##### 10 Tips to Enable People With Disabilities to Get Jobs

##### By Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi

##### President, [RespectAbilityUSA.org](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0595%7c174479%7c5&digest=FMLGmMOV5AY8SMm%2bCpNPbg&sysid=1)

Fully [70 percent](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0596%7c174479%7c5&digest=MqHbi2PsHeTTVaDyKkuViA&sysid=1) of working-age people with disabilities in America are not working. This leads to poverty, powerlessness and prison. So how can we, who care about people with disabilities, change that?

Back in the old days, people with disabilities didn't have access to quality education. Now, thankfully, with better access to education and technology some of the smartest and most productive people on earth are people with disabilities. Think of Stephen Hawkins. Fifty years ago he wouldn't have been able to communicate. Today he is unlocking the secrets of the universe.

We need every American worker who can work to do so. Think about it -- we have [10 million Americans with disabilities](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0597%7c174479%7c5&digest=MGvjXoVmoFAUCSEbjEfcOw&sysid=1), most of whom want to work, ready to get off the sidelines and help make American companies stronger. When more people are earning paychecks, the economy improves. We can save tax money. People with disabilities want to and can contribute to the economy.

Here are 10 tips to how YOU can make a positive difference to enable people with disabilities to get real jobs at real wages.

**1. Demand your rights.** If you are a person with a disability (PWD) or the loved one of a person with a disability (PWD), you need to demand that your IEP and/or vocational rehab program prepare you for paid employment in an integrated work environment. That means that from the infant and toddler program, all the way through the end of school rights at age 21, public employees and the community overall should be preparing you or your loved one with a disability for "employment first." They should not be just passing you through for a lifetime of government benefits (which by the way average not much more than $1100 a month plus healthcare). They should prepare you/your loved one for much more than "dayhab" or to join [400,000 Americans with disabilities](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0598%7c174479%7c5&digest=1kGosQCj6meWue%2f3RKPalw&sysid=1) who are being exploited by a legal loophole of sheltered workshops that allows some employers to "pay" people with disabilities literally as little as pennies an hour. It means helping you find the alignment between your interests, abilities and what is needed in the competitive job market. Your goal should be the opportunities for full time work in an integrated workplace where the pay is at least the minimum wage.

**2. Be proud and loud in telling people you want a hand UP, not a hand OUT.** The majority of working age Americans with disabilities want to work. Yet most of them sit quietly on couches, with 10 million people living in a cycle of dependency that undermines opportunity and hope. Take advantage of vocational rehab (VR) programs and other excellent programs such as BRIDGES and PROJECT SEARCH to get the training and supports you need to get ahead.

**3. Encourage PWD to start working in an unpaid internship or as a volunteer by age 14.** There is no better predictor of future economic success that early practice in the workplace. Work into paid positions as soon as possible and do a job. Ask members of your faith or other communities to help you find opportunities to make a difference and to build skills and experiences that will help you build your resume one step at a time.

**4. Know the facts.** You need to be an expert not only on your own disability or loved one's disability, but also on issues that confront all people with disabilities. When we work together across the range of disabilities we can all help each other. Key facts you need to know include that fully 70 percent of working age Americans with disabilities are currently outside of the workforce. That compares to [28 percent for Americans who do not have disabilities](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0599%7c174479%7c5&digest=gmCpBdINgikLvAczk5fa%2bg&sysid=1). The disability unemployment situation leads to extremely high levels of poverty, isolation and financial dependency for Americans with disabilities. This in turn costs taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars in benefits. However, most Americans with disabilities who are working age want to work.

Companies are in the business of making money -- and hiring people with disabilities can make them more profitable. I know the old stereotypes. People hear the word "disability" and think of someone who needs pity rather than someone with something to offer. But with today's technology a blind person can function fully on Apple computers. A non-verbal person on the Autism spectrum can speak clearly through assisted technologies. The breakthroughs due to science, education, medicine and rehab are transformative. Individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities have demonstrated unique and profitable ways to contribute to the workplace. It's time for companies to take advantage of these changes and to hire people with disabilities for the abilities that they DO have.

