



Book Dive In

Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity, and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce

Nadine O. Vogel and Cindy Brown
Paramount, 2009

Recommendation

A recent Northeastern University study reports that by 2018 companies will have more jobs than people to fill them. In fact, some 36 million U.S. employees will retire by 2014, leaving a huge gap in the labor pool. Nadine O. Vogel, a consultant on special-needs workforce issues and the mother of two daughters with special needs, suggests that employers can address this gap by hiring more people with disabilities. That category includes older workers, as well as the disabled and their caregivers, particularly parents of special-needs children. Writing with Cindy Brown, Vogel provides an abundant, well-rounded resource of valuable information to help employers develop and support a special-needs workforce. She starts by explaining the benefits of hiring special-needs employees and works through the entire process, from recruiting and training to accommodating individual needs. *BooksInShort* finds that she does a thorough job of presenting the practical steps companies should take to create an inclusive culture. Her conversational, if not polished, style invites you to, well, dive in and make waves with your special-needs workforce.

Take-Aways

- Employers should view workers with disabilities as people first, instead of seeing them only in terms of their disabilities.
- A disability doesn't define an individual.
- Special-needs workers include the parents of children with disabilities.
- Hiring workers with disabilities increases retention, saves money, attracts job candidates and customers, and boosts product or service quality.
- Inclusion brings diversity, better customer service and community involvement.
- Some 46% of the accommodations firms make for workers with disabilities are free. When costs occur, they're usually only \$300 more than the cost of using any worker.
- Firms should centralize the governance of accommodation issues and funds.
- Watch for signs that special-needs workers need a hand, from accommodations at work to support with maintaining their work-life balance.
- Tell your staff members about all available services, including accommodation help, benefits and emergency plans. Implement planning and training in these areas.
- One-quarter of parents with special-needs kids have lost a job because they had to attend to their children's needs. Such parents make up 9% of the average workforce.

Summary

The Benefits of Hiring Special-Needs Workers

Workers with disabilities include those with physical challenges, such as deafness and blindness, and those with cognitive differences, from dyslexia to brain injuries. In all, some 54 million U.S. adults identify themselves as disabled. The umbrella term "special-needs workforce" also encompasses those with age-related conditions and people whose dependents have special needs. Firms that hire from this labor pool achieve diversity and reap many other benefits. For instance, companies that employ special-needs workers find that their retention rates increase. This saves the cost of turnovers, which can be as much as 150% of each lost employee's yearly salary. When Carolina Fine Snacks hired people with disabilities, its turnover fell from "80% every six months to less than 5%." Productivity went up from 70% to 95%, absences sank to less than 5% from 20% and tardiness hit zero from 30%.

"Many people with disabilities, in order to be successful, have to go an extra distance."

Your special-needs workforce to potential employees and customers. Hiring special-needs employees builds a more stable, loyal staff and makes your company more attractive to the next generation of workers (10% of Americans aged 14-18 see themselves as “ethical enthusiasts” and say they care more about an employer’s values than about starting wages). Actually, you already may have more workers with disabilities than you know. About 15% of the average U.S. workforce has “disability-related issues,” and 9% are parents of kids with special needs.

“People with disabilities do not want to be special; they want to be equal. They want to be people first.”

Many people with disabilities are natural innovators because they’ve always had to find ways to make things work for them, such as equipment they modify. “They are often quick to troubleshoot, formulate new ideas and adopt cutting-edge solutions.” Hiring people with special needs can also improve your products and services. For example, older workers make better decisions, do more accurate work, take fewer sick days, and bring advanced interpersonal skills and deeper knowledge to the job. An employee in a wheelchair may notice accessibility issues that could matter to your customers. Such factors give your firm an advantage.

“By training your employees, your company will be equipped to truly welcome the special-needs workforce (and the special-needs market).”

