

Hiring People with Disabilities: Good for Business

Elizabeth Kelleher

Companies are learning that employing people with disabilities has a positive impact on business and that making accommodations generally is less costly than expected. Elizabeth Kelleher is a staff writer for the U.S. Department of State in the Bureau of International Information Programs.

In 1998, a Belgian student named Sacha Klein left Brussels to spend a semester at a U.S. university. He ended up enrolling as a four-year student, graduating with a computer-science degree, and landing a summer internship at Virginia-based consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, where management liked him enough to offer him a full-time position. Today, he designs information systems for Booz Allen, studies toward a master's degree in business, and dreams of someday being his own boss.

He is deaf.

"This is truly the land of opportunity," Klein said in a conversation using an instant-messenger computer program. "Employers do not look at your disability, but at your abilities."

Since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which obligated government agencies to hire people with disabilities, Congress has passed 11 major laws to improve access to education, transportation, technology, and housing. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) opened the door for people like Klein to contribute to the U.S. economy in ways no one imagined before.



Many technical careers once were inaccessible to the blind, but new tools, such as this tactile map, allow students with disabilities to pursue careers in science, computer technology, and engineering.

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The ADA is a civil rights law that bars discrimination by employers. It requires businesses to make accommodations to allow a person with a disability to do a job for which he or she is qualified. This might mean giving a diabetic breaks during the workday to check his blood-sugar level or providing software for a blind person to use a computer.

In addition to workplace accommodations, the ADA requires public facilities to remove architectural barriers that hinder people with disabilities from shopping, going to the theater, or using public toilets.

Some experts believe such widespread architectural

changes have put the United States ahead of the 44 other countries with disability-discrimination laws. Katherine McCary, a vice president of SunTrust Banks Inc. and president of a business group that promotes hiring people with disabilities, said European managers tell her they want to hire people with disabilities, but that they can't get to work. "The ADA did a lot for us, in terms of creating access into and out of buildings," McCary said.

Roy Grizzard, assistant secretary of labor, has held recent seminars in EU countries and Vietnam on architectural solutions. "Curb cuts [ramps from sidewalks to streets at intersections] almost everywhere and transportation accommodations ... allow people to go to work," he said.

GUARDING THE RIGHTS OF ALL

Klein thinks attitudes matter, too. Had he stayed in Europe, he said, he would not have been able to become a white-collar professional, but would have been put on track for factory work.

While one can paint a rosy picture of U.S. companies embracing people with disabilities, in the early 1990s, the ADA was greeted with panic by the business community, which predicted enormous costs and out-of-control litigation. A federal hotline offering advice on workplace accommodations went from handling 3,000 calls per year before the law to 40,000 calls per year in the mid-1990s.

The cost of accommodations turned out to be zero in half the cases and averaged about \$500 in the other half, according to the Labor Department. Employers report that workers with disabilities are loyal and productive, Grizzard said, so “balance that [\$500] with the cost of a good day’s work for a good day’s pay from a long-lasting employee.”

As to lawsuits, Peter Susser, an attorney for the employment and labor law firm Littler Mendelson, said there still is a lot of litigation, despite court rulings narrowing the definition of disabled under the law. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which handles claims of discrimination under the ADA, has received a steady stream of charges—averaging 16,000 per year and representing about one-fifth of all discrimination charges—since the law took effect. The government found 18 percent of the charges to have merit.

Beth Gaudio, of the National Federation of Independent Business, said much of the burden for small businesses today comes from state laws. The federal law’s accommodation requirement applies to companies with 15 or more employees, but some state laws apply to firms of two. “It falls on the bookkeeper or the owner’s spouse to figure out what needs to be done,” Gaudio said.

It can be argued that compliance with the law is good for business, too: 87 percent of consumers prefer to patronize companies that hire people with disabilities, according to a January 2006 survey by the University of Massachusetts. In addition, workers with disabilities could help relieve a labor shortage. In the next eight years, 36 million Americans will be eligible to retire and leave the workforce. Census Bureau reports indicate that nearly half of the 33 million working-age people with disabilities were unemployed as of 2000.

“The ADA ... was an important beginning, but in no way an end,” said Tom Ridge, the chairman of the board

of the National Organization on Disability and former governor of Pennsylvania. Businesses have policies to comply with the ADA, but need to step up recruitment, Ridge’s organization believes.

The Department of Labor encourages disability-friendly companies with annual awards, and *DiversityInc* magazine recently published its first list of “top 10 companies for people with disabilities.”

Five thousand businesses have formed chapters of a U.S. Business Leadership Network in 32 states to foster hiring people with disabilities. Through that network, the Booz Allen internship program that attracted Sacha Klein expanded in 2003 to include dozens of other companies and in 2006 to locate internships beyond Washington and New York.

