

CAC Corner: People Are More Than Their Disability

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08/19/2014



Meaningful employment is an integral part of the "American Dream."

Part of the concept of the "American Dream" is that everyone, no matter who they are, can have a job, a home, etc. Becoming self-sufficient, able to do for themselves, makes a person feel good, more self-confident, and a part of something. A job is one way that can make this happen. Unfortunately for many of individuals with disabilities, obtaining a job where they can earn a wage that can help them achieve the "American Dream" is extremely hard.

To quote from the Utah Department of Human Services – Division of Services for People With Disabilities Employment First website: "When individuals are employed in the community earnings increase, social opportunities and relationships expand, self-determination is heightened, and people report a higher quality of life."

Nineteen percent of the U.S. population is living with a disability – making them the largest minority group. Unemployment for this group is twice the national average. So why is this the case?

So often, as a society, we tend to put limits on people and their ability. We see a person in a wheel chair and say "well they probably cannot do this or that." We do not look beyond the chair and get to know the person to find out what knowledge and/or other skills they have.

For a person who appears to be an individual with an intellectual/developmental disability we tend to put a label on them as having limits to what type of job they can do.

Over the years, Government and non-profit groups have strived to help individuals living with a disability find employment and training. Laws have been passed and "Employment First" programs initiated in 32 different states. Utah passed their "Employment First Priority" legislation in 2011. While these have been some help, only 19% or less of individuals with disabilities who are receiving services by a state agency have been able to obtain competitive employment. According to the website for Utah's Employment First program, Utah has dropped from 7th to 12th nationally for supported employment. One problem with these programs is that when budgets have to be cut, these are generally the first to go. Somehow the word is not getting out that people are more than their disability. We need to get the public more aware that people with disabilities are not limited in what they can do. People tend to learn by seeing and experiencing.

On a recent trip this summer, I was reminded of what can happen if a person is given the opportunity to soar above the limits society sets for them. Seeing this first hand helped me learn.

Missouri has a campaign call "No Boundaries". There is a media campaign to get people to rethink their assumptions about persons with disabilities and look at the whole person instead. However, it goes beyond the media message. It also places people with disabilities in jobs where others can see what individuals are truly capable of. For example, on I-70 the main rest stops entering and leaving the State were manned by individuals with disabilities. These individuals were doing a variety of jobs. I overheard a young woman who appeared to have Down syndrome. She was cleaning the area and helping answer questions from visitors such as where recycling cans were, places to see, things to do, water for their pets, etc. She did it in a very nice professional, helpful way. I commented to her about what a good job she was doing. She proceeded to tell me that she was a fulltime employee with the State of Missouri, had health benefits, retirement, etc. She was so proud of her job. She gave me a survey card and said she got raises because people had told her bosses she had done a good job. She said "I love my work and I never miss a day." How many "normal" individuals can say that? There was a young man in a wheel chair who staffed an information booth and helped people with the Wi-Fi questions, telling about places to see and go, etc. Another individual was mowing the grounds.

In stopping at a national chain craft store, I discovered that of the 10 employees working at the time, six had disabilities. One clerk was an individual with a hearing impairment and could read lips very well. A young girl at

the checkout counter was an individual with an intellectual/developmental disability, and knew how to use the computerized items for checking out. She was also an excellent sewer and helped me with a question I had about something I bought. Another individual had only one arm, but could handle the large bolts of material and make a perfect cut. (FYI: I cannot cut a straight line on fabric with two arms and hands.)

Just so many places we went to we saw individuals who in the past may not have had a job or just a job cleaning tables at a restaurant working in careers/jobs where one rarely saw them working. These employers, it would appear, looked at the whole person and not just the disability.

Many years ago as part of a college course, I visited a company that manufactured oil filters for everything from small engines to large ship engines. The company hired many people. It was automated. One thing that impressed me was the number of persons with disabilities that they hired. One filter they made needed to be sewn using a special sewing machine. The owner said they had found that because this job required sitting for a long period, they had a huge turnover in these positions.

People would get bored sitting for more than a few minutes, want to get up and walk around, etc. Hiring people whose disability required them to be in wheel chairs lessened this turnover and productivity went up as these individuals were able to complete products quickly because they were not constantly getting up and down to walk around. Because productivity was up, these individuals were also given a higher pay level than was previously given.

I recently talked to a State of Utah employee who told me the State does hire individuals with disabilities to work in the State Offices/agencies. This is great. However, it would be nice to see more individuals in different jobs where the public can see that individuals with disabilities are more than the label we have placed on them. Maybe this will get Society to rethink how we view individuals with disabilities.

Just because a person has a disability does not limit them. They may not be able to walk, use their hands, talk, see or whatever, but they may be more skilled than we assume. As a Society, we need to change how we look at people and not put labels on them or limit their opportunities. We need to give them the opportunity to try to reach the "American Dream."