



Barriers to employing persons with disabilities: Three common misconceptions

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Policies affecting persons with disabilities have made us a more accessible society. Most of us are aware of accommodations such as curb ramps and automatic door openers that have improved accessibility and increased participation of persons with disabilities. However, statistics and industry testimony show that while there has been progress in many areas, there is still room for improvement, especially in the area of employment.



Employment for persons with disabilities is much lower than for persons without disabilities. In a 2010 Harris Interactive survey titled [The ADA, 20 Years Later](#), the Kessler Foundation and the National Organization on Disability (NOD) found that only 21% of persons with disabilities aged 18–64 are employed full- or part-time, far below the 59% reported for persons without disabilities. A [2008 study by Cornell University](#) put the employment rate for working-age persons with disabilities (ages 21–64) at 39.5%. Other studies may yield different figures, depending on their definition of disability or economic conditions at the time, but they all show similar disparity.

The first step to address this disparity is to understand some of the misconceptions that act as barriers to equal employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Common misconceptions identified by industry experts include:

Misconception 1: Costs of accommodations will be too high

"Probably about half the persons with disabilities need no accommodation at all, and those that do tend to be rather inexpensive" asserts Pat Steele, Director of Employment Services at [Optimae LifeServices, Inc.](#), an Iowa-based service provider for individuals with mental or physical illness.

Steele continues, "Employers make accommodations everyday for persons with and without disabilities in the workplace, but we only think accommodations apply to persons with disabilities. In reality, you make an accommodation because the person you want to hire is the right match for the job."

Valerie Reyher, Vice President of Rehabilitation Services at [The Kennedy Center, Inc.](#), a nonprofit rehabilitation agency supporting children and adults with disabilities in Connecticut, adds, "Employers may really like a person in the interview. The employer will start talking about these tremendous modifications that they want to do. We question if they really need to do that. Often people make assumptions that someone has a need, but it's important to find out what that need truly is. I never want an employer to make an investment and not have it pan out for them."

Resources such as the [Job Accommodation Network](#) (JAN) work to address this misconception. JAN's database of disability types and effective accommodations holds information on specific accommodations that have been made over many years across the United States. Employers can find successful accommodation ideas by searching online or contacting a JAN consultant.

Accommodations are often low cost and easy to implement. Larissa Timmerberg, Director of Workforce Development at [NISH](#), a national nonprofit that offers support to agencies participating in the [AbilityOne Program](#), specifies, "There are accommodations that may not cost anything, such as a flexible workplace or work schedule. They may be as simple as adjusting the table or machinery so that it is at a level for the person to access it."

with an intellectual disability to record verbal instructions. "Tape recorders can be purchased for very little. Some individuals with disabilities might already have one." Another example she mentions is large-print items, which are helpful to persons with low vision. "That's not a huge cost for an employer; it's just a change in process."

Steele stresses the point. "It doesn't have to be the most expensive; it just has to be effective. The cost of reasonable accommodations should not be a barrier in most cases." This sentiment is echoed by both Reyher and Timmerberg.

Misconception 2: Persons with mental illnesses will cause a workplace disruption

"People with mental illness are sometimes viewed as not being able to fit into the workplace or being volatile, aggressive, or violent," Steele observes.

In most cases, concerns can be overcome by actually working with a person with a disability. "Nothing breaks down misconceptions or myths faster than personal contact with persons with disabilities. It's been my experience that when individuals get a chance to put a face alongside the disability, that goes a long way in overcoming those fears and stereotypes," notes Steele. "That's probably the best remedy."

Positive word of mouth can help address this misconception. "As you have successful experiences, it's beneficial to talk about that with friends and family members to help mitigate the stigma," suggests Reyher.

Misconception 3: Persons with intellectual disabilities cannot do complex tasks

"Some employers think that persons with intellectual disabilities can only do work that is very mundane and rote," says Timmerberg. "In reality, given the right accommodations or the right amount of training, that person can perform a variety of tasks that might surprise the employer."

Networking with other employers is a good method for addressing this misconception. Timmerberg advises, "Contact other employers who have hired people with disabilities and get a feel from them about what they thought before they hired somebody with a disability and then what they thought afterwards. I think you will find a big difference between anticipated problems and the reality of gaining a good employee."

Positive changes help remove the stigma

These three common misconceptions are symptoms of a stigma that affects employment for a large group of people. The report from the ADA, 20 Years Later survey estimates the prevalence of persons with disabilities to be between 13 and 16% of the population. Additionally, many people experience a temporary disability at some point in their lives. As a society, we should address our perceptions about persons with disabilities.

Reyher urges, "We have to think beyond the stigma and ask ourselves, if that were me, wouldn't I want someone to give me the opportunity to prove my skills and abilities? Wouldn't I want my fair chance? Don't perpetuate the myth. Be a change agent and embrace the belief that we are equal because everyone has some form of limitation. We can live and survive with a disability. Why then can't we work with one?"

Policy can go only so far in ensuring equal opportunities. It takes everyday people—executives, managers, human resources representatives, and coworkers—to make positive changes. This may mean examining one's own perceptions and making efforts to take advantage of available resources. Often, the changes needed to help level the playing field are much easier than people think.

About the Authors

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