**5. Educate your elected officials.** Perhaps the most important leader in America today on disability employment issues is Governor Jack Markell of Delaware. He has no personal family connection to disability issues. However, when he met a young man with a disability who got his first job in his late 20's, he asked what the young man had been doing. "Sitting on the couch" was the answer. Governor Markell instantly got that our nation would be better off if the talents and time of people with disabilities was harnessed for the good of the country. As the head of the National Governors Association at the time, he got all 50 governors involved in learning about how to make positive change for people with disabilities. You should take the time to read the [report here](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0590%7c174479%7c5&digest=wZd40YNubeLry2gNqUiHfA&sysid=1). Know that it all started with one person with a disability educating one person -- his own governor. You too can make such a difference by getting to know your elected officials and helping them learn the facts.

Even when we are able to change the public perception of hiring practices in America, there are still legitimate obstacles preventing individuals with disabilities from entering the workforce. Working with the government to make changes is imperative and thankfully, Governor Markell of Delaware launched a tremendous initiative in 2012 to set a goal to advance employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities.

Now is a great time to reach out to your governor to encourage them to take additional steps to bring their state to the next level on inclusive hiring practices.

##### Write a letter or email below and ask them to be a leader making a measurable difference in the lives of Americans with disabilities. Suggest that they:

##### Host a statewide summit on disability employment that includes companies, people with disabilities, non-profits, faith leaders, media, government, and philanthropists. The goal of the summit would be to start a process that involves all the sectors to break the deadlock of poor performance by meaningful public-private partnerships and new thinking.

##### Use your office and leadership to promote progress through personal statements/op-eds/media events on this issue.

##### Make specific commitments to improving the numbers of people with disabilities who are employed in a real job for a real wage, as well as for disability owned businesses to be created and expanded through best practices.

##### Support a change in focus from a failed system of "from cradle to dependency" to "from cradle to job and independence" thinking. "Employment first" thinking is the way to go. This means that public school and other services, including transition efforts, must be geared toward successful employment opportunities and that schools be measured on their success.

##### Create a public-private partnership/task force reporting directly to the Governor in order to achieve specific employment goals.

##### Hold people accountable for better outcomes in the public and private sectors so people with disabilities in their state can be empowered to achieve the American dream.

You can find your governor's contact info [here](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0591%7c174479%7c5&digest=cIAVyGbIdcz6ARm8BCPlnw&sysid=1).

**6. Use the right messages and remember to K.I.S.S. -- KEEP IT SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD.** Ensuring that individuals with disabilities are able to achieve the American dream is MY issue. If you are reading this lengthy article, than in some way this is likely your issue as well. We care deeply and are personally impacted. But Americans these days face a million demands on their time and will give you very little to state your case. So if you want to speak out on these critical issues to the media, your elected officials or friends and neighbors, keep in mind a key rule: K.I.S. -- Keep It Simple. Use this message triangle below on the 3 points that you want to get across on this topic.

##### Americans with disabilities want to work.

##### Companies can be more profitable when they hire people with disabilities.

##### We can save tax money and make our country stronger by including people with disabilities in the workforce.

Now, get ready to repeat yourself over and over, with slightly different variances to keep it interesting! You want to go back to your core three messages over and over. It's called "message repetition" or "message discipline" and it's not an easy thing to do. That's because you will be thinking, "I've already said these things once, twice or three times. If I say it one more time the people I speak to will think I'm nuts or will be annoyed." But scientific research has shown that on average a person needs to hear the same message at least seven times before it will be internalized enough to change a behavior.

**7. Talk about case studies that work.** Employers, unlike elected officials, don't follow public opinion as much on the hard issues of dollars and cents. While they might watch and like the Michael J. Fox show which models how a person with a disability can be a productive employee, ultimately they will need to see case studies from companies they trust that show a profitable bottom line. Thus, when business sections of newspapers, magazines and news shows tell real live case studies of companies that are more profitable because of inclusive hiring of Americans with disabilities -- that is when the floodgates of opportunity will open. But it needs to be business-to-business, employer-to-employer.

