

Creating an Inclusive Workplace



People with disabilities make a positive impact.

An Anixter Center employee works in their imaging enterprise.

Employers who tap people with disabilities frequently discover some of their most skilled, dedicated, and reliable employees. You can, too. Just follow these tips when seeking your next employee:

Include people with disabilities in your applicant pool. View your next job search as an opportunity to increase diversity in your workplace. Remember, you're hiring someone who can do the job and just happens to have a disability. You're not hiring the disability.

You can connect with such employees in a variety of ways. Most states have a department of human

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services or rehabilitation services that refers people with disabilities for job placement. National associations can also provide referrals. Or contact local community agencies that find jobs for people with disabilities. Such agencies offer pre-screened, qualified candidates.

They also help integrate the employee into the workplace, arranging such matters as transportation.

Before interviewing for a position, create a job description that clearly identifies the job's essential functions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects people with disabilities from discrimination if they can perform essential job functions. For example, if the job requires a typing speed of 50 words per minute, that information should be included in the job description as an essential function.

Be prepared to make modifications to guarantee accessibility.

Inclusion Is Rewarding All Around

People with disabilities are often overlooked as potential employees. According to U.S. Census data, just 57% of working-age people with disabilities are employed.

A number of nonprofit organizations help people with disabilities find jobs. Anixter Center, one of the Chicago area's largest social services agencies, operates nearly a dozen employment programs for individuals with disabilities. Its Professional Job Placement Program links people with disabilities to professional-level jobs, while other programs provide coaches who help employees transition into their new jobs.

Anixter Center's JobWorks Program focuses on placement services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. "Sometimes it's hard to get that first deaf employee through the door because of concerns about communication," says Sarah Michaelson, an employment counselor at JobWorks. "But once organizations make the effort to open that door, they find that deaf employees are some of their most productive and dependable team members." And in this age of advancing communication technology, the barriers are diminishing quickly.

With the right accommodations, no barrier is too great for inclusion-minded employers. Many nonprofit organizations manage nonprofit businesses that are largely staffed by individuals with disabilities. Anixter Center runs self-sustaining businesses in packaging, imaging, and janitorial services that annually generate more than \$2.5 million in revenue.

Anixter Center's customers take pride in knowing they are supporting an underrepresented part of the workforce. Employers know people with disabilities often become their best workers. The U.S. General Accounting Office concluded that workers who are employed through nonprofits' businesses "benefit from opportunities to develop self-esteem, exercise self-determination and develop socialization skills." Indeed, integrating people with disabilities into the workplace is a valuable experience for employers and employees alike.

ability, "What's wrong with you?" Instead, you could ask, "Are there any accommodations you need?"

- Don't ask a job applicant with a disability to take a medical exam (unless you've already offered that person the job).

Be aware of subtle ways you may be discriminating. For example, if you require pre-employment tests that are heavily laden with difficult vocabulary, you might be excluding potential workers who are deaf. For many deaf people, English is a second language and difficult to learn. Many deaf job seekers have excellent work histories and mastery of their fields, yet they lack the English vocabulary that would enable them to pass pre-employment tests, even though they have the ability to do the job. ■

The ADA explains that employers must make a "reasonable accommodation" if a job candidate is qualified for the essential functions of a position. By "reasonable," the ADA means that you needn't modify your workplace if doing so would be an undue hardship for your organization. For example, you wouldn't have to construct a wheelchair ramp for one employee if the cost would be prohibitive.

Usually the accommodation required is inexpensive. It could be as simple as repositioning a desk or purchasing a chair that can be height-adjusted for a position that involves typing. A small adjustment to a work space might

be all the employee needs. Most people with disabilities will notify the employer of necessary accommodations.

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Interview a person with a disability just as you interview everyone else. Show respect. For example:

- Don't lean on a person's wheelchair during conversation.
- When interviewing a person who is deaf, speak to the job candidate, not the sign-language interpreter. There is no need to speak louder than usual.
- Never ask a person with a dis-

More Resources

For more information on creating a diverse workforce, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Do Your Job Descriptions Comply with ADA?** (Vol. 11, No. 3)
- **How to Accommodate Disabilities under ADA** (Vol. 18, No. 5)
- **The Failure of Diversity Training** (Vol. 18, No. 3)
- **Nonprofits and the Americans with Disabilities Act** (Vol. 11, No. 2)
- **Hire the Best But Hire with Care** (Vol. 20, No. 6)
- **Beyond Diversity** (Vol. 18, No. 2)
- **Personnel and Human Resources Development** category, *Nonprofit World CD-ROM*.

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