

DIVERSITY NEWS

October 2006

Yvonne: At almost 20 percent of the U.S. population (and 30 percent of all veterans), people with disabilities are this nation's largest minority.

Thomas: And the only minority that any person can join at any time. If you don't already have a disability, there's a 20 percent chance that you will acquire one at some point in your life.

Yvonne: People with disabilities cross all boundaries of age... race... gender... ethnicity... religion... politics... income... education... experience... and profession.

Thomas: And though some disabilities are immediately apparent—like the loss of an arm or a leg—others are practically invisible; for example, .diabetes... dyslexia... depression... arthritis... anxiety... heart disease... hypertension... hernia... fibromyalgia... lupus... attention deficit hyperactivity disorder...and a whole lot more.

Yvonne: In this edition of Diversity News, we'll examine the business case for hiring people with disabilities.

Thomas: And we'll talk about best practices for recruiting, retaining, developing, and fully engaging employees with disabilities.

Yvonne: A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as seeing... hearing... speaking... breathing... walking... sitting... standing... lifting... performing manual tasks... working... caring for oneself... and mental and emotional processes such as learning... thinking... concentrating... and interacting with others. Someone who has a record of having such impairment, or is regarded as having such impairment, is also considered to have a disability.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than fifty million people in this country have some level of disability. A third of those people have a medical condition that makes it difficult for them to find a job or to remain employed. Only thirteen percent of the people with a severe disability are currently working full time, year-round. And only forty-four percent of the people with a NON-severe disability are working full time, year-round.

The Department of Veterans Affairs employs more than twenty thousand people with disabilities, most of whom are veterans. That's almost ten percent of the VA workforce. But only one-and-a-half percent of VA employees have a TARGETED disability: that is, deafness, blindness, a missing extremity, partial paralysis, complete paralysis, a convulsive disorder, mental retardation, mental illness, or a genetic or physical condition that affects the limbs or the spine.

Thomas: Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in Federal employment and requires the Federal Government to engage in affirmative action for people with disabilities.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination in all employment practices, including job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, training, and other terms and conditions of employment. Failure to provide reasonable accommodation can also be a form of employment discrimination.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires Federal electronic and information technology to be accessible to people with disabilities, including employees and members of the public.

The Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 promotes the policy of "the maximum of employment and job advancement opportunities within the federal government for disabled veterans and certain veterans of the Vietnam era and of the post-Vietnam era who are qualified for such employment and advancement.

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 requires "fair and equitable" treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or disabling condition.

The Veterans Education and Employment Program Amendments of 1991 require expanded job opportunities for veterans and disabled veterans through the Veterans Readjustment Appointment Authority.

The Architectural Barriers Act requires buildings and facilities to be accessible to people with disabilities.

Executive Order 13078 established the National Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities to create a coordinated and aggressive national policy to bring adults with disabilities into gainful employment at a rate as close as possible to the general adult population.

Executive Order 13163 promotes an increase in the opportunities for individuals with disabilities to be employed at all levels and occupations of the Federal Government.

Executive Order 13164 requires each Federal agency to establish effective written procedures to facilitate the provision of reasonable accommodation.

And Executive Order 13217 promotes community based alternatives for individuals with disabilities, including helping ensure that all Americans have the

opportunity to live close to their families and friends, to live more independently, to engage in productive employment, and to participate in community life.

Yvonne: An employer is required to make a reasonable accommodation for the known disability of an employee (or for a qualified applicant for employment) as long as it would not impose an “undue hardship” on the employer’s business. “Undue hardship” means that the action would require significant difficulty or expense, considering the employer’s size, financial resources, and the nature and structure of its operation.

Types of reasonable accommodations include: Making existing facilities readily accessible to—and usable by—people with disabilities. Restructuring jobs, modifying work schedules, or reassigning an employee with a disability to a vacant position. Acquiring or modifying equipment or devices; adjusting or modifying examinations, training materials, or policies; and providing qualified readers or interpreters.

The U.S. Defense Department’s Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program has the authority to provide assistive technology, devices, and services free of charge to Federal agencies that have a partnership agreement with the program. The CAP Web site provides examples of a variety of accommodation solutions for people with a disability. Check it out at tricare.osd.mil/cap.

