

The Handicapped Worker: Seven Myths

Many of your notions about the handicapped may fly out the window after you read this.

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Kevin was asked to leave a small family-owned company after an accident left him with both physical and mental impairments. Although the severity of Kevin's handicap could in no way prevent him from leading a normal and useful life, his employer felt insurance premiums would increase, Kevin's work performance would decrease, and Kevin would cause embarrassment not only to the organization but to his peers. Kevin was let go, even though none of these concerns was justified. In fact, this manager's loss would prove to be another's gain.

The law

In the United States there are approximately 45 million handicapped people. Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 defines a handicapped person as anyone who has or is regarded as having a visible or invisible physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, including

employment. Moreover, Section 504 of the Act states: "No otherwise handicapped individual . . . shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program receiving federal financial assistance."

This requires federal agencies and private employers under federal contracts to take affirmative action in hiring, placing, and advancing handicapped individuals in employment. But even organizations not required to abide by the Act are finding that handicapped workers can be a company's most valuable, efficient, and loyal resources.

The myths

Below are seven myths and misconceptions managers have regarding hiring or retaining "qualified" handicapped people.

1 *They have a higher turnover.* Perhaps the most frequent reason employers cite for not hiring the handicapped person is their belief that the handicapped have poor attendance records and a high rate of job turnover. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Table 1 illustrates, handicapped workers have lower absenteeism and nearly five times lower turnover rates than nonhandicapped people.

Joe, a controlled epileptic, recently won an organizational attendance award. When asked what he attributed his award to, he said, "The organization took a chance with me, and I am committed to this firm because of its trust." This would be a typical reaction from any employee given an opportunity to prove his or her capabilities.

2 *They are less productive.* Some managers argue that handicapped

Table 1—Comparison of handicapped with nonhandicapped

	Better	Same	Worse
Absenteeism	55%	40%	5%
Labor Turnover	83	16	1
Job Productivity	24	66	10
Accident Record	57	41	2

Statistics are from the U.S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

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workers are not as productive as similarly salaried employees and that their efficiency has to be lower due to their physical and mental limitations. Again, current research does not support these assertions. In fact, nearly one-fourth of handicapped workers have better job performance records while nearly two-thirds have at least the same.

An excellent example is Susan, a computer programmer for a government contractor. Though she is confined to a wheelchair, Susan's quality and quantity of production has been quite high. Indeed, her last performance rating showed her to be one of the more outstanding workers.

3 *They are a greater safety risk.* A misinformed manager might assume that the company's safety records will become jeopardized, resulting in increased insurance costs. But 90 percent of nearly 3,000 firms surveyed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers indicated no measurable effect on insurance premiums as result of employing the disabled.

William, a paraplegic, was asked why managers think handicapped workers are more likely to be a safety risk. His explanation was that nonhandicapped individuals assume that mobility and safety are directly related. Further, nonhandicapped people often cannot imagine how the handicapped worker is able to maneuver. William added that handicapped workers learn to deal and work with their limitations and are just as concerned as nonhandicapped people—if not more—about avoiding injury.

Research also shows that 98 percent of handicapped employees have better or similar accident records compared to nonhandicapped people. Only two percent have worse; certainly no reason for discrimination.

4 *They are too costly.* Some managers insist that the firm will have to incur a great deal of extra expense in making adjustments to the work environment. While some companies do maintain a "therapy" area consisting of whirlpools and other equipment, the facility is usually available to *all* employees for recreational activities. This means that the cost of the room isn't solely attributable to handicapped workers. And many organizations maintain a therapist or counselor on staff or on call to assist *any* employee with difficulties.

Paul, an activist for the rights of handicapped individuals, was quoted recently as saying that the handicapped are not asking for extra facilities, only equal ones. Further, many employers confuse assis-

tance with constructional changes. This isn't always the case. Typically employers can assist disabled individuals by providing transfers within the firm, different shifts, and other accommodations without much difficulty. And due to their loyalty and high motivation, the handicapped are often more cost-effective in the long run.

5 *They are too demanding.* A significant number of managers, when pressed, suggest that special privileges and working arrangements given to the handicapped will result in hostility and resentment among coworkers.

Studies reveal that the problem, in fact, may not be demanding employees but an intolerance on the part of a few employers. Research suggests that the greatest majority of negative attitudes in this category stem not from aggressive handicapped employees but, rather, from highly authoritarian managers.

In reality, the handicapped make no more demands than their counterparts, and often are close friends of their coworkers. Indeed, the disabled employee is likely to be more satisfied, more customer-oriented, and more perceptive. Being self-sustaining is a great source of pride for the handicapped.

Mary Lou, the personnel director of a regional department store, confirmed these findings. She said that her experience with handicapped workers showed that the disabled individuals seemed to be more satisfied. She attributed this to their trust and commitment to the organization. Mary Lou also noted that there appears to be an indirect relationship between worker satisfaction and individual demands.

6 *They would be an embarrassment to the organization.* Systematic examinations in the last several years have clearly indicated that most individuals having direct contact with the handicapped have relatively favorable perceptions of those people. Moreover, studies show that when evaluated in peer groups, the handicapped are not evaluated differently from nonhandicapped employees.

"Sure, there are some bad apples among the disabled, but there are just as many among the nonhandicapped," said Jesse, a union steward. He went on to say that any worker who gives 100 percent is treated fairly in the union. He also has found the disabled to be some of the harder workers and rarely, if ever, an embarrassment.

7 *They won't fit in the organization's work groups.* On the contrary, many companies view handicapped employees, due to their often higher educational levels,

realistic job expectations, and ability to work independently and longer hours, as a needed addition to the work group. Coworkers of the handicapped also believe the disabled enhance the employment and community environment. This is not to say that coworkers see hiring the handicapped as a "charity," for this has not been the case.

Instead of the assumed discomfort created by the handicapped, examples abound of companies finding the disabled worker as a source of inspiration and a role model. Indeed, many employees have said that the handicapped worker enhances the nonhandicapped employee's worklife.

Karen, the officemate of a disabled worker, said it best: "I forgot Bill is handicapped!" What better testimony to the ability of the disabled to be integrated into the work group?

Suggestions for managers

Inasmuch as these seven myths are false, there are a couple of recommendations for managers who employ or wish to hire the handicapped.

First, cooperation is essential. Working together, handicapped workers and their employers have made tremendous progress, especially in the areas of training and placement. Further, federal legislation such as the Projects with Industry Program (PWI) has connected federally funded rehabilitation programs with industry. Preparing the disabled for gainful employment in a realistic job setting has filled the previous gap.

Second, much effort is required. And this doesn't just mean effort in training the handicapped worker since this employee must be placed first. Frequently, placing the handicapped requires the combined efforts of vocational rehabilitation agencies, educational and governmental institutions, professional agencies, and the disabled persons themselves.

Handicapped workers who accept society's stereotypes are shouldering an undue burden. An employer who listens to the cries of misinformed managers will be missing a valuable, productive resource. Several studies published in the last decade clearly point to the fact that myths about the handicapped generally are unfounded.

A plausible explanation for the ability of disabled workers to exceed managers' expectations might be *courage*. Lest we forget: Productivity and profitability go hand in hand.

