

Expanding the Labor Pool: Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Workers with Visual Impairments

Karen Wolffe and Tony Candela

People are still talking about "that blind man who was on Jeopardy and answered all those tough questions!" What Jeopardy fans do not know or do not remember is that the contestant, Eddie Timanus, works every day—not as a quiz show participant, but as a sports reporter for *USA Today*. Sports fans discuss the performances of Marla Runyan, the first visually impaired athlete to qualify for the Olympics, and Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind man to scale Mount Everest. What they may not know is that both Marla and Erik had full-time teaching jobs that supported them as they trained to become world-class athletes. These three individuals have excelled not just because of their innate abilities, but also through being productive members of the workforce.

Unfortunately, the simple act of working is not a reality for many adults with visual impairments in this country. The most recent data available from the Census Bureau (1997)¹ on employment rates indicate that only 31 percent of blind and 44 percent of visually impaired individuals between the ages of 21 and 64 are employed. However, when asked if they want to work, two-thirds of disabled adults without jobs indicate that they want to work. What, then, is keeping these eager-to-work adults out of the labor market? The greatest barrier to employment for people with visual impairments may well be employers' lack of awareness concerning the *abilities* of blind and

visually impaired people. Not understanding something tends to result in avoiding it. Most people do not understand blindness because they have never experienced it or have never met anyone who is blind or severely visually impaired. Given the low incidence of blindness in the general population, that is not surprising. Although there are estimates that as many as 10 million people in the United States are visually impaired, only 1.3 million are legally blind (meaning that they qualify for social security benefits and rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities).

One might ask, "Can such people work successfully in a world where the vast majority of people are not only sighted, but rely heavily upon their sight for gathering and processing information?" The answer is a resounding, "Yes." People without sight or with limited sight can perform almost any job imaginable. There are visually impaired lawyers, artists, architects, accountants, secretaries, customer service representatives, food-service workers, factory workers, financial analysts, teachers, medical transcriptionists, day-care workers, counselors, computer programmers, cooks, salespeople, and more. They ply their trades by using residual vision enhanced by spectacles and other optical devices, large-print documents and labels, or video magnifiers. If they have little or no residual vision, they may use computers with speech or braille output devices attached, portable speech-output PDAs,

reading machines, and low-tech devices like mechanical brailers and canes for travel. At times, modest amounts of human assistance may be necessary.

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Numerous tools exist to help employers understand how people who are blind or visually impaired perform job tasks. A variety of brochures, videos, and Web sites describe how blind and partially sighted people access and retain printed information, use computer technology, and handle routine office procedures (see the resource list at the end of this article for details). This information notwithstanding, employers continue to express concerns about the complexity and expense of providing accommodations, to worry about inordinate delays in newly hired visually impaired employees reaching full productivity, and to envision that there might be difficulties terminating a visually impaired employee whose performance is not satisfactory. Hiring managers have logistical questions about dog guides and safety issues. They want to know how such workers read, write, access computers, travel to and from work, navigate within the work environment comfortably, and so forth. Answers to these questions follow, and additional resources are shared at the end of the article. Human resource managers can rest assured that visually impaired workers want to and can be productive team players.

LEGAL CONCERNS

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals with disabilities from job discrimination on the basis of disability.

However, it is important to note that the ADA is not an affirmative action law. To be protected from job discrimination by the ADA, an individual with a disability must be qualified to perform the *essential functions* of the job with or without *reasonable accommodation*. This means that the worker must satisfy the employer's requirements for the job, including education, employment experience, skills, and licenses. In addition, the worker must be able to perform the fundamental job duties independently or with the help of a reasonable accommodation. A reasonable accommodation is any change or adjustment to a job or work environment that enables a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process and perform on the job. Examples of reasonable accommodations that workers with visual impairments may need are:

- Providing or modifying equipment or tools with braille or tactile markings; assistive technology, such as computers with speech, braille output devices, or screen magnification software; improving the lighting in the workplace; and so forth.
- Job restructuring or job task sharing so that a worker who is visually impaired can perform more of the tasks that do not involve visual inspection.
- Adjusting a work schedule so that a worker who is a nondriver can use mass transit.
- Reassigning an employee losing vision to a vacant position where a visual impairment can be accommodated in order to retain the worker.
- Adapting examinations or training materials by enlarging the print, recording the material, producing it in braille, or providing an electronic copy.
- Providing readers or drivers, when necessary.

