



# Disability: Dispelling the Myths

How People With  
Disabilities Can Meet  
Employer Needs

UNTAPPED RESOURCES IN TODAY'S ECONOMY



CENTER FOR WORKFORCE PREPARATION  
AN AFFILIATE OF THE U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

## CENTER FOR WORKFORCE PREPARATION

The Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP) is a nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that focuses on workforce development and quality education issues. It develops workforce strategies for businesses, chambers of commerce, and communities to hire, train, retain, and advance skilled workers in the 21st century. CWP strengthens the leadership role of chambers and businesses in their communities to create market-driven workforce development systems and to connect the resources available to support this effort.

CWP's partnerships with local chambers, other workforce development organizations, and funders have been instrumental in defining and demonstrating the important role of local chambers in workforce development and education. Together, CWP and local chambers excel at reaching small and medium-size businesses, where the majority of job growth occurs.

Workforce development is about more than hiring and training the right workers. It is about identifying and addressing other critical factors such as transportation, health care, and child care that enable people to work and advance in their careers. CWP promotes lessons and promising practices from successful communities to encourage chambers and employers to build resources that support productive workplaces.

## THIS PUBLICATION

***Disability: Dispelling the Myths*** is a resource for businesses. It provides information on successful strategies used by employers to meet their labor force needs and includes practical examples and commonsense approaches for hiring and retaining people with disabilities. Chambers of commerce can use this publication to educate and advise local businesses and their partners on workforce development strategies.

***Disability: Dispelling the Myths*** was developed from a series of Internet ChamberCasts hosted by CWP. These ChamberCasts, titled ***Untapped Resources in Today's Economy***, focused on the economic advantages of employing nontraditional populations—people with disabilities, people transitioning from welfare, and dislocated workers. To view ***Untapped Resources in Today's Economy***, visit [www.uschamber.com/cwp/tools/chambercast/default.htm](http://www.uschamber.com/cwp/tools/chambercast/default.htm). Publications and videos may be ordered online at [www.uschamber.com/cwp](http://www.uschamber.com/cwp).

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## The Upcoming Shortfall

Experts predict that by 2010 the American economy will support 168 million new jobs, yet there will only be 158 million workers to fill them.<sup>1</sup> Add to this shortfall the increasing need for technology skills and the millions of seasoned workers—baby boomers—who are reaching retirement age.

“Companies in many industries report having trouble finding enough skilled workers to fill available jobs. It’s not just big business: A recent National Federation of Independent Business survey of small businesses found that 27% of employers reported difficulty in filling open positions.”<sup>2</sup> In 2003, a CWP survey of more than 3,700 businesses found that half of the employers responding reported having a hard or very hard time finding qualified job applicants.<sup>3</sup>

To compound this shortfall, in the near future, 60% of new jobs in the United States will require skills held by only 20% of the current workforce.<sup>4</sup> From where, then, will these skilled workers come?

### People with disabilities represent a large source of qualified workers.

According to the *Census 2000 Brief*, 49.7 million people (19.3% of the population) have some level of disability.<sup>5</sup> As the population ages, approximately 40% of those over 65 will likely acquire a disability.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one in five Americans will likely be affected by a disability during his or her lifetime.<sup>7</sup>

High unemployment continues to be a serious problem for the disability community. Only 32% of Americans with disabilities aged 18 to 64 are working, but two-thirds of the 68% who are unemployed would rather be working.<sup>8</sup>

### Workers with disabilities represent a significant source of productivity.

Industry reports consistently rate workers with disabilities as average or above average in performance, attendance, and safety.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to employee retention and reduced turnover costs, research has found that workers with disabilities are not “job hoppers.” On the contrary, they are inclined to remain in their jobs longer than the general workforce.<sup>10</sup>

A 2002 survey of 255 supervisors of employees with disabilities found that supervisors are satisfied with the overall work performance and productivity of workers with disabilities and that workers with disabilities perform as well as or better than their nondisabled co-workers.<sup>11</sup>

### What, then, are the concerns of business?

Despite these facts, employers still believe many myths and have many fears about hiring people with disabilities. *Disability: Dispelling the Myths* sets out to eliminate some of these concerns.





## Seven Myths to Dispel

### MYTH 1: INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT SKILLS FOR BUSINESS.

**FACT:** People with disabilities develop important critical thinking skills.

“People who have disabilities, either through birth or because they have acquired one, must develop other strengths, traits, and qualities—perseverance, problem solving, goal setting, determination—that make them valuable and marketable in the workplace.”

