach supports the employee in maximizing opportunity for success. Often the job coach will enhance the initial training offered by the employer if necessary. The employee's supervisor then provides whatever ongoing support is needed to maintain performance levels or to teach additional tasks.

Community-based vocational education programs represent another work-based learning strategy. Control for human resource development is put into the hands of the employer through partnership with local schools. This approach offers high school students with disabilities unpaid work-based opportunities in three areas: career exploration, ability- and interest-assessment, and/or training in a specific job. Experiences are time-limited and must meet guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Workplace supports provided to employment candidates by schools and community service agencies are customized to meet the needs of the person with a disability and the job requirements.

UNDERSTAND

In developing and implementing effective human resource practices that include people with cognitive disabilities, it is important to understand what the term 'cognitive' means. Cognition refers to comprehending and processing what one sees and hears, and to inferring information from social cues and body language. It involves an array of abilities, including the ability to stay focused (attention); to process information (reason); to remember (memory); to get along and work with others (interpersonal skills); to speak and write (communication); and to solve problems, handle multiple tasks, manage one's self, plan and organize, and understand how one learns best (executive functioning).

Cognitive abilities and functional limitations of varying degrees can be found in many people who have learning disabilities, mental retardation, psychiatric disabilities, autism, and/or a brain injury. Yet such cognitive, functional limitations do not preclude an individual's ability to work. It is important for employers to learn about the *capabilities* of their employees with disabilities, to support their needs, and to make reasonable workplace accommodations.

ENHANCE

Recruitment

Recruiting individuals with cognitive disabilities is a simple process of obtaining information and making contacts in your community.

Employers have many resources available to them. Every state has a publicly-funded vocational rehabilitation agency dedicated to assisting people with disabilities in obtaining employment. Most communities also have not-for-profit and proprietary agencies that work with people with disabilities. High schools have school-to-work transition programs for students with disabilities. Employers can contact such agencies and schools to gain access to a pool of potential employees and to get assistance in hiring, accommodating, and training employees with cognitive disabilities. These agencies can also answer questions about legal and compliance issues, adaptive and assistive technologies, and accessing tax credits and other financial incentives for hiring employees from targeted groups. Often these agencies are listed in the white pages of your telephone directory under government headings, or in the yellow pages under headings such as vocational rehabilitation or disability services.

Another valuable resource for businesses is the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), an organization of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. To contact JAN, call 800 526-7234.

We have mentioned supported employment as one resource employers can tap in order to provide job-coaching for an employee with a cognitive disability. In each state, there are many qualified providers of these services and many organizations that can assist in identifying local service providers and programs that actively support employees in businesses such as yours. Some of these are:

- **The Association of Persons in Supported Employment**
  804 278-9187 (voice)
  http://www.apse.org (Web site)
- **The American Congress of Community Supports and Employment Services**
  888 285-4742 (voice)
  http://accses.firminc.com/ (Web site)
- **The National Association of Rehabilitation Professionals in the Private Sector**
  508 820-8889 (voice)
  http://www.narpps.org (Web site)

As an employer, you can take several steps to enhance existing recruitment procedures for people with cognitive disabilities:

- Establish recruiting relationships with local schools, adult service agencies/organizations, public and private vocational rehabilitation agencies.
- Participate in local job fairs conducted by schools and local service agencies that work with traditionally under-represented groups in the workplace. Or even help to establish such an event.
- Post jobs in multiple formats such as newspaper classified ads; radio advertising; listings with individual employment agencies, organizations serving people with disabilities, and e-mail listserves.

Application and Interview

The job application and interview process is a candidate's initial experience of an employer's human resource practices that either encourage or hinder access for people with cognitive disabilities. The actions listed below will improve access for candidates with cognitive disabilities and probably for other job applicants, too.

Completing an application and job interview can be a stressful event for any applicant. You can lessen the anxiety for any job applicant, and may be particularly helpful to an applicant with a cognitive disability, in several ways:

- Simplify and minimize wording on the job application.
- Make provisions for candidates who cannot write well or who may be unable to confine writing to small spaces.
- Provide copies of your job application to community providers of employment services, or forward it to employment candidates prior to the interview, to allow more time for completion.
- Post your job application on your Web site.
- Conduct a verbal interview if the job-application information you require is complex or can be difficult to express in writing.
- Provide candidates with a more detailed profile of the essential functions and qualifications of the job you posted, so they can better measure their qualifications against the position's requirements.
- Volunteer to conduct practice interviews with potential employment candidates at schools, job fairs, and community agencies. This exposes people with disabilities to a variety of employment options and gives them interviewing experience.