- Making the workplace readily accessible to and usable by people with impaired sight by providing braille signage or audible directory information, for example.

An employer is required to provide a reasonable accommodation unless it can be shown that this would be an *undue hardship*, meaning that the accommodation would impose significant difficulty or expense. Most people with visual impairments (80 percent) have residual vision. In other words, they have usable vision that enables them to access information and travel visually. Although they cannot see perfectly, many of these individuals will need few, if any, accommodations in the workplace. The types of accommodations that they might need are not expensive and may help other workers as well. For example, such a worker might perform best with an enhanced lighting system, nonglare screen guard for the computer monitor, and enlarged print. Optical devices such as magnifiers or prescribed eyeglasses for reading might be all that is required.

Although job accommodations for workers with severe visual impairments or who are blind are slightly more expensive, they are by no means prohibitive. Workers who cannot see well enough to read from the computer screen, for example, would need to access the computer through the use of either a speech output device (to listen to what is on the screen) or a braille output device (to read what is on the screen tactually). Such devices range in price from approximately \$600 to \$5,000. If computer access is not an integral part of the job, the tools used by blind and visually impaired workers are comparable to those used by sighted workers and not appreciably more expensive. For example, a mechanical braille writer is comparable in price to a typewriter, and a scale

with audio output is comparable to a scale with a digital display. Further information about meeting the needs of individuals with visual impairments under the ADA, including an informative checklist for employers, is available in a publication by Joffee.²

In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act to require federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Section 508 (29 USC 794d) was enacted to eliminate barriers in information technology, make available new opportunities for people with disabilities, and encourage the development of technologies that will help achieve these goals. The law applies to all federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology.

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The information technology of nongovernmental bodies is not affected by Section 508. However, if a corporation develops information technology products that are purchased by the federal government, those products will need to be accessible by people with disabilities. (For further information on Section 508, see the resource list at the end of this article.)

SAFETY

Seemingly simple tasks, such as stapling or shredding papers, or more difficult tasks, such as maneuvering in a heavily congested and noisy factory area or operating power tools, can become especially worrisome for HR and hiring managers with regard to blind and visually impaired employees. How a visually impaired employee might

respond, for instance, during a medical emergency or environmental disaster might also be a concern. A safe workplace is of primary importance not only to ensure that employees are healthy, but also—in this increasingly litigious environment—to keep costs down in the long term.

We have known since the early 1980s when du Pont first studied the matter,³ that people with disabilities are statistically at no greater risk with regard to workplace safety than their coworkers. Moreover, a Louis Harris poll,⁴ which reported the results of nearly 1,000 employer interviews, indicated that almost half the employers surveyed believed that disabled employees actually had fewer accidents on the job. Only 28 percent disagreed, and 25 percent were unsure if there was any difference. This positive picture mirrors earlier studies and lends credence to the argument that people with visual impairments are at no greater risk of having accidents than are sighted workers.

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A study on occupational injuries and illnesses by National Industries for the Blind (NIB), entitled "Incidence of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses Among Workers Who Are Blind,"⁵ reported that workers who are blind do not have a higher incidence rate of illness and injury than the national average. The study compiled data from 1995 through 1997 on recorded injuries, illnesses, and recent Workers Compensation insurance rates. Similar data was obtained for comparison with for-profit employers. A summary of the report is available at the NIB Web site (see the resource list at the end of this article).

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Despite advances in technology, employers worry that people who do not read ordinary print will be unable to keep up with written information shared internally between management personnel and their staffs, as well as among coworkers. Employee manuals, training materials, posted bulletins, and other printed materials routinely shared in the work environment pose challenges to workers with impaired vision. In addition, retrieving written materials from customers and colleagues outside the company, such as letters, order forms, requests for information, and brochures, seems difficult at best.

