

10 Tips to Enable People With Disabilities to Get Jobs

Fully 70 percent of working-age people with disabilities in America are not working. This leads to poverty and powerlessness. So how can we, who care about people with disabilities, change that?

We need every American worker who can work to do so. Think about it — we have 10 million Americans with disabilities, most of whom want to work, are ready to get off the sidelines and help make American companies stronger. When more people are earning paychecks, the economy improves. We can save tax money. People with IDD want to and can contribute to the economy.

1. **Demand your rights.** If you are a person with an IDD or the loved one of a person with IDD, you need to demand that your IEP and/or vocational rehab program prepare you for paid employment in an integrated work environment. They should not be just passing you through for a lifetime of government benefits. They should prepare you/ your loved one for much more than “dayhab.” Your goal should be the opportunities for work in an integrated workplace where the pay is at least the minimum wage.

2. **Let your community know you want a hand UP, not a hand OUT.** The majority of working age Americans with IDD want to work. Yet most of them sit quietly on couches— with 10 million people living in a cycle of dependency, this lack of opportunity undermines opportunity and hope. Take advantage of vocational rehab (VR) programs and other excellent programs, such as Bloom Community in your area.

3. **Encourage adults with IDD to start working in an unpaid internship or as a volunteer.** There is no better predictor of future economic success than practice in the workplace. Work into paid positions as soon as possible and do a job. Ask members of your faith or other communities, such as the Bloom Community, to help you find opportunities to make a difference and to build skills and experiences that will help you build your resume one step at a time.

4. **Know the facts.** You need to be an expert not only on your own disability or loved one’s disability, but also on issues that confront all people with disabilities. When we work together across the range of disabilities we can all help each other. *Key facts you need to know include that fully 70 percent of working age Americans with disabilities are currently outside of the workforce. That compares to 28 percent for Americans who do not have disabilities. The disability unemployment situation leads to extremely high levels of poverty, isolation and financial dependency for Americans with disabilities.* This

in turn costs taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars in benefits. However, most Americans with disabilities who are working age actually want to work.

Companies are in the business of making money — and hiring people with disabilities can make them more profitable. Bloom Community knows the old stereotypes. People hear the word “disability” and think of someone who needs pity rather than someone with something to offer. But with today’s technology a blind person can function fully on Apple computers and a non-verbal person on the Autism spectrum can speak clearly through assisted technologies.

The breakthroughs due to science, education, medicine and rehab are transformative. ***Individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities have demonstrated unique and profitable ways to contribute to the workplace. It’s time for companies to take advantage of these changes and to hire people with disabilities for the abilities that they DO have.***

5. **Educate your elected officials.** Perhaps the most important leader in America today on disability employment issues is former Governor Jack Markell of Delaware. He has no personal family connection to disability issues. However, when he met a young man with a disability who got his first job in his late 20’s, he asked what the young man had been doing. “Sitting on the couch” was the answer. Governor Markell instantly understood that our nation would be better off if the talents and time of people with disabilities was harnessed for the good of the country. As the head of the National Governors Association at the time, he got all 50 governors involved in learning about how to make positive change for people with disabilities.

Know that it all started with one person with a disability educating one person — his own governor. You too can make such a difference by getting to know your elected officials and helping them learn the facts.

6. **K.I.S.S. — KEEP IT SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD** when talking with people.

- Americans with disabilities want to work.
- Companies can be more profitable when they hire people with disabilities.
- We can save tax money and make our country stronger by including people with disabilities in the workforce.

7. **Talk about case studies that work.** Employers, unlike elected officials, don’t follow public opinion as much on the hard issues of dollars and cents. Give them examples of companies who have successfully hired an adult with IDD.

8. **Meet the print and TV reporters who cover business or disability issues in your area-** bring them the news. Leaders and activists who care about people with disabilities should be speaking about these issues to the media.

9. **Network with business people who matter.** Speak to friends, neighbors, and colleagues. You aren’t asking them to hire an individual, you are speaking to them about

an important profitable initiative that they should know and care about. Keep your audience in mind. You never know who is listening or who your message might be shared with second-hand. CEOs want to hear that inclusive hiring practices will make them money, and help save on taxes. It might seem tricky to work into cocktail party conversation, but what do you want to answer when someone asks how you are and what are you working on these days? Why not respond, “actually, I’m very involved in advocating for people with disabilities to achieve the American dream. Did you know...” Remember...K.I.S.S.

10. **Never give up and stay positive.** We have a lot to accomplish, but it can be done! Alone we feel alone, but together we can and will make a difference. Get involved today, talk to a friend or co-worker, identify a promising employer to highlight, contact your governor or mayor. We can enable more Americans to achieve their American dream!

Partial Credit: Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi