



# Book Perfectly Able

## How to Attract and Hire Talented People with Disabilities

Lighthouse International  
AMACOM, 2010  
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### Recommendation

Companies that avoid hiring disabled workers miss a golden opportunity to improve their workplace. Often, disabled employees prove to be tough-minded problem solvers who have learned resiliency. Appreciative of the chance to work for their employers’ trust, employees with disabilities seldom leave their jobs and so help their companies minimize turnover rates. People with disabilities often possess great character and a strong work ethic. In many cases, they have had to strive more than others to achieve their training and education, and so prove to be superior in their chosen fields. This informative, straightforward guide covers all pertinent legal questions about interviewing and hiring disabled people, dispels numerous myths and prejudices, and offers hardheaded practical advice. *BooksInShort* recommends editor Jim Hasse’s insights about recruiting and managing this talented but underused labor pool.

### Take-Aways

- People with disabilities comprise nearly 13% of the available workforce in the US.
- More than six out of 10 people with disabilities do not have jobs.
- Yet many individuals with disabilities can work and are well qualified.
- Numerous tools and aids are available to help disabled employees perform at work, often at minimal expense to employers.
- People with disabilities often prove to be model employees.
- Many are resourceful and effective problem solvers with great strength of character.
- The working disabled have very low rates of turnover, absenteeism, tardiness, and so on.
- Employers who hire disabled individuals sometimes can earn tax credits.
- A workforce without disabled people is not truly diverse.
- Treat employees with disabilities as you would any other employees.

### Summary

#### People with Disabilities Make Great Employees

According to the US Census Bureau, only 37.7% of Americans with disabilities have jobs, compared to 79.7% of individuals without disabilities. The National Council on Disability reports that the biggest reason US companies cite for not hiring disabled workers is a “lack of qualified applicants.” Yet many disabled people are fit to work, though firms often avoid hiring them because of their disabilities.

“Diversity is about capturing and retaining individuals who are creative and talented...and fostering a workplace climate that recognizes, values and supports ideas from every direction.”

While not obligatory, hiring disabled workers makes good business sense. They often have developed strength of character and problem-solving abilities. They value the opportunity to work, which means better employee retention rates and a stronger work ethic.

In the 1990s, Carolina Fine Snacks, a snack food firm in Greensboro, North Carolina, faced a staggering 80% turnover rate. The company’s retention problem ended when it began to hire people with “learning, hearing, sight and psychological” disabilities. After instituting the new hiring policy, turnover dropped to “less than 5%,” as did their 20% absenteeism rate. Productivity jumped from 70% to 95%. The 30% tardiness rate fell to zero. Disabled employees proved loyal, hard working and responsible.

## Hiring People with Disabilities Is Smart Business

“According to the US Census Bureau, there are nearly 22 million working-age people in the United States with disabilities.” Disabled people know how to deal successfully with vulnerability issues. They are mentally and emotionally agile. They excel at meeting unexpected challenges.

“Disability is not inability.”

HirePotential, a recruitment agency for disabled employees, has determined that people with disabilities remain at their jobs “50% longer” than people without disabilities. Employees in Marriott’s Pathways to Independence Program have a 6% turnover rate, compared to 52% for the rest of the hotel chain’s workers.

“Businesses today are not instruments for deliberate social change. They probably never have been and probably never will be.”

Today’s competitive business environment demands diversity. This includes employing people with disabilities, who make up 12.9% of the US workforce. Employers who hire only white nondisabled males (25% of the US labor pool) significantly miss out on available talent. Research also indicates that seniors stay in the workforce longer than in the past. Considering the graying of the workforce, employers can make their workplace “inclusive of disability.”

“Candid questions about employment of people with disabilities often go unasked, and, therefore, are generally unanswered.”

### Take these three steps to launch a diversity initiative:

1. **“Clarify your mission and values”** – Where does your organization stand regarding diversity? Define your position in the most concrete terms.
2. **“Communicate that mission and those values”** – Make sure all your employees understand your organization’s commitment to diversity.
3. **“Align those values with daily practices”** – Your diversity initiative requires the full-fledged support of your managers and supervisors. They must be ready to answer questions such as: “Why are we changing, and why is it important to me?” “What do you want me to do differently from what I’m doing today?” “Why?” “What’s in it for me?” “What’s in it for all of us?”

“According to the President’s Committee on Employment of Disabled Persons, approximately 75% of people with disabilities are able to work and are interested in joining the workforce but are unemployed.”

Your management team must encourage an environment that considers diversity an essential element of your organizational makeup.

When it comes to people with disabilities, recognize their differences without magnifying them. You do not want to communicate that disabled employees are “special.” This inappropriate attitude can create resentment among other workers toward their disabled colleagues. Convey the attitude that a disabled worker is no different, aside from requiring special tools to do his or her job, from other staffers. Attitude is all-important. Do not make a disabled employee feel like a burden to you or others within your organization. Make sure that your employees understand that you hired someone eminently qualified for the job. Integrate employees with disabilities into their teams and into your organization. Accept them as individuals.

## “Self-Determination”

Self-determination is vital to democracies. People should be in charge of their own destinies, be able to play active roles in society and have the opportunity to work toward their own self-interest. Disabled individuals want to determine for themselves what they get out of life, and laws exist to protect this basic right. Across the globe, many nations have enacted legislation that guarantees self-determination for their disabled citizens. Examples include the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) in the United States, Australia’s Disability Discrimination Act of 1992, Canada’s Human Rights and Criminal Code additions in 1997 and Japan’s Law to Promote the Employment of the Handicapped.