Adaptive technologies for reading print materials (including bar codes and paper money), such as stand-alone reading machines, bill identifiers, and scanners with optical character recognition (OCR) software, enable more to be read nonvisually today than ever before. New technology designed for sighted employees, such as the CrossPad Portable Digital Notepad, which allows handwritten notes to be converted to text, offers promise to employees with visual impairments as well. Other tools have been designed specifically for visually impaired employees, such as the Scantell, which incorporates a handheld scanner with audio output and has proven effective for reading bar codes in retail and warehouse settings.

Whenever possible, manuals and company-related documents can be posted on internal electronic networks. This accommodation facilitates easy access by both sighted and visually impaired employees. Likewise, e-mail minimizes the need for internal handwritten notes.

In spite of the technological advances available to today's visually impaired employees, there will continue to be printed materials that

are inaccessible by machine. Handwritten documents, especially those in cursive script, poorly printed materials, and documents laden with pictures and graphics pose difficulties. In such instances, a human reader may be needed to access the printed information. Prospective employees may have paid readers on whom they can call for assistance or volunteers with whom they have worked previously. A part-time reader might also be requested as an accommodation. Restructuring the workload of current employees to include part-time reading for a visually impaired colleague can lead to a *quid pro quo* as the visually impaired worker can return the service in some way. For instance, he or she may take on the sighted reader's telephone duties or periodically assist in some other way.

Writing so others can read what has been written can be accomplished, in the extreme, by using a computer and producing hard copy printouts for sighted coworkers and supervisors. However, e-mail and nonmechanical script writing guides often serve quite well in most of today's workplaces.

TRAVEL AND MOBILITY

Although most people with visual impairments are nondrivers, there are a few individuals with limited vision who can drive with the use of special magnification devices, known as bioptic spectacles, mounted on their eyeglasses. For those people with visual impairments who cannot see well enough to drive, their transportation options are limited only by the availability of public and private transit options in their communities. Nondrivers may use buses, subways, trains, taxis, hired drivers, or a combination. Some will live within walking distance of work, using either a long cane or a dog guide. Nondrivers

are typically knowledgeable of the transportation options available to them, because they will have been faced with the challenge of getting around in public for as long as they have been visually impaired.

Employees who are blind or severely visually impaired will typically use either a long cane or a dog guide to move around the workplace. Concerns about how an individual will navigate in the work environment can be addressed and resolved simply by asking what assistance he or she might need. What the visually impaired worker will probably say is that he or she needs a quick orientation to the workplace—where the restrooms, the cafeteria or break room, important offices and work areas, and any emergency evacuation routes are located. If the worker requires more extensive assistance, he or she will make arrangements with an orientation and mobility (O&M) specialist. O&M specialists are workers trained to teach visually impaired people how to get around using either their residual vision or alternative travel techniques like the use of a long cane. This service is usually available through a local rehabilitation agency but can also be contracted with an individual vendor.

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MEETING PRODUCTION STANDARDS

In a recent qualitative study, the authors interviewed nine employers whose companies had hired approximately 35 visually impaired workers.⁶ The vast majority of employers interviewed (89 percent) uniformly expressed positive attitudes towards their visually impaired workers. Some of their comments reflect their positive observations about their

employees meeting production standards. Comments from different employers included, "[We are] immensely satisfied...he's one of our top sellers. He wins all kinds of awards." "Doing a great job...we definitely feel fortunate to have gotten this person on board. It's definitely adding a lot to what we're doing." "We're very, very pleased." "Very good worker. Very dedicated." The remaining 11 percent offered only neutral comments, such as "[We] haven't had any problems with [the visually impaired workers]."

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Once employers have hired workers with visual impairments, they realize that the benefits to their companies outweigh any of the minor changes they may have made to their work environment. Although many employers publicly express favorable attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities, those with actual experience easily enumerate more advantages than disadvantages. The employers in the aforementioned study describe their satisfaction with their visually impaired employees and state that they would hire additional qualified workers with visual impairments. The HR personnel and hiring managers interviewed uniformly stated that their preconceived ideas about people with visual impairments were changed once they witnessed the productivity and loyalty of their visually impaired workers. In addition, the interview respondents reported noticeable and beneficial changes to their organizational cultures engendered by the hiring and integration of visually impaired employees into their workforce.