Companies that employ a special-needs workforce – including Starbucks, Walgreens, Procter & Gamble, Cisco Systems, McDonald’s and many more – have seen positive transformations in their corporate cultures. Thanks to an employee who is deaf, another firm added closed-captioning to its product videos and gained a big competitive advantage. Some customers patronize companies simply because they have employees with disabilities. A U.S. national survey found that 92% of consumers think better of a company that hires employees with disabilities, and 87% would rather buy from firms that hire the disabled. One stockholder admitted that he had planned to sell his shares in a firm until he saw a corporate video that included special-needs employees. Such firms see that inclusion leads to better service, improved community involvement and higher profits.

Recruiting

Advances in medicine mean that more people survive accidents, and many live longer with physically limiting conditions. Thus, the number of potential staffers with disabilities continues to grow. The ranks of veterans with disabilities also are increasing, given that some 25% of U.S. soldiers who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan return with a “service-related injury,” putting 180,000 more people among the U.S.’s 2.9 million veterans with disabilities.

“Ask what they need, and listen.”

Disability-oriented nonprofit or government agencies can assist your company in finding qualified job candidates with disabilities and arranging accessible interview processes. Organizations that can help you contact potential special-needs workers include the U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Employer Assistance & Resource Network, the U.S. Business Leadership Network, Easter Seals and the American Association of People with Disabilities. Also try college disability services offices and your state’s vocational rehabilitation agencies. Your current staff members also can help you find job applicants with special needs.

“The level of self-advocacy required [by workers with special needs] is really high. It takes tenacity, patience and courage.” (Deborah Dagit, chief diversity officer, Merck)

To help with recruiting, your marketing materials and website should include images of people with disabilities. Inclusive materials tell everyone that you prioritize having a diverse workforce. Make your website accessible. Many people with vision impairments use “screen readers” that can’t penetrate online clutter, so your site should “talk” to screen readers. Add subtitles to online videos for those with hearing-related differences. Having an accessible website helps your staff and can encourage potential hires. However, to keep the special-needs workers you’ve recruited, you have to learn how to treat them well.

Disability Awareness and Etiquette Training

Do you know what to say when parents tell you their newborn has Down syndrome? (Say what you’d say to any new parents or mention a supportive experience if you’ve had one.) What do you say when you run into a co-worker who’s had chemotherapy and is now bald? (“Welcome back...It’s great to see you.”) And what’s the polite reaction if “you go to shake someone’s hand and discover that they have a prosthetic device or no hand at all”? (Shake what the person offers – the prosthesis, the forearm or the other hand.) Educate staffers to deal with uneasy moments. Add a training unit about safety to prepare people for unexpected situations, such as what to do and not to do if someone has a seizure. Some firms mandate disability awareness training; others limit it to executives and certain specialists. Ernst & Young, Starbucks and Wal-Mart include everyone. Often, awareness trainers or their partners have disabilities. “Experience” training shows staffers what it is like to have a disability. They use wheelchairs, put on blindfolds or insert earplugs. Yet this teaches only the physical side of a disability; it doesn’t cover emotional and social issues.

“Support and flexibility are key components of being an employer of choice.”

When you meet people with disabilities, talk directly to them, not just to their companions. Instead of saying “disabled people,” speak of “people with disabilities.” Using the right phrasing emphasizes a “people first” philosophy. The same thinking applies to other preferred terms, such as “older workers” and “children with special needs.” And don’t judge people’s abilities based on their looks – just think of Stephen Hawking.

Working with Accommodations

Making workplace adjustments or accommodations for special-needs workers can be simple. Adecco, a “human capital solutions company,” hired a deaf and nearly blind telephone worker. She needed only an instant messenger program, paper, a pen, large-print materials and an orientation to the building to do her job well. This is normal in that 46% of the accommodations that firms make for workers with disabilities cost no money. When a cost is involved, it’s usually only \$300 more than the expense for any worker in the same job. Accommodations are more likely to involve adopting flexible policies than adding technology. For example, your firm could promote telecommuting, which offers more flexibility to all your staffers, not just those with disabilities. Some 87% of managers surveyed by the National Science Foundation say teleworkers are as productive or more so than on-site workers.

“More importantly, you’re saying that you get it – that people with disabilities are your employees and your customers.”