To encourage a more relaxed interviewing atmosphere, try one or more of these ideas:

- Begin by clarifying with the applicant what the interviewing process entails and what you as an interviewer can do to make the applicant more comfortable.
- Stay focused on the applicant, not on the support person who may be accompanying the applicant.
- Conduct interviews in an accessible, comfortable, and quiet environment.
- Break the interview into parts so the focus is clear.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Be prepared to rephrase a question if it is not understood by the applicant.
- Speak in a manner that is clear and simple, without being patronizing.

Hiring Suggestions

- **Do** learn where to find and recruit people with disabilities.
- **Do** learn how to communicate with people who have disabilities.
- **Do** ensure that your applications and other company forms do not ask disability-related questions and that they are in formats accessible to all people with disabilities.
- **Do** consider having written job descriptions that identify the essential functions of the job.
- **Do** ensure that requirements for medical examinations comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- **Do** relax and make the applicant feel comfortable.
- **Do** provide reasonable accommodations that the qualified applicant will need to compete for the job.
- **Do** treat an individual with a disability the same way you would treat any applicant or employee—with dignity and respect.
- **Do** know that qualified individuals who have AIDS or cancer, or who are mentally retarded, traumatically brain injured, deaf, blind, or learning disabled, are protected by the ADA.
- **Do** understand that access includes not only environmental access, but also forms accessible to people with visual and cognitive disabilities and alarms/signals accessible to people with hearing disabilities.
- **Do** develop procedures for maintaining and protecting confidential medical records.
- **Do** train supervisors in making reasonable accommodations.
- **Don't** assume that people with disabilities are unemployable.
- **Don't** assume that people with disabilities lack the necessary education and training for employment.
- **Don't** assume that people with disabilities do not want to work.
- **Don't** ask during an employment interview if a person has a disability.
- **Don't** assume that certain jobs are more suited to people with disabilities.
- **Don't** assume that you have to retain an unqualified employee with a disability.
- **Don't** assume that your current management will need special training to learn how to work with disabilities.
- **Don't** assume that accident insurance cost will increase as a result of hiring a person with a disability.
- **Don't** assume that the work environment will be unsafe if an employee has a disability.
- **Don't** assume that reasonable accommodations are expensive.
- **Don't** speculate or try to imagine how you would perform a specific job if you had the applicant's disability.
- **Don't** assume that you have no jobs that a person with disabilities can do.
- **Don't** make medical judgments.
- **Don't** assume that due to apparent and nonapparent disabilities a person with a disability can't do a job.
- **Don't** assume that your workplace is accessible.

This page has been adapted from a publication by the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disability, 1996.

Job Training and Performance

Assimilating new employees into the workplace involves exposing them to the work culture. It is helpful if the employer or supervisor takes the time to orient the employee to workplace rules, performance standards of quantity and quality of work, and the method of performance appraisal. A new employee who understands the work culture has a better chance to succeed. The work culture makes us feel connected to those we work with and includes everything from traditions and customs (How are birth days and holidays celebrated?) to dress (Is it formal or informal?), interaction (What's the boss really like? Want to hear a funny story? Do you know that we all head for Smoky's after work on Thursdays?), and image (both perceived and self-ascribed). The key, as with any employee, is making a new hire feel welcome, comfortable, and appreciated.

Individuals with cognitive disabilities may have directly relevant work experience or job skills that may generalize and transfer to other tasks, but sometimes they may need to be taught a specific job. If so, it is important to start by using the training provided to all employees regardless of whether they have a disability. For example, if an employer provides every new hire with one day of orientation followed by two days of job shadowing and a week of coworker training, that is where training should start for the new hire with cognitive disabilities. Based on individual requirements, specific training may need to be customized as part of the accommodation process. Consider these options:

- Have a community-service provider prepare coworkers to adapt to the specific learning style and preferences of the new employee.
- Supplement your standard orientation and training with additional training from a job coach or employment specialist.
- Divide job tasks into small units that are clearly defined.
- Develop and use self-management tools such as checklists.
- Provide instructions in the employee's preferred learning modality (verbal instructions, written instructions, demonstration).
- Develop a set routine in the job.
- Work with the employee to develop compensatory tools such as to-do lists and schedules.
- Allow the employee to use tools such as alarm clocks, watches, or timers to pace work flow.
- Use pictures or diagrams showing job sequences, to assist in teaching new tasks.
- Encourage coworker involvement in ongoing training if needed.