TIPS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE PERSONNEL

The Job Application Process

If all job applicants are routinely required to complete an application, there are ways to make it possible for blind or visually impaired applicants to do so as well. Some practical solutions for handling application forms include: making the application available electronically, e-mailing it on request, providing it on diskette, or placing it on your Web site; providing someone to read the application and record responses if applications are to be completed on site; offering to provide (self-identified) blind or visually impaired people with applications to complete in advance of interviews, so they can use low-vision devices or readers to help them complete the form in print; permitting the applicant to use adaptive technology (if available) on site; or accepting a standard completed application in lieu of your application form.

Administering Employment Tests

An employment test must measure the essential functions of the job. Therefore, any testing needs to assess an applicant's abilities, not disabilities. An open discussion with a blind or visually impaired applicant can usually result in recommendations to make the test accessible. Accommodations that would allow applicants to demonstrate their abilities include: asking a member of the staff to read the test to the applicant; making the test available electronically, placing it on a computer that the applicant can use with appropriate assistive technology; asking if a state or local agency for the blind can administer the test; or determining whether the applicant has already passed a similar test (for example, tests measuring typing speed and accuracy, spelling, grammar, or basic math skills).

Interviewing

Interviewers are often concerned about what questions they are allowed to ask a blind or visually impaired applicant during an interview. This need not be complicated. A blind or visually impaired person is a "person" first. Lack of vision is just one aspect or characteristic and does not define a person any more than hair color does.

When greeting an applicant, ask if he or she needs assistance. Some people with visual impairments will want to take an arm while others will prefer to follow verbal directions. When entering the interview room, it may be helpful to describe the setting to the applicant. For instance, "We are going to sit at a round table. Your chair is on your left...."

Focus on the person's qualifications to do the job. Matters that are not job related—such as how or when an applicant lost his or her sight—are not relevant to the interview. If applicants inform their potential employer about their disability—and they are advised to do so if they will need an accommodation—the interviewer may ask them how they perform tasks related to the essential functions of the job for which they are interviewing.

TAX INCENTIVES

Three federal tax incentives are available that may help employers to cover the cost of accommodations for employees with disabilities and make places of business accessible for employees and customers with disabilities. State vocational rehabilitation agency personnel can help you explore these tax incentives. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides a tax credit for employers who hire certain targeted low-income groups, including vocational rehabilitation referrals and

summer youth employees with disabilities. Applicants who are vocational rehabilitation referrals are eligible if certified by the State Employment Security Agency. The employer may take a tax credit of up to 35 percent of the first \$6,000, or up to \$2,100 in wages paid during the first 12 months for each new hire. Eligible employees must work 180 days or 400 hours; summer youth must work 20 days or 120 hours.

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The Small Business Tax Credit, IRS Code 44, Disabled Access Credit, allows small businesses to take an annual tax credit for making their businesses accessible to people with disabilities. Only small businesses who in the previous year earned a maximum of \$1 million in revenue or had fewer than 30 employees are eligible. The credit is available every year and can be used for a variety of costs, including readers for employees who are visually impaired, the purchase of adaptive equipment or the modification of equipment, and the production of print materials in alternate formats (e.g., brailled, audio-taped, or enlarged print).

The Architectural/Transportation Tax Deduction, IRS Code, Section 190, Barrier Removal, is often viewed as being specific to making businesses wheelchair-accessible. However, the credit can help businesses to remove physical barriers for people who are blind, for example, by adding braille and large print signage. It is important to remember that all businesses may not qualify for all three tax incentives and that specific information should be requested from your accountant or the Internal Revenue Service before trying to benefit.

CONCLUSION

In a work environment that is facing a shrinking labor pool, due in large part to the aging of the baby boomers, it makes good business sense to look for nontraditional recruitment resources. Blind and visually impaired people have been underrepresented in the labor market for too long due to the general public's lack of awareness of their abilities. With modern technology and an informed public, there is no reason to ignore this valuable pool of potential workers. Likewise, retaining valuable, experienced workers whose vision is diminishing enables companies to maintain corporate memory, provide leadership with a proven work ethic, and engender a sense of company loyalty. There is ample evidence that blind and visually impaired workers are safe, dependable, productive, and affordable; therefore, one can comfortably expand the labor pool by recruiting, hiring, and retaining workers with visual impairments.