—Jennifer Sheehy, U.S. Department of Education

**FACT:** People with disabilities bring unique characteristics and skills to the workforce.

“One manufacturer had difficulty in retaining employees to work in a high-noise area of the plant—employees often complained of headaches. Individuals who are deaf weren’t bothered by the noise. This was a win-win for everybody.”

—Bradley Bellacicco, Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce

### MYTH 2: SUPPORTS IN THE WORKPLACE WOULD BE TOO COSTLY.

**FACT:** Accommodations are generally not expensive.

“Many employers believe that they will have to change their physical structures, every desk, every doorway ... but statistics show that 15% of accommodations cost nothing and 50% of accommodations cost less than \$500.”<sup>12</sup>

—Marian Vessels, ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region

A March 2003 *Work Trends* report found that the vast majority (73%) of employers reported that their workers with disabilities did not require accommodations.<sup>13</sup>

**FACT:** Employers make accommodations daily.

“The most requested accommodation is a flexible work schedule, which costs nothing.”

—Marian Vessels, ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region

“Any operation that has more than a handful of workers is going to have to make accommodations. This might include not asking an employee with a bad back to lift a heavy box or not requiring an employee with poor eyesight



to read fine print. You're not doing something unusual. You're accommodating the people you work with without even thinking about it."

—Bradley Bellacicco, Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce

**FACT: As the workforce ages, supports will be necessary for incumbent workers.**

"We can't forget about the graying workforce. These workers will need to be accommodated because their expertise and experience add value to the business."

—Marian Vessels, ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region

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**MYTH 3: SAYING THE WRONG THING IN THE WORKPLACE WILL OFFEND EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES.**

**FACT: Simple etiquette can avoid relationship barriers.**

"We see the fear factor in many employers. They're worried about saying the wrong thing, embarrassing themselves, or setting themselves up for a lawsuit. But that's not the case at all. People with disabilities know that others don't know the language. It's okay to say 'walk' to someone who uses a wheelchair or to say 'see' to someone who is blind."

—Marian Vessels, ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region

**FACT: People with disabilities appreciate "people first" language.**

Employers need only remember to put the person first and the disability second. This means referring to workers as "people with disabilities" not "the disabled" and describing an individual as a "person who uses a wheelchair," not one who is "wheelchair bound." Don't be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure of what to do.

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**MYTH 4: CO-WORKERS WILL BE UNCOMFORTABLE AND THEIR PRODUCTIVITY WILL BE NEGATIVELY IMPACTED.**

**FACT: Workers with disabilities have a positive effect on co-workers.**

"After hiring the first employee with a disability in his department, SunTrust's manager found that employee morale and productivity had increased and there was a noticeable decrease in turnover."

—Katherine O. McCary, SunTrust Bank, Mid-Atlantic

"Watching someone who has overcome a major challenge in his or her life and manages the disability on the job raises morale and provides a good working environment for everyone."

—Jennifer Sheehy, U.S. Department of Education

**MYTH 5: GETTING INFORMATION ON HOW TO HIRE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IS TIME-CONSUMING AND COMPLICATED.**



**FACT: Help is easy to get and available at little or no cost.**

Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs) provide employers with information, training, and technical assistance in such matters as complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), employing people with disabilities, and alleviating employers' concerns. (See the section entitled "Getting Help" for contact information.)

"By calling the local DBTAC, employers can find out who's doing what in their communities. The DBTAC can help employers connect with people who have disabilities and put employers in touch with businesses that have successfully hired them."

*—Marian Vessels, ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region*

The new Web site [www.Disabilityinfo.gov](http://www.Disabilityinfo.gov) is a good source of information for businesses and community-based organizations needing quick answers to questions about services for people with disabilities and the companies that hire them.

**FACT: Employers may be eligible for tax credits and tax deductions.**

Employers can use financial incentives—tax credits or deductions—to help create disability-friendly environments for workers and customers with disabilities. The DBTACs offer information on tax credits that offset costs related to accommodations for both employees and customers.

