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# Market Research Report: Making the Case for Hiring and Retaining People with Disabilities

**Keywords**

disability, employment, hiring, employee retention

**Comments**

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From the focus groups, for example, EARN learned that:

- Facts and statistics are persuasive. Most participants agreed that facts and statistics are very useful for dispelling myths and misconceptions about people with disabilities. Knowing the source of data helped employers determine the credibility of the information.
- The most compelling facts were those about attendance, retention and tax incentives that may be available when accommodating employees or customers with disabilities. Many people found it difficult to believe that most people with disabilities do not need a workplace accommodation or that the typical cost would likely be below \$500. However, most employers realized that they actually accommodate workers with and without disabilities everyday to build a loyal, dedicated and productive workforce.
- While many employers did not readily connect with the message that recruiting and hiring workers with disabilities is one strategy to counter the effects of the aging and shrinking workforce, most included a desire to retain qualified employees among their most pressing workforce issues. This led to recognition about how job accommodations can play a vital role in facilitating employment of people with disabilities—whether they have a pre-existing disability or are returning to work following an illness or injury.
- Employer reactions to the idea that workers with disabilities contribute to enhancing workplace diversity varied considerably. This idea seemed to resonate best among the larger businesses and for-profit organizations with existing diversity policies and programs.
- Many employers did not understand the connection between employing people with disabilities and gaining access to a vibrant consumer base. Information on population size and discretionary income, introduced to show a link between the economic power of people with disabilities and the value of attracting clients or customers with disabilities, was confusing. This message strongly resonated with service-oriented, for-profit employers that specifically seek customers.
- Many employers indicated they would prefer to hear directly from other employers like themselves (e.g. the same type of industry, the same size company). Participants suggested that seeing more testimonial information from other employers—including senior executives, human resources, and front-line managers—would be compelling.

For the full Focus Group Report, visit [www.earnworks.com](http://www.earnworks.com).

For more information on EARN's Business Case for Hiring, Retaining and Promoting People with Disabilities, visit [www.earnworks.com](http://www.earnworks.com).

You can also call EARN at 1-866-EARN-NOW or email us at [earn@earnworks.com](mailto:earn@earnworks.com).