Accommodations not funded by CAP are the responsibility of the employing office.

Thomas: What’s the business case for hiring people with disabilities? Well, it begins with the fact that the U.S. labor force is changing—rapidly and dramatically. Baby boomers are retiring now, and the size of the generations immediately following theirs is just too small to make up for the loss of manpower (and womanpower). People with disabilities represent an underutilized source of productive energies and talent.

In addition, employers have found that employees with disabilities are a loyal workforce. Among the most economical solutions to reducing high turnover is hiring and retaining qualified employees with disabilities.

And studies have shown that employees with disabilities perform at levels equal to, or greater than, their non-disabled counterparts. Even better, employers have found that employees with disabilities not only get the job done, they inspire their co-workers to improved performance. And because people with disabilities often must find creative ways to perform tasks other people may take for granted, they may possess valuable problem-solving skills.

Employees with disabilities are better able to relate to customers with disabilities. Remember, approximately 30 percent of all veterans have a disability.

Creative recruiting strategies can help agencies meet the human capital component of the President's Management Agenda.

Yvonne: Every year, DiversityInc magazine identifies the top 50 companies for diversity. Out of those 50 companies, DiversityInc selects the top TEN companies for people with disabilities, based on the companies' recruitment and marketing programs aimed at people with disabilities... the presence of employee-resource groups... the availability of diversity training... the mention and depiction of people with disabilities on the companies' Web sites, and the opinions of leading national disability organizations.

All of the top ten companies for people with disabilities have a diversity director or chief diversity officer who reports directly to the head of the company, or who is no more than one-direct-report away.

All of the top ten companies for people with disabilities incorporate diversity into their corporate mission statement.

All of the top ten companies for people with disabilities seek feedback on diversity issues, whether through employee surveys, focus groups, management-employee interviews, or exit interviews.

All of the top ten companies for people with disabilities have mentoring programs in which most mentors and mentees meet on a monthly basis.

All of the top ten companies for people with disabilities have active recruitment programs that target people with disabilities: through the Internet, word of mouth, newspapers, job fairs, professional networks, and colleges and universities.

And all of the top ten companies for people with disabilities offer flexible hours and dependent-care benefits, including childcare and eldercare.

Of all the companies that have ever been identified as the best for people with disabilities, more than 90 percent allow job sharing, telecommuting, cafeteria-style benefits, and adoption assistance.

Thomas: The United Spinal Association has put together a booklet of tips for interacting with people who have a disability. The guide includes advice related to SPECIFIC disabilities and includes some basic rules of etiquette.

For example:

Ask before you help. Just because someone has a disability, don't assume he or she needs help. If a setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people.

Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it. And if the person does want help, ask how you can help before you act.

Think before you speak. Always speak directly to people with a disability, not to their companion, aide, or sign language interpreter. Making small talk with people who have a disability is great; just talk to them as you would with anyone else. Respect their privacy. If you ask about their disability, they may feel like you are treating them as a disability, not as human beings. (However, many people with disabilities are comfortable with children's natural curiosity and do not mind if a child asks them questions.)

Be sensitive about physical contact. Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance. Grabbing them—even if your intention is to assist—could knock them off balance. Avoid patting a person on the head or touching their wheelchair, scooter, or cane. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space. And don't pet their service animal!

Don't make assumptions. People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the situation, it could be a form of discrimination to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations.

Respond graciously to requests. When people who have a disability ask for an accommodation at your business, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough in your establishment to ask for what they need. And if they get a positive response, they will probably come back again and tell their friends about the good service they received.

Put the person first. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person." Say "people with disabilities" rather than "the disabled." For specific disabilities, saying "person with Tourette syndrome" or "person who has cerebral palsy" is usually a safe bet. Still, individuals do have their own preferences. So, if you're not sure what to say, just ask.

Yvonne: You can find links to a lot more information on people with disabilities by going to the Web Links page on the Office of Diversity Management's Web site at the address shown below. Just click on the "Disability & Employment" heading. You can also contact David Walton, VA's national program manager for people with disabilities. His e-mail address is david.walton@va.gov, his phone number is 202-501-0215.

Thomas: That's all we have time for in this edition of Diversity News. Be sure to check back with us next month when we'll be talking about why diversity initiatives fail. Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!