The Cincinnati Children’s Hospital recently decided to imitate a year-long mentorship program that SunTrust’s banks offer to students with developmental disabilities. Executives from the national drugstore chain CVS Corporation met with the Labor Department’s Ray Grizzard in October 2006 to discuss plans to introduce people with disabilities to pharmacy occupations. The Marriott Foundation for People With Disabilities, established by the founder of Marriott International, the hotel operator/franchisor, has formed links with several companies to train and place high school graduates with disabilities in jobs.

Small companies are taking the leap, too. Seven of the 20 employees at Michigan manufacturer A&F Wood Products have disabilities. The company has rebuilt workstations, provided job coaches and special software, reconfigured telephones, and adjusted work schedules.

Companies hiring workers with disabilities do it for business reasons. They say they gain valuable employees who, often because of their disabilities, are skilled at planning ahead or communicating creatively.

Klein said he has learned a lot at Booz Allen about teamwork and communication. But early-on, he himself shared communication tips with colleagues. He asked them to speak one at a time at meetings and to look at him, not at his sign-language interpreter, when speaking to him. “They learn fast once you educate them a little bit,” he said. ■

How One Company Approaches Disability

From hiring and training employees to product development, the Microsoft Corporation is a leader in serving people with disabilities.

Technology has changed all our lives, but perhaps has had the most impact for persons with disabilities, opening new worlds of communication, access, work, and education. With the current estimate of more than 54 million people in the United States with some form of disability, people with disabilities and their caregivers and family members are a highly attractive market. Microsoft realizes that to understand this group, to know what will meet their needs, and to know how to reach them, the company can benefit from the insights provided by employees with disabilities.

If you use the Microsoft Encarta encyclopedia and look up the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Jr., you will be able to hear his voice giving the speech. But you can also see the text written across the bottom of the screen. This addition, unique for this type of product, makes Encarta more useful to many customers and potential customers. Adding closed captioning to Encarta was the suggestion of a Microsoft employee who is deaf. This is only one example of the kind of contribution employees with disabilities can make to product development and marketing.

Microsoft has developed a multifaceted strategy to attract and retain qualified employees, including employees with disabilities, and to help them create products and services for people of all abilities. The company participates each year in National Disability Mentoring Day to help introduce students with disabilities to the world of work, and Microsoft encourages employees with disabilities to be involved. Students with disabilities often have had fewer opportunities to spend time in a work place, talking to professionals doing the kind of work in which they are interested, and even fewer opportunities to see people with their kind of disability succeeding in their target career. The mentoring program fills this need, while serving as an important element of Microsoft’s outreach to this employee pool.

Like most companies, Microsoft has a recruitment program to attract talented individuals, including those with disabilities. But recruiters sometimes were concerned about how to approach these students, how to communicate with them, and how to make sure the team that conducted subsequent interviews was prepared to appreciate the candidates’

qualifications. Microsoft developed training for their recruiters to smooth this process. But their efforts did not stop there.

According to Mylene Padolina, Microsoft’s senior diversity consultant, the company goes on to ensure that the workplace is fully prepared for the new employee. She interviews the new hires to find out what equipment and other accommodations they will need to do their jobs. The office groups or teams they will be joining receive briefings about the needs arising from the new employee’s disability. There is a plan in place to ease the transition into the work environment for the new employee. Padolina says this allows the employee to be as productive as possible quickly and helps team members focus on the tasks of the office, not questions about the disability.

Accommodation can include special furniture or special computer programs or hardware, such as screen readers for the blind that produce the material on screen in spoken form or on a Braille display. Plans are made to make work meetings comfortable and productive and to be sure everyone is included, even in the more social team-building events. If the employee is blind, for example, team members will be coached on how to provide guidance from time to time to help the new employee move around. For teams gaining a deaf member, training will be offered in American Sign Language.

Microsoft has developed a coordinated approach to recruiting and employing people with disabilities; but it has not done this alone, nor does it have all the answers. For more than 15 years, Microsoft has partnered with the National Business and Disability Council to create the Able to Work Consortium, and it is a member of Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (COSD). Padolina explains that this networking gives her resources for counsel when she faces a new issue and allows all participants to learn from the experiences of other members.

For its efforts, Microsoft has won numerous awards, including a New Freedom Initiative Award from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2004. In presenting the award, U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao noted that the company offers unique employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities. The award also cited many of the achievements noted above. Learn more from Microsoft’s 15-minute video, “Window of Opportunities” at <http://www.microsoft.com/about/corporatecitizenship/citizenship/diversity/inside/access.asp>. ■