



Employment Brief

Mentoring: A valuable method for dispelling employer misconceptions about hiring workers with disabilities

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Mission:

To increase employment opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities nationwide.

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This brief is one of a series from the National Technical Assistance Center for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities (NTAC-AAPI), designed to provide information on employment strategies for people with disabilities. Several issues discuss the value of mentoring both as a means for individuals with disabilities to explore various career options, and for employers to learn about disability culture and to clarify misconceptions about hiring workers with disabilities.

Introduction

Despite passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and subsequent policies, many individuals with disabilities of adult working age remain unemployed. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, only 56 percent of individuals with disabilities between the ages of 21 to 64 were employed (see Table 1). As recently as the Heldrich Work Trends Survey of 2003, furthermore, Dixon, Kruse, and Van Horn found that “People with disabilities are underrepresented in the labor market, despite the desire and ability to work” (2003, p. 3).

Table 1: Disability Status and Employment

Disability Status of the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population

Population 5 to 20 years	64,689,357	100.0
With a disability	5,214,334	8.1
Population 21 to 64 years	159,131,544	100.0
With a disability	30,553,796	19.2
Percent employed	56.6	(X)
No disability	128,577,748	80.8
Percent employed	77.2	(X)
Population 65 years and over	33,346,626	100.0
With a disability	13,978,118	41.9

U.S. Census Bureau, Profile of Selected Characteristics: 2000

Much of this disparity between desire and tangible employment is due to misconceptions and reluctance employers have about hiring people with disabilities. The graphic below illustrates some of the beliefs employers in the Heldrich survey cited as barriers to hiring (Table 2).

Table 2: Barriers to hiring people with disabilities according to employers

Survey question: *In your opinion, what is the greatest barrier to employers hiring people with disabilities?* (N=502)

Employer discomfort/unfamiliarity regarding hiring people with disabilities	10%
Fear of cost of accommodation	10%
Actual cost of accommodating disability	5%
Fear of litigation under the Americans with Disabilities Act	4%
Nature of work is such that it cannot be effectively performed by people with disabilities	32%
Other	9%
Don't know	23%
Lack of knowledge/information on the disabled	3%
None/I don't think there are any	5%

Adapted from Dixon, Kruse, and Van Horn, *Restricted Access: A Survey of Employers About People with Disabilities and Lowering Barriers to Work*, 2003, p. 22.

The authors of the survey note, for example, that many employers (32 percent) believe the type of work their companies require cannot effectively be performed by individuals with disabilities. Forty percent of employers, write the survey authors, believe it might be difficult or costly to accommodate employees with disabilities. They also observe, however, that it is employers who have *no experience* providing accommodations to workers with disabilities who are likely to hold such misconceptions (Dixon et al., 2003, p. 14). Thus one key to dispelling the myths is providing employers with more exposure to workers with disabilities. A highly effective means of doing so is through the experience of mentoring.

What is mentoring?

Simply put, “mentoring is the facilitation, guiding, and coaching of others” (Canada SchoolNet, 2004, para. 2). However, there are many types of mentoring, including school-based, community-based, faith-based, and work-based mentoring. Sword and Hill (2002) note “mentoring can take place through personal meetings, E-mail exchanges, telephone conversations, letters, or any other form of correspondence,” although the most common form usually takes place via a one-on-one, face-to-face relationship between a **mentor** and a **mentee** (also referred to in the literature as a protégé) (p. 1). Often, though not always, the mentor may be chronologically older than the mentee; certainly, the mentor has more experience in the area in which the protégé wishes to be mentored. In work-based mentoring, it is the role of the mentor to share his or her knowledge about an occupation or career, materials, and skills with the mentee, while also providing guidance, support, and structure to the mentee’s experience within the company or agency. The mentor aids the mentee’s progress in acquiring job competence, and may also advocate on behalf of the mentee in settings with others, such as in company meetings.

