

Dispelling the Myths

There are a lot of misconceptions associated with hiring and working with people with disabilities. Career Concepts has addressed some of the most common to help avoid misunderstandings during the hiring process and in your workplace. We hope this overview will help you in your efforts to create a productive, diverse workplace.

1. Myth:

People with disabilities are limited in the work they can do.

Fact:

The United States Census reports that 50 million Americans – 20% of the population – report some type of long-lasting condition or disability. Disability comes in all sizes, shapes and flavors. People with disabilities have a variety of ABILITIES and experience that can help your business reach its goals.

The National Disability Council reports a 50% jump in requests for workers with disabilities from firms as diverse as Merrill Lynch to Microsoft.

“Workers with disabilities do everything from working on the production line to operating high technology equipment,” explained Philip Kosak, president of Carolina Fine Snacks in Greensboro, North Carolina (*Nations Business*, “A Very Able Workforce” October, 1998).

2. Myth:

Hiring people with disabilities means making a lot of expensive accommodations

Fact:

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, two-thirds of accommodations cost less than \$500, with nearly a quarter costing nothing at all. Yet, more than half of the employers surveyed said that each accommodation benefited their organization an average of \$5,000.

Real-life examples of successful accommodations that were implemented by employers:

Situation: A woman with a severe developmental disability worked in an envelope manufacturing facility operating a machine that stacked boxes. She needed to stack 20 boxes at a time, but could not keep a mental count past 10.

Solution: The employer installed a punch counter and trained the woman to include punching in her routine—tape, stack, punch; tape, stack, punch. As the woman’s productivity soared, the employer realized that keeping count is difficult for many people and decided to install counters at other machines. **Cost: \$10**

Situation: A person who is blind was a switchboard operator for a large building. As such, she needed to know which telephone lines were on hold, in use or ringing.

Solution: The employer installed a light probe that emitted a noise signaling which console buttons were blinking and which ones were steadily lit. The console was also modified to audibly differentiate incoming calls from internal calls. **Cost of light probe: \$45.** Console modifications were made at no cost to the employer.

Situation: A secretary had a back impairment and experienced pain when reaching for things such as documents, files and the phone receiver.

Solution: To reduce the need for reaching, she was provided an adjustable workstation, a telephone headset, a copy holder and a horizontal filing cabinet. **Cost: adjustable work station, \$900; headset, \$50; copy holder, \$35; horizontal filing cabinet, \$300.**

Situation: A clerical worker who stamped paperwork for several hours each day had difficulty pinching and gripping due to carpal tunnel syndrome.

Solution: The stamp handles were wrapped in anti-vibration wrap and cut tennis balls were placed on the top to eliminate the need for fine motor pinching and gripping to operate them. **Cost: anti-vibration wrap, \$15; tennis balls, \$3.**

Situation: A teacher with multiple sclerosis was not able to effectively communicate with students because his speech became soft and slurred when he was fatigued.

Solution: He was provided with a personal speech amplifier so that he would not have to strain to project his voice and was allowed to schedule his classes to allow periodic rest breaks. **Cost: \$210.**

Situation: An office manager who had been treated for stress and depression had difficulty concentrating when trying to complete assignments.

Solution: She was allowed to schedule blocks of time each week during which she could focus on tasks without interruption and modify her hours to allow more time for counseling and exercise. Her supervisor also arranged stress-management training for all employees and informed them about the company's employee assistance program. **Cost: None.**

3. Myth:

I'm afraid that one of my employees or I will say or do the wrong thing and I'll get sued.

Fact:

Before a private lawsuit can be filed in court, a charge of discrimination must be filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In 2005 there were 14,893 complaints filed with the EEOC. That's an average of 300 complaints per state. Of those complaints, 867 were judge by the EEOC to have reasonable cause. That's an average of about 17 per state. As a point of reference, there are more than 274,000 corporations in Michigan.

In 2005, the EEOC filed 42 ADA lawsuits. The fact is that very few employers have complaints filed against them and even fewer get sued.

4. Myth:

People with disabilities have poor attendance and safety records and the turnover is high.

Fact:

According to a March 2000 article in Business Week, employees with disabilities have had 90% above-average safety and attendance records, far above the average. People with disabilities are often more loyal to the employers who hire them and are less likely to be lured away by a bigger paycheck. Further, Career Concepts statistics show that CC employees have about a 15% turnover rate as compared to the national turnover rate of 20%.

5. Myth:

I'm afraid my insurance premiums will go up.

Fact:

This almost never happens. In fact, in 1999 President Clinton signed the Work Incentives Improvement Act, which allows worker's with disabilities to keep their federally funded Medicaid benefits even when privately employed.