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VIEWPOINT: WE CAN DO BETTER EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

*The following article appeared in the Op-ed/Opinion section of the Boston Business Journal on November 3, 2017.
<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2017/11/03/viewpointwe-can-do-better-employing-people-with.html>*

Viewpoint: We can do better employing people with disabilities

As organizations across the country that serve and provide vocational training to individuals with disabilities marked National Disability Employment Awareness Month this past October, it is a meaningful time to review the progress of employment of people with disabilities.

According to the 2016 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, only 35 percent of individuals with disabilities were employed in Massachusetts, compared to 79 percent of adults ages 18 to 64. While this puts our state in the middle of the pack (29 out of 50), we should not be content with that. Nonprofits that serve these individuals must work closely with the business community here to improve our ranking and get more willing participants in the job market hired.

Our nonprofit, the Carroll Center for the Blind, works with many working-age individuals who become diagnosed with vision impairment later in life. This devastating diagnosis often leads to the loss of their job and, more importantly, the loss of their independence. And yet, these are individuals with significant work histories and life experiences who can make real contributions in the workplace.

Through the training and support that we are able to provide, these individuals learn that there are, in fact, many opportunities still available to them. For example, some individuals work as part of a digital accessibility team at the Carroll Center that reviews websites and online content for organizations to ensure that they are accessible and compliant with the American with Disabilities Act and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Over 20 percent of the Carroll Center staff are blind or vision impaired. Others return to their previous employers or find new work in businesses, government, or nonprofit organizations. And some launch their own businesses or join startups.

Despite these good jobs, there are too many people with disabilities who have effectively been shut out from the labor market. This is unfortunate because people with disabilities have a lot to offer, and both experience and data show that they can be more dependable and reliable employees than those without disabilities.

Perhaps this is because they are grateful for the opportunity to work. Or maybe their life experience as a person with a disability gives them a perspective that others simply don't have.

While some employers have embraced the opportunity to hire individuals with disabilities, too many have shied away. Here are three reasons why these businesses should re-examine their approach:

1. Hiring people with disabilities is not a charitable endeavor; it is good for the bottom line. Those with disabilities tend to be very conscientious and committed employees. Managers often state that these employees have better attendance and performan

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than other workers. So the decision to create company policy that encourages the hiring of these individuals isn't a social value or act of charity; it is good for business.

2. Reasonable accommodations do not mean costly accommodations. The ADA introduced the term of reasonable accommodations, meaning employers are required to make changes to their workplace that enable those with disabilities to work at the organization, unless such changes are unduly burdensome. Often, a reasonable accommodation is as simple as providing magnification or screen reading software for a computer, or a low-cost device to increase the volume of a phone. In some cases it might mean lowering or raising the height of a desk. These are minor expenses and should not be considered a barrier to hiring what could be the next great employee.

3. Businesses everywhere are striving to be diverse and inclusive. The business community—from large corporations to small family businesses—has embraced diversity because they know it is important to have a workforce that mirrors their customer base. Diversity must extend beyond race, religion and sexual orientation to include those with and without disabilities. Our nation is aging fast and baby boomers, many of whom are now in or approaching retirement, are major purchasers of goods and services. They want to see more workers like them—including those with disabilities.

Progress has been made in recent years, particularly since passage of the ADA; it just isn't coming quickly enough for those who are so eager to work, and able to work, but do not have the opportunity to do so.

Gregory J. Donnelly is president and CEO of The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton.

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[Starting today, all federal websites must be accessible to those with disabilities; the business community should take note](#) »

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