RESOURCES

There are many publicly and privately funded resources available to assist employers in recruiting candidates for employment who are blind or visually impaired. In addition to the national sources for information listed below, there are regional Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers throughout the country. Call 800/949-4232 to locate the closest center.

Each state provides vocational rehabilitation services for people who are visually impaired or have other disabilities. Rehabilitation services can help an employee who becomes disabled remain productive or provide support to a new employee through on-the-job training, technical assistance, or spe-

cialized equipment. Rehabilitation agencies can also refer qualified applicants with disabilities to prospective employers. In addition to state rehabilitation agencies, more than 1,000 private organizations throughout the country provide disability-specific, employment-related services. Assistance in locating such agencies can often be found in local telephone directories or from the American Foundation for the Blind's toll-free information line listed below.

Business Leadership Networks (BLNs), resources for employers led by employers, can provide assistance as well. Employers appreciate the benefit of sharing with each other their experiences in hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities. In the late 1990s, the federal government promoted the development of BLNs, business-led organizations that develop business partnerships and effective employment networks share to promote the employment of people with disabilities at the local level.

Organizations

American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)
11 Penn Plaza, Suite 300, New York, NY 10001
(800/232-5463), www.afb.org.

AFB's national office can refer employers to free recruitment services in their communities. In addition to the national office, AFB maintains offices in Chicago and Dallas, a National Literacy Center in Atlanta, a National Employment Center in San Francisco, a governmental relations office in Washington, DC, and a Technology and Employment Center in West Virginia.

Business Leadership Network (BLN)
1331 F Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20004
(202/376-6200), www.usbln.com.

Center for IT Accommodation (CITA)

U.S. General Services Administration,
1800 F Street N.W., Room 1234,
Washington, DC 20405 (202/501-4906),
www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/cita.

The Center for IT Accommodation acts as the government's policy resource advocate for making information technology accessible for people with disabilities.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

1800 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20507
(800/669-3362), www.eeoc.gov.

The EEOC provides regulations, technical manuals, and other information relating to employment requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

P.O. Box 6123, Morgantown, WV 26505
(800/526-7234), www.jan.wvu.edu.

A free service to employers that helps them understand which reasonable and appropriate accommodations are available to help people with disabilities perform their jobs. The service is provided by the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, formerly the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

National Industries for the Blind (NIB)

1901 North Beauregard Street, Suite 200,
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703/998-0770), www.nib.org.

NIB coordinates production of industries with a majority of workers who are blind or visually impaired in 36 states. They also provide recruitment services in many states.

Books and Related Materials

American Foundation for the Blind. (2000). *Are you looking for a few good workers?* New York: Author.

American Foundation for the Blind. (2000). *The new what do you do when you see a blind person?* [video]. (Available from American Foundation for the Blind.)

Computer Center for Visually Impaired People. (2002). *A practical guide to accommodating people with visual impairments in the workplace.* New York: Author.

Joffe, E. (1999). *A practical guide to the ADA and visual impairment.* New York: American Foundation for the Blind.

Pat Sommerall Productions. (2002). *A hire vision: What employers want to know about hiring visually impaired workers* [video]. (Available at www.industryview.com, click on the Champions of Industry and the American Foundation for the Blind links to find the video)

Wolffe, K. (1997). *Do the rules change...when you hire a person with a visual impairment?* Austin, TX: Texas Commission for the Blind.

NOTES

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1997). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 1997.* Washington, DC: Author.
2. Joffe, E. (1999). *A practical guide to the ADA and visual impairment.* New York: American Foundation for the Blind.
3. du Pont de Nemours & Company. (1982). *Equal to the task: 1981 du Pont survey of employment of the handicapped.* Wilmington, DE: Graphics Communication Division, du Pont de Nemours & Company (1982). *Equal to the task II.* Wilmington, DE: Author.
4. Harris and Associates. (1987). *The ICD survey II: Employing disabled Americans.* New York: Author.
5. General Council of Industries for the Blind. (1999). *Incidence of occupational injuries and illnesses among workers who are blind.* Alexandria, VA: Author.

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