Performance Evaluations

Every company differs in how it evaluates its employees. Some procedures comprise formal, written documents; others are less formal and oral. Whatever procedure your company follows, treat your employees with disabilities as you treat all others. If you have restructured jobs to accommodate disabilities, of course you should evaluate the employees only on those tasks they are expected to perform. But you should apply to those employees the same performance criteria that you apply to all other employees. Trying to "give the guys a break" does not encourage workers with disabilities to perform up to standards and may cause resentment among other workers. If an employee with a disability is not able to perform the essential function of the job even with accommodation(s), the employer is not required to retain this person.

Goal Setting

Recognize that people with disabilities have career goals. Sit down with your employees and talk about goals. If the goals seem unreasonable to you, ask the employees what they think it would take for them to achieve the goals. See if you can reach a consensus.

If the goals are unreasonable for business reasons, say so; but do not automatically assume that the employees' disabilities will be barriers. The biggest barrier may be your lack of experience or understanding. Workers with disabilities simply add to the cultural diversity employers must manage in today's market.

Promoting

The key to any new hire's long-term success involves the employee's full assimilation into the workplace culture, feeling of worth and contribution to the workplace, and opportunity for advancement. A key to advancement is understanding an employee's career goals. To assist all employees in assimilating:

- Ensure accessibility of in-service training opportunities.
- Help employees identify their career goals.
- Maintain an open and honest relationship with the employees regarding performance and work-behavior expectations.
- Hold annual discussions as part of the employees' performance appraisals, to assess abilities and discuss promotional opportunities.
- Seek assistance from community agencies for re-training when necessary.

Accommodations

According to the Job Accommodation Network, of the President's Committee, 20% of all accommodations cost nothing, 48% cost between $1 and $500, and 12% cost between $1,001 and $1,500. For every dollar spent to make an accommodation, the company received $16.44 in benefits.

In order to make existing facilities used by employees accessible to individuals with disabilities, you may have to make these accommodations:

- Restructure a job.
- Allow part-time or modified work hours.
- Reassign an employee to a vacant position.
- Acquire or modify equipment or devices.
- Appropriately adjust or modify examinations, training materials, or policies.
- Provide qualified readers or interpreters.
- Provide other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities.
- Provide written instructions.

Worksite Accessibility

How do I know if my workplace is accessible? Here are some questions to keep in mind when determining physical accessibility.

- Are parking spaces close to the entrance of the worksite designated for people with disabilities?
- Is there a pathway without abrupt level changes or steps that leads between the parking area and the entrance?
- If ramps are used to provide access, are they appropriately graded and are handrails provided?
- Are the doors wide enough (three feet) for people using wheelchairs? Are they easy to open (e.g., not excessively heavy, with easily grasped handles, or automatic)?
- Is the personnel office in an accessible location?
- Are pathways to the bathroom, water fountain, and public telephone accessible? Can people with disabilities use them?
- Are elevators accessible to all people with disabilities (e.g., control panels lower then fifty-four inches from the floor, raised symbols or numbers on the control panels)?
- Is all signage (including those with symbols and graphics) appropriate and accessible for people with visual, learning, and cognitive disabilities?
- Does the emergency warning system include both audible and visual alarms?

Resources

Many organizations and agencies can provide more information regarding supported employment services, vocational rehabilitation, school-to-work transition, and effective strategies and incentives for employing people with cognitive and other disabilities:

- **ADA Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers**
  800 949-4232 (voice/TTY)
  http://www.adata.org (Web site)
- **The ARC of the United States**
  817 261-6003 (voice/TTY)
  817 277-0553 (TTY)
  http://thearc.org (Web site)
- **The Association of Persons in Supported Employment**
  804 278-9187 (voice)
  http://www.apse.org (Web site)
- **Goodwill Industries**
  301 530-6500 (voice)
- **Institute for Community Inclusion**
  617 355-6506 or 617 287-7645 (voice)
  617 355-6956 or 617 287-7597 (TTY)
  http://web1.tch.harvard.edu/ici (Web site)
- **National Transition Alliance**
  217 333-2325 (voice/TTY)
  http://www.dssc.org/nta/html/home.htm (Web site)
- **President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities**
  202 376-6200 (voice)
  202 376-6205 (TTY)
  http://www.pcepd.gov (Web site)
- **The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), an organization of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities**
  800 526-7234 (voice/TTY)
  http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu (Web site)
- **The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports at Virginia Commonwealth University**
  804 828-1851 (voice/TTY)
  http://www.vcu.edu/rrtcweb/ (Web site)
- **Program on Employment and Disability at Cornell University**
  607 255-7727 (voice)
  607 255-2891 (TTY)
  http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped (Web site)

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