Much of the literature on mentoring articulates the value(s) of mentoring for the protégé, such as increased self-esteem, greater feelings of competence, and so forth. However, mentoring also contributes to growth of the mentor, thus offering a “two for the price of one” technique (Exemplas, 2003). With respect to hiring workers with disabilities, the significance of mentoring is even clearer. Because many fears about hiring individuals with disabilities stem from misinformation (or no information), employers and coworkers learn about their *capabilities* through mentoring. In fact, mentoring provides employers with

the opportunity to tap into a pool of heretofore unrecognized talent that may contribute to organizational and economic growth.

How to institute mentoring in your company

While a primary reason for underemployment of people with disabilities is employer misconception, as noted in the Heldrich survey, some employers recognize their beliefs are misinformed, yet simply do not know how to establish programs and policies that welcome potential employees. Many managers and supervisors did not begin their careers in environments which encouraged diversity, and are unfamiliar with inclusive programs and practices. These issues can be addressed by utilizing services established at national, regional, and local levels.

For example, an employer or human resources manager can request accommodation guidelines from the American Association of Persons with Disabilities (AAPD) or the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC). They might also turn to state vocational rehabilitation agencies. Increasingly, however, communities have organized activities that bring potential workers with disabilities and employers together through short-term mentoring programs, which serve as a link to further inclusion. While on the whole employers initially may be reluctant to attempt to institute programs themselves, many are willing to participate in already-established or organized programs. By so participating, employers demonstrate positive leadership in their communities, and often, attract positive media attention. These efforts can positively impact the number of community members who patronize their establishments. Moreover, once employers become mentors through such programs, they often find the rewards go beyond economic profit. In addition to personal satisfaction, one may experience “doing the right thing” by sponsoring a mentor or becoming a mentor. “Mentoring influences organizational culture, sending a message that the company cares about people, values employees, and accepts diversity [. . .] employers benefit from a more motivated workforce, and employees report greater satisfaction in their work” (Sword and Hill, p. 2). What begins as short-term efforts often morph into ongoing mentoring relationships, internships, and job opportunities.

In particular, Disability Mentoring Day, organized at the national level by AAPD and the U.S. Department of Labor, has successfully promoted the employment of persons with disabilities through personal mentoring, by dedicating their initial efforts to obtaining mentors for one day. Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) started as National Disability Mentoring Day in 1999 in the White House, during President Bill Clinton’s second term, as a program to increase the profile of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, celebrated every October. On the third Wednesday of each October since 1999, coordinators in each state (and internationally) have creatively planned DMD activities best suited to the interests and abilities of the community’s job-seekers and local employers. Employers are often put at ease when they learn there is no required size or timing for a successful event –for one company, DMD could involve one job-seeker shadowing an employee; for another, DMD could include several dozen mentees touring company facilities. Once the mentees arrive, moreover, employers often breathe a sigh of relief when they realize many of their fears (some of which are delineated above) are unfounded, and that common sense, sensitivity, and straightforward communication are the keys to interacting with people with disabilities.

The mentor-mentee match may not be perfect the first time around, but this is not cause for concern. “Getting the right mentor-protégé combination is often a matter of chance rather than design,” writes Zubehr Habib (1997, p. 2). However, once the initial barriers to working with people with disabilities are broken down, employers tend to become increasingly more willing to be involved with both DMD and its subsequent effects. Placing mentees in smaller communities may also have the added advantage of closer

networks between companies and families, and possible recommendations for positions within those networks. Often assisting a mentee who did not fit his or her DMD placement perfectly spurs a mentor to refer the mentee to a friend or business acquaintance whose interests seem a better match. Having developed contacts and relationships with those in the disability community, employers/mentors themselves have another avenue to recruit interns, tap a pool of potential future employees, and improve their businesses and organizations. They may realize that making an impact in one person's life makes a difference and lays a foundation for subsequent years.

More than 6,500 students and job seekers and 1,000 private, non-profit, governmental, and educational organizations participated in DMD 2003. Past participants have come to look forward to the event, year after year.

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Additional Information

For additional general information on Disability Mentoring Day, visit www.dmd-aapd.org/docs/pressroom.html

For additional information on Disability Mentoring Day in Hawai'i, contact the National Technical Assistance Center for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities (NTAC-AAPI) at the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, at (808) 956-2890, or www.ntac.hawaii.edu.