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## MARKET RESEARCH REPORT

### Making the Case for Hiring and Retaining People With Disabilities

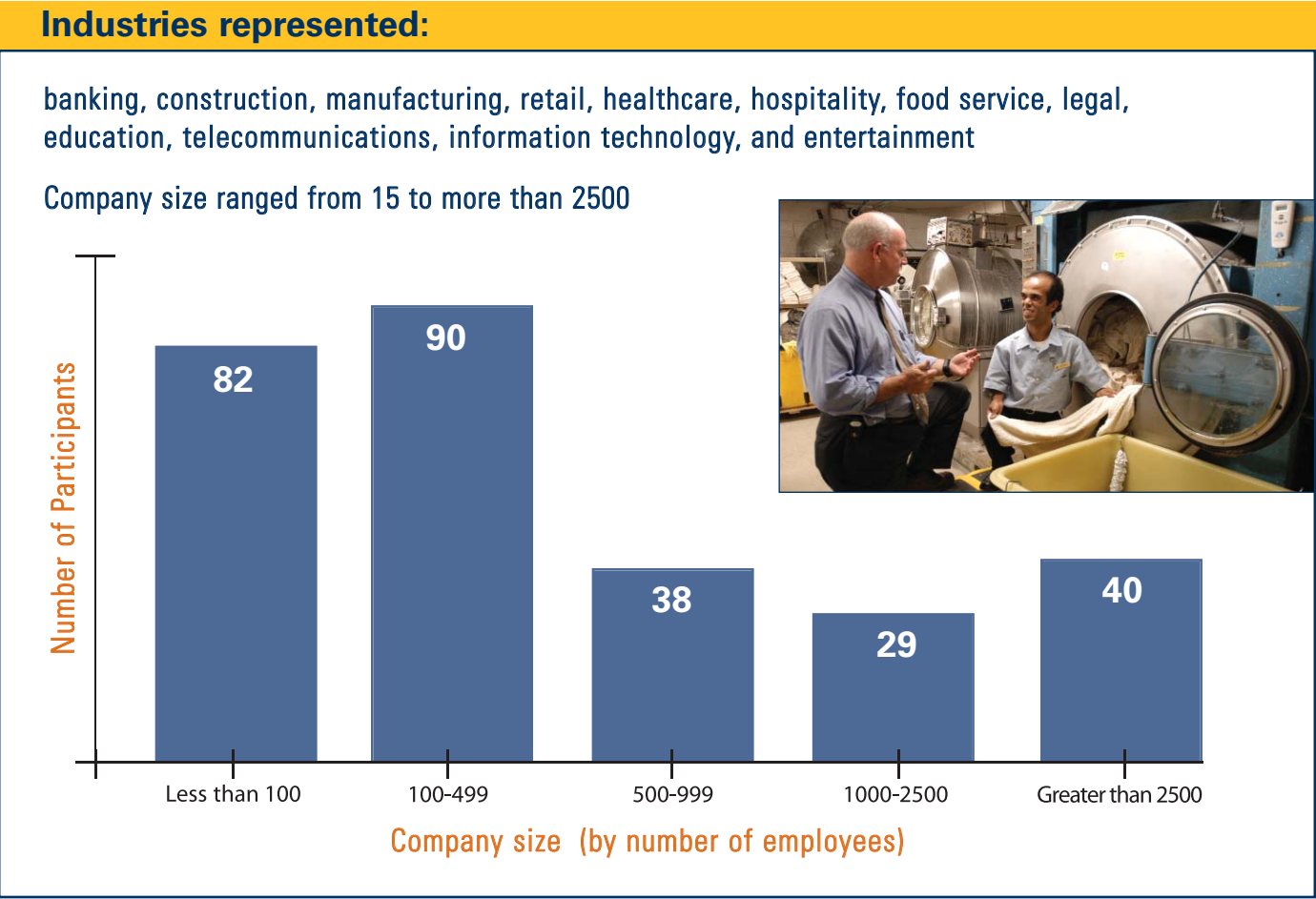




What one thing would need to change to improve the hiring climate for people with disabilities?

This question was posed to human resources professionals and business leaders in focus groups conducted in key markets throughout the country. The most common answer given: more accurate and practical information to dispel preconceptions and concerns about hiring people with disabilities.

From May through October 2004, the Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network (EARN) conducted focus group research in 13 major metropolitan areas. The 26 groups, representing a range of industry sectors and sizes, included private sector executive-level managers and human resources professionals from for- and not-for profit organizations. Across the focus groups, participants shared their most pressing workforce issues as well as reactions to various business case messages and facts about workers with disabilities.



Findings: Employers’ Primary Workforce Issues

At the beginning of each of the focus groups, participants were asked to identify the top staffing or workforce issues facing their organization today. From these discussions, a number of common workforce issues surfaced across the groups—regardless of industry, company size or profit:

- Finding and retaining qualified employees is the most significant workforce issue facing employers today. Nearly all of the participants said they have difficulty finding and

retaining employees with the right skills, qualifications and level of experience, regardless of industry or location. Reasons varied depending on the type of workers sought and, to a minor degree, geographic location; however, most believed this would become increasingly difficult in the future.

- Employers are continually seeking strategies to maintain affordable benefits and contain costs in this area. They believe that keeping benefits affordable is key to offering attractive benefits packages that will enable them to recruit and retain talent.

Employers’ workforce priorities also included:

- Meeting goals and objectives during economic downturns.
- Finding workers with the appropriate “soft skills.”
- Encouraging workers to maintain an appropriate work ethic.
- Training.

Findings: Misperceptions or Concerns about People with Disabilities in the Workplace

At the start of each group, participants explored their perceptions of people with disabilities and experiences working with people who have disabilities. Based on the discussions within each of the groups, prior work experiences or personal relationships had the most significant influence on perceptions of people with disabilities in the workplace. Many of the participants had little or no experience working with a person with a disability, let alone recruiting, hiring or managing a workforce that included people with disabilities. Across the groups, some common themes emerged from these discussions:

- Assumptions that people with disabilities cannot do the type of work that the organization needs to have done. This was the most prevalent thought across a variety of the industry sectors.
- Concerns about attendance and retention, stemming from the idea that people with disabilities are absent more often as a result of illness or medical conditions. Interestingly, few expressed concern about perceived impacts on the cost of health insurance.
- Assumptions about the costs of accommodations. Many participants assumed that all people with disabilities require significant and costly workplace accommodations. Employers’ first thoughts related to physical disabilities, mobility, and access—along with the costs associated with significant structural changes such as ramps, elevators, accessible bathrooms, larger doorways, etc.

Other concerns included:

- Confusion over the definition of disability.
- Fear of or experience with legal problems.
- Apprehension about mental illness or psychiatric disabilities.
- Safety of employee, both in terms of an individual performing their job duties safely and being able to evacuate the workplace in the event of an emergency.

Findings: Business Case Messages that Resonate with Employers

The business case demonstrates, in detail, the economic and other benefits to employers when they recruit and hire people with disabilities. It addresses the need surfaced throughout the discussions for more accurate and practical information to dispel preconceptions and concerns about hiring people with disabilities.

| EARN Business Case Message Points   |
|---|
| <div>Hiring, retaining and promoting people with disabilities...<br/>Positively impacts your bottom line.</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increase employee retention.</li><li>• Meet or exceed performance standards.</li></ul></div>   |
| <div>Gives you a competitive edge.</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hire employees with the skills you need.</li><li>• Attract qualified employees in a shrinking workforce.</li><li>• Reduce costs of employee benefits.</li><li>• Gain insight to a multi-billion dollar market segment.</li><li>• Acquire creative problem-solving skills.</li></ul></div> |
| <div>Is easier than you might think.</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Level the playing field with technology.</li><li>• Make accommodations easy and cost effective.</li></ul></div>   |

Through the focus group research, EARN also tested reactions to key message points that demonstrate the ways in which recruiting and hiring people with disabilities is a sound business strategy. This led to a better understanding of the appeal of arguments based on an employer’s role within an organization and industry sector. This also enabled EARN to revise and refine the message points and craft a compelling case to educate executives, human resource personnel and hiring managers about the contributions people with disabilities make to an organization’s bottom line.