The recent cover story, "[The Autism Advantage](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0592%7c174479%7c5&digest=tQKP1799rMDjNGevHN3Jrg&sysid=1)" in the New York Times Magazine, Thorkil Sonne of Denmark, "started a company called Specialisterne, Danish for "the specialists," on the theory that, given the right environment, an adult on the Autism spectrum, could not just hold down a job but also be the best person for it. This is a tremendous example of a successful case study. The impact is sure to be far-reaching. More of these stories are needed to change the public opinion dynamic.

**8. Meet the print and TV reporters who cover business or disability issues in your area, bring them the news.** Leaders and activists who care about people with disabilities should be speaking about these issues to the media.

The media (both the news media and Hollywood) is the lens through which Americans see people with disabilities. The Cosby Show and Oprah broke historic ground for race relations in our nation. All of a sudden African Americans were in the living rooms of white Americans -- and they became like welcomed family members. What The Ellen DeGeneres Show, Will and Grace, and Married with Children did for LBGT issues caused tremendous change. Public opinion shifted on marriage equality so quickly that elected officials and courts are practically falling over one another to change their views on these issues.

The disability community has high hopes for the new Michael J. Fox Show. Michael J. Fox, an incredibly popular and well-known actor who himself has Parkinson's, portrays a reporter with Parkinson's who re-enters the workforce. And because Fox is so very well liked and talented, the hope is that viewers will root for him -- and that they will see him as capable and successful. Sadly however, [according to G.L.A.A.D.](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0593%7c174479%7c5&digest=OxezlyDH5u2TpiZMUEvySg&sysid=1), only one percent of scripted TV characters have a disability, compared to [18.6 percent of the population](http://click.bsftransmit7.com/ClickThru.aspx?pubids=919%7c0594%7c174479%7c5&digest=aIi5PildKFckiCqfJw07lg&sysid=1).

We need employer "heroes" who will be proud to be showcased in the media. They need to be both in entertainment media and in the news. We need to showcase companies who are doing better because they hired people with disabilities who are capable, productive and profitable.

Although 20 percent of Americans have a disability, there are very few public role models, which show the stunning success that Americans with disabilities can have for their employers. As disability leaders or activists, our goal with the media and the public is to have them show people with disabilities for the talents and benefits that they bring to employers. To do this, we need to identify local heroes -- a company or organization that has been more successful because of their inclusive hiring processes. It needs to be a win-win pro-business or pro-employer story. It should also make the employer so proud of being associated with hiring people with disabilities that they will want to send it to their clients and make it a part of their publicity. That, in turn, can help inspire more employers to choose employees with disabilities.

**9. Network with business people who matter.** Speak to friends, neighbors, and colleagues. You aren't asking them to hire an individual, you are speaking to them about an important profitable initiative that they should know and care about. Keep your audience in mind. You never know who is listening or who your message might be shared with second hand. CEOs want to hear that inclusive hiring practices will make them money, and help save on taxes. It might seem tricky to work into cocktail party conversation, but what do you want to answer when someone asks how are, what are you working on these days? Why not respond, "actually, I'm very involved in advocating for people with disabilities to achieve the American dream. Did you know..."

Remember to go back to your "message triangle" again. Here is an example of what you could say to a business person:

##### The majority of Americans with disabilities who are working age want to work. They represent a talent pool of 10 million Americans who can make companies and organizations stronger and better.

##### Hiring people with disabilities can make companies more profitable. Nationally Walgreens has found this to be true as employees with disabilities, when aligned with their talents and interests, are more productive, loyal and have fewer work place accidents than employees without disabilities. Here locally we have company (insert the name of the local company), which has found (insert the local success story). There is actually also a company that specializes in hiring people on the Autism spectrum because they find them laser focused and excellent at critical thinking.

##### Hiring Americans with disabilities can save money for U.S. taxpayers. Americans with disabilities, in most cases, would rather have a hand up than a hand out. They need to be included in employment because of the talents they bring to the table. Their work and commitments to success can be a part of how America can compete against countries like China in this tough global economy.

**10. Never give up and stay positive.** We have a lot to accomplish, but it can be done! Alone we feel alone, but together we can and will make a difference. Get involved today, talk to a friend or co-worker, identify a promising employer to highlight, contact your governor. We can enable more Americans to achieve their American dream!

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