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Disability-Inclusive Initiatives Result in Positive ROI

By **Hannah Rudstam** and **S. Antonio Ruiz-Quintanilla**, *September 2007*

When most employers think of disability, they think of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This is understandable. The ADA has clear implications for workplace policies and practices. But has the significant attention given to ADA compliance eclipsed a larger, more important issue for human resource professionals?

The real risk for employers who don't hire individuals with disabilities might have less to do with running afoul of the law and more to do with being unprepared for the new reality of the emerging workforce. One in five people in the United States has a disability. Hence, employers that do not have disability-inclusive HR practices in place run the risk of turning away from approximately 20 percent of their potential and current talent base. And the number of people working with a disability is expected to increase as the average age of our population rises and as improved diagnostics and treatments enable more people with disabilities to work.

But the face of disability is changing. Many skilled, talented younger workers are now entering the workforce with hidden disabilities, such as Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), auditory processing disorders, learning disabilities or Asperger syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, that were undiagnosed just one generation ago. This generation, the first to come of age with the services and protections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, understands that a disability need not stand in the way of fully contributing talents to the workplace. This younger generation will be less forgiving of employers that approach people with disabilities with misperceptions, stigma or lowered expectations.

Given these trends, the questions for employers to ask shift from, "Can we afford to employ and accommodate people with disabilities?" to "Can we afford to disengage a significant portion of our current and potential talent base in the face of an upcoming talent crisis?" and "Are we just ADA-compliant, or are we ready for the future?"

Many organizations have developed innovative practices to ensure that the talents of employees with disabilities in their workforce are fully engaged. Among the best practices:

ADA training and accountability. An HR leader of a major computer firm found that a significant portion of its computer scientists had Asperger syndrome. The annual 15-minute ADA training session, focusing narrowly on issues of legal compliance, did nothing to address the real-life issues around engaging employees with Asperger syndrome. As such, the skills and knowledge of this significant portion of the firm's workforce were not being fully tapped because team leaders were tacitly freezing out these employees from the learning-rich informal networks in their workplace.

The company responded. In addition to providing team leaders with accurate and timely information about Asperger syndrome, it went one step further, adding a goal of disability inclusiveness to the performance management system for team leaders. Team leaders were measured on their ability to accommodate and include the talents of all members of their team, including those who had Asperger syndrome or other disabilities.

Learning and work process flexibility. A major hospital chain, partnering with a state employment service agency, launched a project to hire people with developmental and cognitive

disabilities into routine jobs that were difficult to fill. At first, the project appeared to falter as the new employees seemingly could not master the routine work processes. However, one day while the supervisor was out, an employee left on his own created new task processes that actually enabled him to do the job more effectively than he could using the old process. Learning from this experience, the supervisor found that when employees with these disabilities were given the flexibility to learn in their own way and to create task processes that worked for them, they were able to get the job done accurately and quickly. Some of their work processes were adopted as standard procedures by others in the hospital.

Coaching. An estimated 4 percent to 7 percent of the U.S. population has ADD. Because this diagnosis is relatively new, the cohort of people now in their 20s is the first generation to enter the workplace with this diagnosis. There are many examples of people with ADD contributing a great deal to a variety of professions. Several employers, including the federal government, have started providing these employees with ADD coaches. These coaches have enhanced the performance of this significant portion of younger workers by improving their focus, task processing, attention to detail and decision-making. Employers have leveraged similar specialized coaches for employees with other hidden disabilities. These coaches can be provided by expanding an existing employee assistance program service or might even be contracted for and covered by health insurance.

Resource groups. A major medical products company has enhanced disability inclusiveness by creating resource groups. Unlike support groups (whose name implies that members cannot function independently), resource groups are voluntary communities of employees with disabilities that provide members with information, networking opportunities and the chance to discuss issues in a safe environment. Also, according to one HR manager involved with forming resource groups, they have served as a conduit to identify disability-related needs before they become larger problems.

Return on Investment in Reasonable Accommodations

Shifting focus from short-term compliance to long-term return on investment (ROI), many HR professionals have developed ADA-compliant accommodation policies. But fewer have leveraged the ROI in an effective reasonable accommodation policy that is integrated into an overall HR strategy. Studies show that 15 percent of accommodations cost nothing and 68 percent cost less than \$500. Among other ROI statistics:

Reduce off-the-job time. According to one study, employees who are accommodated return to work on average 30 days earlier than employees who are not accommodated. In fact, one major insurance company has adopted an HR strategy that views reasonable accommodation and return to work as part of the healing process.

Reduce turnover. Employees who are accommodated are less likely to leave the job. When reasonable accommodation is integrated into an overall retention strategy, the ROI is substantial. Studies show that it costs 100 percent to 150 percent of annual salary each time an employee leaves. By comparison, the costs of reasonable accommodation are minimal. Hence, several organizations have included their reasonable accommodation process as part of their turnover prevention strategy.

Most HR professionals have a shared language around ADA compliance. But in order to create HR strategies to prepare for the workforce of tomorrow, we also need to have in place a shared language around disability-inclusive HR practices.

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