The most frequently used employer incentives for hiring individuals with disabilities are the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the Welfare to Work Tax Credit, and the Veterans Job Training Act. In addition, other tax credits and deductions are available to employers, including the Disabled Access Credit, the Architectural/Transportation Tax Deduction, the Mentor-Protégé Program, and the Social Security Administration Employment Network Cash Provision.<sup>14</sup>

**MYTH 6: HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MAKES BUSINESSES VULNERABLE TO LITIGATION.**

**FACT: Very few businesses experience disability-related claims.**

In a 1998 survey of employers regarding their experiences with the ADA, the vast majority of respondents reported that they had experienced no disability-related claims against their companies.<sup>15</sup> In a 2003 survey, 91% of respondents indicated that they were not aware of any ADA complaints filed against their companies in the last 12 months.<sup>16</sup>



**MYTH 7: SERVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WILL ADVERSELY AFFECT BUSINESSES' BOTTOM LINE.**

**FACT: Consumers with disabilities represent an enormous market niche.**

People with disabilities have a combined income of more than \$1 trillion, with \$220 billion in discretionary income.<sup>17</sup> By comparison, the teen market, heavily catered to by businesses, controls \$140 billion in spending power according to a 1998 estimate by Teenage Research Unlimited.<sup>18</sup>

**FACT: Marketing to consumers with disabilities and making appropriate accommodations makes good business sense.**

Businesses that make accommodations reap the benefits. For example, increased access provisions enabled hotel and hospitality revenues to increase by 12%.<sup>19</sup> Marketing studies have shown that 54% of households pay more attention to and patronize businesses that feature people with disabilities in their advertising.<sup>20</sup> Disability-friendly businesses earn the lucrative and loyal patronage of people with disabilities, their families, and their friends.

In 1995, people with disabilities spent more than \$81 billion on travel, excluding expenditures of family, friends, and escorts. According to the food-service industry, people with disabilities eat out between 2 and 30 times a month.<sup>21</sup>

**FACT: Yesterday's accommodation is today's product innovation.**

Customers with disabilities have the same preferences, perceptions, attitudes, habits, and needs as customers without disabilities, and they are looking for the same quality of products and services.<sup>22</sup>

Today, automatic door openers, talking ATMs, accessible photocopiers, and accessible Web sites<sup>23</sup> are commonplace.<sup>24</sup> The telecommunications industry is developing wireless communication systems for people with hearing impairments. As the population ages, greater numbers of people will require accessible home design to be a readily available option.<sup>25</sup>

**SUNTRUST TAKES LEADERSHIP ROLE**

SunTrust began to be proactive about employing people with disabilities for two reasons—to bring talent into the company and to market its products to people with disabilities.

It started out simply. A SunTrust Bank manager needed to fill a position with a good worker. After hiring the first employee with a disability, the manager found that employee morale and productivity had increased and turnover had noticeably decreased. Inspired by its initial success, SunTrust established the ACT (Accessing Community Talent) Program to serve as the internal and external contact for disability issues.

SunTrust, in partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University, is developing orientation materials for its human resources staff to encourage hiring people with disabilities throughout the company. It is also developing disability-friendly products to take advantage of a robust market niche.

SunTrust chairs the U.S. Business Leadership Network (BLN) and leads BLNs in Virginia and Montgomery County, Maryland, to increase businesses' participation in developing employment opportunities for candidates with disabilities and retaining employees who become disabled.

# How Chambers Can Help Businesses Get Started

Chambers play a key role in linking employers with skilled workers. Here are some of the strategies to successfully tap into the pool of workers with disabilities.

## Provide the business case for hiring people with disabilities.

- Help employers understand that hiring a worker with a disability is both a retention strategy and an employment strategy—people with disabilities have higher than average retention rates and company loyalty.

### SALISBURY CHAMBER TOUTS HR ADVANTAGE

The Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce, located on Maryland's Eastern Shore, became interested in hiring people with disabilities for a simple reason—employers were looking for good employees. Its members with the greatest needs were small and medium-size businesses that lacked human resources departments and did not know how to tap into the nontraditional labor pool. The chamber invited the local vocational rehabilitation agency to make a presentation to its members about how to identify and access nontraditional employees.

As a result, the chamber formed the Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network (ESBLN) as a chamber subcommittee. The ESBLN, composed entirely of employers, is able to

- communicate employers' skill needs to key agencies that work with people with disabilities;
- educate members on how to hire, retain, and advance people with disabilities; and
- raise employers' awareness and understanding of available financial incentives, such as tax credits and deductions.

After three years, employers report an 85% retention rate for employees with disabilities.

- Educate small and medium-size businesses to show how workers with disabilities can increase productivity.
- Emphasize to employers the advantages of reaching a population that has \$220 billion in discretionary spending.

## Develop community resource networks.

- Provide help and guidance to businesses and emphasize the positive aspects of hiring workers with disabilities.
- Raise awareness and foster best practices by planning events to share information, resources, and examples of businesses that have been successful in hiring workers with disabilities.
- Demonstrate that providing accommodations can be easy.

