

The business case for hiring people with **DISABILITIES**



CURT HUDSON

Juan Garibay visits with Verizon's mid-Atlantic recruiter James West at a HireAbility job fair at Camden County College in Blackwood, N.J., on March 15.

Funding and tech assistance is readily available for employers

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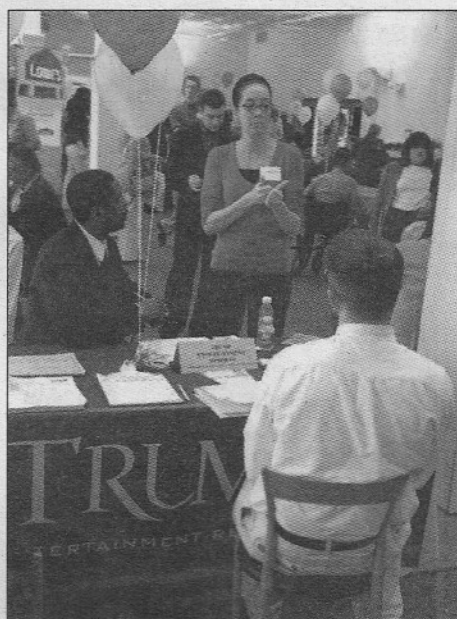
Juan Garibay doesn't think of himself as a person with a disability.

"I'm basically someone who sits in a chair all the time," Garibay said, fingering the control lever on his motorized wheelchair.

Garibay, a 20-year-old computer science student from Camden, doesn't think employers should see him differently from any other employee who sits in a chair to work.

"I don't need that much help or that much accommodation," said Garibay, who has cerebral palsy, as he searched for jobs earlier this month at a South Jersey job fair for people with disabilities. The only thing he needs, he said, is a flexible schedule to deal with his slightly more-complicated-than-normal commute.

Advocates for people with disabilities say businesses are increasingly willing to hire employees with some form of disability, and technology and government funding have made it easier than ever to accommodate workers with special needs.



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Lori Mann, a signer who works for Camden County College, interprets for Copeland Bain, a Trump Entertainment Resorts recruiter, and Ronald Hall Jr. (seated with his back to camera) at a HireAbility job fair.

Moreover, in the war for talent, people with disabilities have some advantages over other job candidates.

"I think when you work with somebody who has a disability, you're getting somebody who is so committed and so appreciative for the opportunity," said Bruce Sham, vice president of sales for First Financial Group in Bala Cynwyd and host of a periodic breakfast meeting to connect business owners and people with disabilities looking for work. "They've worked harder in everything they've had to do in life to achieve their level of success and it's a matter of educating the employer."

"Some employers are scared; they think if I hire somebody with a disability, they're going to be out sick all the time. How is it going to affect my health insurance premiums? This is not the case," said Sham, who has a grown daughter who is disabled and who has worked for decades to persuade his colleagues in the business community to hire people with disabilities.

In most cases, employers can recoup any disability accommodation costs they

DISABILITIES: Tap into experts for help

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incur through state and federal grants and tax credits, said Janet Fiore, CEO of The Sierra Group Inc. of King of Prussia, a consulting company that specializes in job placement for people with disabilities and in helping businesses recruit and accommodate employees who are disabled.

"Business finds it hard to figure what all the incentives are, where all the agencies are, how would I possibly figure out an accommodation if I've never seen one ... they just need to find the resource, and then the answers are there," Fiore said. "When you tap into the pool of experts whose life is helping people with disabilities go back to work, it's easy. And we're out there."

One of the key fears of business is that they will hire someone who turns out to be unable to fulfill the job, said Rich Massaro, executive director of HireAbility, a regional nonprofit that helps businesses recruit employees with disabilities. This, he said, is a huge misconception. The agencies and consultants that help people with disabilities are very careful to match the job seekers to jobs they can handle. And in most cases, he said, the job seekers themselves have a realistic view of their own abilities and limitations.

"It's not going to do us or that person any good to get that person in a position where they are not able to do what the employer needs," he said.

At a HireAbility job fair earlier this month at the Blackwood campus of Camden County College nearly two dozen employers, ranging from huge corporations such as Philadelphia-based Comcast Corp. to small regional businesses, were interviewing candidates. Among them was The Bank, a South Jersey community bank chain with fewer than 600 employees, at least five or six of whom have disabilities.

Kathy Tatasciore, vice president of human resources for The Bank, said hiring people with disabilities just makes good business sense.

"If you have the skills that are important to us, the disabilities shouldn't make any difference," she said. "You have to ... look at the skills that [the candidate] is bringing to the table."

It's that kind of attitude that helped Ed McCarthy find a new job following a serious accident in 2001 that left him with difficulties talking. The speech impairment cost him his career as a purchasing manager with an electronics company. After

several years without a job, he came to HireAbility and found work as a computer technician for the Federal Aviation Administration.

McCarthy, 53, brought to the table considerable education, including an MBA from Carnegie-Mellon, and a lifetime of high-level business experience. All he needed was a company to look past his disability and find him a job where speaking was not a critical issue.

"Give the handicapped a chance," McCarthy said in an e-mail interview. "Many times these are highly trained individuals who now have a disability."

He believes his experience has made him a better employee because he no longer takes for granted his ability to get a job.

"Handicapped people are more loyal than the typical professional because they realize how difficult it is to find a new position because of employer prejudices," he said.

It is not completely clear how many people with disabilities are without jobs, in part because the definition of "disability" is broad and ever changing. It can range from something fairly common, such as a difficulty sitting for long periods, to the loss of limbs or major mental deficiencies.

It is clear, however, that unemployment among people with serious disabilities is far higher than among those with little or no disability. In 2002, the Census Bureau reported that only 42 percent of working-aged adults with severe disabilities had worked in the previous 12 months, while more than 88 percent of nondisabled adults have worked in the same period.

Many of the people who aren't working would like to. The Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation reports that in 2005, the latest year for which they have released statistics, almost 26,000 residents applied for the first time for help in getting jobs, and almost 23,000 of them were eligible for some kind of assistance. Overall, the office provided some form of help to 85,000 people and helped 10,500 land new jobs in 2005 — jobs worth an estimated \$5.8 million in taxes for the state alone.

Hiring the disabled is "a win-win situation really for the business and for the client," said Teresa Brady, a Philadelphia lawyer who has hired several people with disabilities. "They're working, they're no longer on some kind of [public assistance], they feel good about themselves. And of course it's wonderful for the employer — we have absolutely the best employee." ■