“Demand balanced and well-informed disability awareness training from a diversity trainer.”

Unfortunately, despite such legislation, many treat disabled people as children who cannot fend for themselves and require protection from the vicissitudes of life. Disabled citizens who can find jobs get the chance to re-establish themselves as adults, not “terminal adolescents.” This does not mean “special employment.” It means regular work for which they are qualified. When it comes to self-determination issues, you and your company can do a lot for people with disabilities:

- **“Hire them”** – Give them the opportunity to do work that fits their capacities.
- **“Equip them”** – Many people with disabilities have only “mechanical limitations” that prevent them from working effectively. Provide one or more of the numerous tools available to get around these limitations.
- **“Challenge them”** – Demand the same productivity and performance from your disabled employees as from anyone else.
- **“Tell the world about them”** – Publicize the contributions these workers make within your organization.
- **“Challenge those who limit them”** – Speak out against harmful stereotypes that portray people with disabilities as “dependent, childlike or pitiful.”

- **“Help the advocates”** – Assist the organizations that support disabled people.
- **“Demand opportunity”** – Everyone, regardless of background, ethnicity, religion, gender, age and disability, should have the same opportunities to work. Insist on a level playing field.

## Hiring Guidelines

Follow these principles as you recruit people with disabilities:

- **Think** – Consider disabled applicants, and what their lives are like, before any job interview. “Your best job candidates with disabilities may have had to develop a sense of personal dignity and self-worth without the support you would normally expect they would receive.”
- **Speak with care** – Avoid the use of the term “handicapped.” No one likes that word, even though “handicapped parking” remains a standard expression. Some disabled people don’t mind being called “disabled.” Others may prefer a “people first” orientation. See how the individual refers to himself or herself. Your best bet is to say “person with a disability,” or alternatively, a “person who is disabled.”
- **Do not discriminate** – The law requires that employers do not discriminate against disabled job applicants. If a person can do the job, you cannot refuse to hire him or her due to a disability.
- **Know what to look for** – Seek out individuals who take an entrepreneurial approach to work, such as someone who set up and ran their own small business. Favor applicants who assume responsibility for themselves, who possess emotional intelligence, who know how to accept or turn down help gracefully when it is offered, who want to shoulder their share of the work load, who are not afraid to take risks, and who seem genuine in all that they say and do.

## Questions to Ask During Job Interviews

Some interviewers are uncertain regarding what questions they can ask people with disabilities. So, for starters, “focus on how an individual job candidate can be an asset to your organization instead of that person’s disability.” Explain the job and its functions; ask the individual if he or she will be able to do the work, and how they would go about it. Do not phrase any questions “in terms of the disability.” To illustrate, if the job involves driving, you can ask if the individual has a driver’s license. You cannot ask, however, if the leg braces the person wears will hinder his or her ability to drive. You may inquire, “How do you see yourself achieving your career goal within our company?” Don’t solicit information “about medical conditions, past hospitalizations, the nature of the disability or the severity of the disability.”

“The disability market is the third largest market segment behind baby boomers and the mature market, placing them ahead of Hispanics, African Americans, Gen X, teens and Asian Americans.”

Job applicants may “voluntarily self-identify” themselves as disabled to respond to an affirmative action initiative at your firm. In the US, it is illegal to ask an applicant if he or she qualifies as an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) job candidate. Thus, you cannot inquire if a person is EEO-qualified based on “being disabled, a minority, over age 40, and so on.”

“As an employer, one of your most economical solutions to a high turnover rate is to hire and retain qualified employees with disabilities.”

Some employers naturally worry about special equipment they may need to purchase on behalf of a disabled potential employee. Research indicates that for 75% of the companies surveyed, it costs no more to hire a person with a disability than to hire someone without a handicap. If costs are involved, such expenses are under \$50 for half those firms. Employers who hire disabled workers can sometimes receive tax credits worth “from \$2,400 to \$15,000.”

“A diversity initiative that does not include disability is only half of a program.”

Your insurance premiums should not increase upon hiring disabled workers since insurers base the costs for health care on group rates. Know that you can dismiss a worker with a disability as readily as you can anyone else. When it comes to the ADA of 1990, US firms must provide “reasonable accommodation” for people with disabilities. This means that employee facilities are “readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities.” It also can indicate that you need to acquire or modify “equipment or devices” so disabled employees can do their work.

## Finding Potential Employees

If you decide to hire disabled people, where can you find them? Investigate state and local vocational rehabilitation programs. Disabled veterans often are available for work: Contact the Military Severely Injured Center for information. Colleges have disabled student services departments that provide information about upcoming graduates. Publications that specialize in disabilities often have employment listings. The United Way and other local community service organizations may be useful sources of information. You also can contact such organizations as the National Federation of the Blind, Blinded Veterans Association and the American Council of the Blind. Job fairs offer excellent hiring opportunities. Online resources include: GettingHired, a job portal that is part of the US Business Leaders Network (USBLN); Hire DisAbility Solutions and eSight Careers Network.

## Some Additional Tips

Treat a new employee with a disability the same way you would treat any other worker. At the same time, it may be helpful to assign a mentor to a disabled newcomer. Be thoughtful about possible barriers that may prevent a person with a disability from achieving success within your organization. Often, such barriers exist due to mere oversights. Make adaptive technology available if this will help your disabled employee do better work. Some available tools include Braille printers, magnification stands, screen-reading software, talking calculators, detectable warning services, tactile graphics, and laptops made for people with vision impairments. Document any accommodation plans that you develop on behalf of employees with disabilities. Such a record reduces the likelihood of a successful legal suit concerning discrimination.

## About the Author

