



# Success Story Brief

## John Yeh – A Man of Few Words

Prepared in collaboration with TransCen, Inc.

### National Technical Assistance Center

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#### Mission:

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

#### Based at:

University of Hawaii  
at Manoa, Center on  
Disability Studies

#### In collaboration with:

Hawaii Centers for  
Independent Living

Hawaii Vocational  
Rehabilitation and  
Services for the Blind  
Division

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Education  
Rehabilitation Services  
Administration

*The following is the first of a series of portraits of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities who have embodied the following quote: “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are omnipotent. The slogan ‘press on’ has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.” ~ Calvin Coolidge*

John TC Yeh calls himself a man of few words. “I always like being a doer and not a talker,” says the Gallaudet University graduate and award-winning entrepreneur. Over the past four decades, John, who has been deaf since birth, has proven his abilities as a “doer” time and time again—as a young immigrant, a college student, a savvy business leader, an employer of persons with disabilities, an advocate, and a loving husband and father of three.

A native of Taiwan, John came to the United States with his parents and siblings in 1962 so that he and his sister, who is also deaf, could receive the best education possible. John graduated from the Kendall School for the Deaf and then went on to Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where he earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics. He aspired to become mathematics teacher, but found many obstacles in his path, most importantly that employers would not hire him because he was deaf.

John reflects that his first job was working at a Hot Shoppes cafeteria when he was in college in Washington. “I didn’t have to talk to anybody, so I worked there all through college,” he recalls. He went on to receive his master’s degree in computer science at the University of Maryland, but after applying for hundreds of jobs, he once again found that employers in his field of choice were unwilling to hire him.

In the late 1970s, John concluded that the only way a deaf person could succeed in business was to become an entrepreneur. Frustrated by the shortage of technical and management employment opportunities for deaf individuals, he and his brothers founded a software company, Integrated Micro-computer Systems, Inc. (IMS), which had annual sales in the millions and hundreds of employees, many of whom were deaf.

During the years to come, IMS and John were recognized with numerous awards for business and technical excellence,

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including the Norman Vincent Peale Foundation America's Award, the Employer of the Year Award from the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, and Small Business Administration recognition. In 1989 and 1990, IMS also received industry awards for high technology excellence from KPGM Peat Marwick and from Arthur Young and Inc.

In 1994, 16 years after establishing IMS, John and his brothers sold the company and became "semi-retired." Within two years, though, John founded Viable Technologies, Inc., a company that uses remote technology to offer affordable, real-time transcription services to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. He also is chairman of WebbyNation, Inc., which specializes in media, Internet, and wireless services and is the parent company of deafbuy.com and DeafNation.

Over the years, in addition to proving his business acumen, John has demonstrated his leadership abilities as a disability advocate by serving on the boards of numerous non-profit and educational institutions, including the National Captioning Institute, the National Asian Deaf Congress, the National Deaf Business Institute, and Gallaudet University.

In a recent interview, John discussed his observations and vision for employment of persons with disabilities, including Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities. Excerpts from the interview are presented below.

**Q: What unique employment obstacles do Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) with disabilities face today?**

A: AAPIs with disabilities are from different countries and cultures, so we need to think of them as individuals. For me as an individual, the biggest barriers have been communication and language, more so than culture. In the workplace, everything's connected with communication, and lack of good communication can lead to misunderstanding. The bottom line is there has to be very clear communication to work together effectively.

**Q: Based on your experience as both an employer and an employee, what can AAPIs with disabilities do to increase their opportunities for meaningful, competitive employment?**

A: Attitude is most important. No matter what kind of person you are, no matter how bright you are, no matter how well you're educated, the thing that I look at most as an employer is attitude and how it relates to work performance. Attitude relates to a person's integrity, responsibility, and reliability. As an employer, I see some very good resumes from very competent, very technically skilled people, but some of them have lousy attitudes. Therefore, I wouldn't hire them.

**Q: What is your company's philosophy about hiring persons with disabilities?**

A: When hiring people, I think about my business plan and the future of my business and what we need to be able to grow. People are the key and they play an important role in business. Given that, I look at the requirements for the job. I look toward the future and how people who apply fit the company's vision in terms of qualifications, experience, and of course attitude. I focus on those qualities and skills, what the person can contribute, and how the person can help the business to grow. I don't look necessarily at the disability—whether the person is blind, deaf, or in a wheelchair.

**Q: Has your company proactively looked for employees with disabilities?**

A: I know many people who have disabilities, and I know they have experienced frustration with employment. At times, I look to people with disabilities first, but of course, they have to have the skills, the

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capabilities, and the attitude to be able to do the job. My current company, Viable Technologies, has hired at least six people with disabilities, most of whom are deaf. We also have two new voice transcribers with disabilities who were clients of Maryland's Division of Rehabilitation Services. When I interview job candidates with disabilities, I don't think about their disabilities, but I look at their abilities and how they can contribute to my company.

**Q: How well do employment service providers, such as vocational rehabilitation agencies or One-Stop Career Centers, serve AAPIs with disabilities?**

A: I see these providers' services improving. Looking back 10 or 15 years, they didn't have an understanding of persons with disabilities, and persons with disabilities weren't employed in those agencies. Now I'm seeing deaf people working in vocational rehabilitation agencies and One-Stop Centers, and that helps people to understand the workforce of persons with disabilities. However, I don't see AAPIs working there, and I wonder where AAPIs like me go to get help. AAPIs in general feel limited in not knowing where they can go to get employment help. I suspect that AAPIs with disabilities feel more isolated and have a greater lack of information than those without disabilities. For deaf persons, I think it's significantly worse still, with communication limitation being a big barrier.

**Q: What benefits can employers derive from hiring persons with disabilities, including AAPIs with disabilities?**

A: My experience is that people with disabilities are motivated, care about their work, and show that they want to work. They also tend to stay at a job longer and have less job turnover. This is all part of attitude. In addition, for many AAPIs, family and culture are important. They understand what work means, how a good job leads to a good life, and how those things all together support a family.

**Q: What else should employers know when hiring persons with disabilities?**

A: When I talk to employers, they say their first reaction to people with disabilities is seeing their physical limitations. Employers need to develop an understanding of people with disabilities and their desires, their work and pride, and how those factors contribute to an organization. Most people with disabilities don't want to stay home and collect Social Security Income. That's awfully boring, and there's no meaning there. Employers should be responsible to give persons with disabilities opportunities to work, do a good job, and as a result have a sense of pride that they're a part of society.

**Q: What do you recommend to other employers who want to employ AAPI job seekers with disabilities?**

A: Many persons with disabilities are looking every day for jobs. Employers need to have a more open attitude and be willing to hire them because they will find people with disabilities to be assets to their companies or organizations. Employers also should open their minds and attitudes, and look toward hiring AAPIs with disabilities. However, language, culture, family, goals, style of responsibility, commitment—all of those things can be very different for AAPIs and should be communicated to and understood by employers. Employers who are Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders themselves especially should be encouraged to hire AAPIs with disabilities because they may share the employee's language and culture.

I encourage all employers—whether they are AAPIs or not—to focus on a person's abilities when they are hiring, more than observing the differences in their culture or their disability. Think about how the person can contribute to the organization with a positive attitude. Do not focus on disability—focus on ability!

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