IBM accessibility executive John Evans expresses his company’s accommodation philosophy as, “If you need something to do your job, we work to get it for you.” Like IBM, most firms that accommodate special-needs workers report good results. To accommodate those with disabilities, as the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates if you have 15 staffers or more, try these steps:

- **Search for resources** – Many resources are available online, through nonprofit groups and Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers.
- **Make it simple to request accommodations** – When staffers with disabilities come to the human resources department for support, HR should not refer them back to their local managers. If that tactic had worked, the staffer wouldn’t have come to HR. Simplify the accommodation request process and spread the word.
- **Wait to see how people do** – Rather than creating exceptions to rules and processes based on assumptions about disabilities, react to what the employee actually can do well.
- **Include your workers in decisions** – Let people figure out what jobs they can handle.
- **Invite partners in** – Nonprofit groups, government agencies and assistive technology centers all offer expert help.
- **Foster a supportive corporate culture** – Build inclusion into the fabric of your firm.

“Universal access should be your ultimate goal – design that works for all people, all of the time.”

Consider implementing a “Reasonable Accommodation Committee” (RAC), so employees can get help without chasing answers. The RAC manages accommodation funding so the firm can track its expenses from an overall accommodation budget instead of using departmental funds. The RAC can handle requests fairly and consistently. Having a RAC shows your firm’s support of its special-needs workforce, supports local managers and consolidates policies and costs. With a process in place, the firm has support if legal issues arise. For an effective RAC:

- Draw members from across the firm’s departments and specialty areas.
- Decide how often the committee should meet and how long members will serve.
- Determine a process for handling accommodation requests.
- Detail and communicate the processes for requests, appeals and other concerns.

“If you want to be the employer of choice, you have to understand and value the needs of your employees.”

The RAC should create an emergency contingency plan for helping anyone with special needs, not only those with permanent disabilities. If the fire alarm goes off, what will you do about the employee with the broken leg on the 25th floor? One method is to assign a buddy to those who might need help in an unexpected situation. Then hold a drill.

Working with Benefits

Health benefits, often a tangled, complicated puzzle, can be an even greater challenge for special-needs employees. In one case, an employee passed away, leaving his daughter with disabilities as the beneficiary of his life insurance. As a result, she lost her eligibility for government benefits and services. His company could have prevented this outcome by educating the employee. For instance, your benefits paperwork should tell your staffers how to access legal counsel or obtain full medical insurance benefits. One woman thought she had to stop her physical therapy because her plan said it covered a set number of sessions. She didn’t know she had an extended therapy option. Consider asking your insurance company to offer benefits training to your employees.

Providing Resources and Support

To become an “employer of choice” for special-needs employees, nurture their diversity and support their careers. For instance, provide easy intranet access to data and resources that matter to them. This material should cover benefits, terms of employment, etiquette, government services and resources, financial information, educational support, contact information for assistive organizations, travel opportunities, commuting data, training programs and more. Other information resources include brown-bag lunch programs on various topics, as well as videos, posters and newsletters (preferably electronic).

“Flexibility, that’s another one of those qualities that makes a company an employer of choice – and it works for more than just people with disabilities.”

Some special-needs workers may require support to maintain their work-life balance. Managers should be alert to signs that a person needs a hand. Try to be aware if a staff member takes longer to get to work – perhaps that’s because only a few city buses have wheelchair lifts. When you set schedules, be sensitive to parents who can’t work late because they must get home to tend to special-needs children. Some 23 million Americans have children with special needs, and 25% of these parents report that they have lost at least one job because of their kids’ requirements.

“People with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, problems and joys.”

To assist special-needs workers, consider establishing affinity groups. Whereas support groups focus on medicine and treatment, affinity groups bring together employees with similar needs or interests to discuss ways to be more productive. Affinity groups can unite parents of kids who have special needs, or people with mobile disabilities, or caregivers tending aging parents. The topics you cover and the number of affinity groups your company fosters will depend on your employee population. Some companies assemble a welcome committee or “champions group” that helps everyone feel included and supported. Firms can also form partnerships with other organizations to share ideas and resources.

About the Authors

Nadine O. Vogel is the founder and president of Springboard Consulting.