## Serve as a workforce facilitator, broker, or intermediary.

- Serve as an information clearinghouse; help employers remain current on where to find help in the community.
- Keep a database of community resources current by maintaining relationships with community-based organizations that provide services to people with disabilities.

## Establish a pipeline of ready workers.

- Develop mentoring and internship programs so that young people with disabilities are aware of careers and establish relationships with potential employers.
- Build relationships among businesses, state and local business leadership networks, local workforce investment boards, and training entities to focus training on employer needs.



# Getting Help

## Job Accommodation Network

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a service of the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, provides information about job accommodations, ADA, and the employability of people with disabilities. JAN's mission is to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities by providing information to employers, employment providers, people with disabilities, their family members, and others on job accommodations, self-employment, small business opportunities, and related subjects.

JAN's work helps employers in a number of ways to

- hire, retain, and promote qualified employees with disabilities;
- obtain information on accommodation options and practical solutions;
- understand their responsibilities under ADA;
- reduce workers' compensation and other insurance costs; and
- address issues pertaining to accessibility.

For more information, call 800-ADA-WORK (V/TTY) or go to <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu>.

## Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs)

Employers looking for information, training, and technical assistance can find it at the 10 regional DBTACs around the country that are sponsored by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR).

DBTACs provide technical assistance on accessing information technology, complying with ADA, employing people with disabilities, and dispelling myths. DBTACs also provide information on low-cost or free training, local resources, and tax credits and deductions to supplement the cost of making accommodations for both employees and customers. For more information, call 800-949-4232 (V/TTY) or go to [www.adata.org/dbtac.html](http://www.adata.org/dbtac.html).

## Business Leadership Networks (BLNs)

BLNs are employer-led organizations whose missions are to increase workforce and marketplace diversity by including people with disabilities. BLNs engage employer-to-employer dialog on best practices, accommodations, and mentoring. There are 37 BLNs across the country, several of which partner with local chambers of commerce and local workforce investment boards. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center for Workforce Preparation serves on the steering committee for the U.S. BLN. For more information, go to [www.usbln.com](http://www.usbln.com).



“Watching someone who has overcome a major challenge in his or her life and manages the disability on the job raises morale and provides a good working environment for everyone.”

—JENNIFER SHEEHY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## Web-Based Resources

ADA & IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region:  
[www.adainfo.org](http://www.adainfo.org)

American Association of People with Disabilities:  
[www.aapd-dc.org](http://www.aapd-dc.org)

Americans with Disabilities Act: A Primer for Small Business:  
[www.eeoc.gov/ada/adahandbook.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/ada/adahandbook.html)

Association for Persons in Supported Employment:  
[www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)

Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP):  
[www.uschamber.com/cwp](http://www.uschamber.com/cwp)

Communicating with People with Disabilities:  
[www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/comucate.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/comucate.htm)

DisabilityInfo.gov:  
[www.disabilityinfo.gov](http://www.disabilityinfo.gov)

Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs):  
[www.adata.org/dbtac.html](http://www.adata.org/dbtac.html)

Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network (ESBLN):  
[www.esbln.org/employer\\_resources.asp](http://www.esbln.org/employer_resources.asp)

Job Accommodation Network (JAN):  
<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu>

Manpower Inc.:  
[www.manpower.com](http://www.manpower.com)

Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP):  
[www.dol.gov/odep](http://www.dol.gov/odep)

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS):  
[www.ed.gov/OSERS](http://www.ed.gov/OSERS)

Preemployment Inquiries:  
[www.dol.gov/dol/allcfr/oasam/title\\_29/part\\_32/29cfr32.15.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/allcfr/oasam/title_29/part_32/29cfr32.15.htm)

Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA):  
[www.ed.gov/OSERS/RSA](http://www.ed.gov/OSERS/RSA)

SunTrust Banks, Inc.:  
[www.suntrust.com/common/AboutST/about\\_suntrust.asp](http://www.suntrust.com/common/AboutST/about_suntrust.asp)

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM):  
[www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)

U.S. Business Leadership Network (BLN):  
[www.usbln.com](http://www.usbln.com)

U.S. Department of Labor (DOL):  
[www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

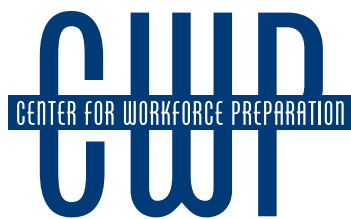
Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation  
Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports (VCU RRTC):  
[www.worksupport.com](http://www.worksupport.com)

## Endnotes

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