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Disabled Workers; Employer Fears Are Groundless

Studies show that hiring the disabled does not lead to higher accommodation costs, worker comp, or sick leave, yet these myths persist

By [Ralph Braun](#)

Recent data indicate that the economy is starting to stabilize, which is good news for millions of jobless Americans. While it's no comfort that the unemployment rate has pushed past the 9% level in recent months, it has actually edged down from 9.5% in July, to 9.3% in August for Americans without any physical disability. For people with disabilities, the jobless situation has been catastrophically worse. In the first year the government has kept such data, unemployment has soared month by month, rising from 15.1% in July to 16.9% in August. Worse, if precedent is any indication of future trends, many people with physical disabilities still may not be able to find work in the impending recovery.

Even in times of economic abundance, many working-age Americans with disabilities remain out of work. A 2008 DePaul University study showed that only 40% of the more than 21 million working-age adults with disabilities are employed, either full- or part-time. Why? Statistics show that employers assume it would be challenging to hire people with special needs, including those who use wheelchairs, are legally blind, hard-of-hearing, or have other physical disabilities.

As a business owner and employer who uses a wheelchair, I know firsthand that having a physical disability shouldn't exclude someone from becoming a fully productive member of the U.S. workforce. But it's alarming to learn of how many employers do not share this attitude. The Labor Dept.'s 2008 *Survey of Employer Perspectives on the Employment of People with Disabilities* found that companies fear that hiring people with disabilities will lead to higher employment costs and lower profit margins. In the same survey, company executives also expressed concern that workers with disabilities lack the job skills and experience necessary to perform as well as their non-disabled counterparts. Employers were also uncertain about how to take potential disciplinary action with a worker with disabilities.

TECHNOLOGY CLOSES THE GAP

This is dismaying, since these concerns have been proven groundless. Let's start with a top worry for any company: the bottom line. Studies by Sears ([SHLD](#)) and DuPont ([DD](#)) have shown that hiring workers with disabilities does not translate into higher accommodation costs, such as adapting office space or equipment. As studies by the President's Job Accommodation Network committee have shown, most workers with disabilities require no special accommodations. Among those who do, 15% cost the employer nothing. A little more than half of the workplace modifications cost \$500 or less, 12% cost from \$501 to \$1,000, and only 22% exceeded \$1,000.

Given that the average employer spends \$2,683.20 annually per employee on retirement plans (calculated for a full-time employee), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of accommodating special needs is negligible. Additionally, technologies that are commonplace today—such as the Internet and voice-recognition software—are eliminating many of the remaining obstacles for workers with disabilities.

According to the Labor Dept.'s survey, employers also expressed concern that hiring people with disabilities would increase worker-compensation rates or the use of sick time. Wrong again. A study conducted by DuPont showed that absentee rates are virtually equal between employees with and without disabilities. As for workers' compensation, insurance providers calculate premiums based on the relative job hazards and the likelihood of an accident. Disabilities among workers are not a factor in insurers' formulas, nor should they be: According to the study, the safety records of both groups (with and without disabilities) were identical.

CREATIVELY TOUGH

Sometimes employers hesitate to hire an adult with a disability because of a misguided sense that the person may not be able to handle the job when the going gets tough. I've used a wheelchair for most of my life, and I would argue that people with disabilities are in fact better equipped for acute problem-solving than their peers without disabilities. That's mainly because we're experts in finding creative ways to perform tasks that others may take for granted.

My own company, BraunAbility, started as a solution to a problem I faced when my employer relocated and I had to find my own transportation. It wasn't long before I quit my job to focus full time on the growing demand for products such as wheelchair-accessible minivans. The fact is, employees with physical disabilities can do for your business what they've done for themselves: Move it forward, one step (or wheel turn) at a time.

Ralph Braun is CEO of [BraunAbility](#) in Winamac, Ind.