

Attitudinal Change

by Rob McInnes

For many years, I have the opportunity to work closely with employers on issues of disability and employment. In recent times, and on several occasions, I have heard employers say that most companies have now effectively dealt with attitudinal barriers and that disability/employment efforts should concentrate on other fronts. In fact, I've heard some job developers and employment specialists say the same thing. I'm not convinced.

New research from the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, [A Survey of Employers about People with Disabilities and Lowering Barriers to Work](#) (pdf), once again highlights the enormity of the subjective barriers that still prohibit people with disabilities from effectively participating in the workplace. In this study, over 500 employers were queried about employment practices and people with disabilities.

Among other questions, employers were asked to identify the single greatest employment barrier to people with disabilities. 25% cited employer attitudes as the biggest single barrier. (15% cited employers' general reluctance to hire people with disabilities. 5% cited employers' discomfort and/or unfamiliarity with disability. 5% cited discrimination or prejudice.) This is supported by a 1999 study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in which 22% of 1400 Members surveyed cited attitudes and stereotypes as a major barrier (to both employment AND advancement opportunities) in their companies. Related to this, another study of 800 employers by Gallup Robinson revealed that 15% of them admitted discomfort with the notion of working for, or nearby, a person with a disability.

As a job seeker with a disability, this is truly a daunting notion – that 25% of the people who you will encounter in your job search – the people who read your resume, who interview you for a job – are likely predisposed to discriminate against you based on their own entirely subjective preconceptions.

As employment professionals seeking to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities or as proactive employers seeking to increase the representation of people with disabilities in their workplaces, this information is of no small consequence. I believe that, in aspiring to inclusive workplaces, attitudinal change is one of the very most urgent and challenging issues that we face.

I think it is tragic that attitudinal issues have been so downplayed in recent years. I think it is sad, even maddening, that so much that goes on under the banner of “Disability Awareness” or “Attitudinal Training” is so frequently trite, haphazard and/or unprofessional. It is disheartening to see so many companies offering their employees presentations that are selected on “cost” not “cost-benefit” (selecting the cheapest – not the most impactful) and to see this important task of dismantling attitudinal barriers resting on the shoulders of poorly-trained and poorly-equipped personnel from community-based organizations.

Even the best attitudinal training of our day seems rooted in tools that were developed ten years ago in the spirited times accompanying the passage of the ADA – tools like the powerful “Windmills Attitudinal Training Program” and the engaging “10 Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities”.

In a 2002 study by Susan Bruyere of Cornell University on policies and practices that affect the employment of people with disabilities, employers reported that attitudinal changes are possibly the most difficult organizational barriers to change. 35% of them considered attitudinal change “difficult” or “extremely difficult” to accomplish.

With subjective employer attitudes looming as possibly 25% of the reason that people with disabilities are still not effectively participating in the workplace, isn't it time that we address it, with renewed vitality, in a concerted and strategic fashion?

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For many years, the Employer’s Forum in Great Britain, now boasting over 350 Member companies, has been striving to open Britain’s workplaces to more people with disabilities. A key focus of their activities has always been education of their Members. About a year ago, they evaluated the effectiveness of their training initiatives. The critical importance of attitudinal barriers was brought sharply into focus. In the words of their Chief Executive, Susan Parker, “We must now recognize that no amount of factual evidence on productivity and cost benefit can hope to persuade an individual manager who has yet to address the embarrassment, the fear and the deep-rooted negative assumptions about disability which are so often at play.”

The Forum’s response, however, was not to develop some new attitudinal training programs. Interestingly enough, their response was to increase the opportunities for employees of their Member companies to interact directly with people with disabilities. According to Parker; “We need a more integrated approach which links the evidence on the business benefits of including disabled people to the need for a planned commitment to engage actively with disabled people on as many fronts as possible... This face-to-face contact with disabled people as potential colleagues can precipitate a radical change in the way people look at the whole issue of working with anyone with an impairment.”

There is real wisdom here. I wonder if this isn’t something we can really “take to the streets” in North America? What if our rallying cry, against attitudinal barriers in our workplaces, became; “Maximizing the opportunities for positive contact between employers and people with disabilities.”?

Maybe we could infuse some existing initiatives with more vigor:

- Putting more effort into organizing activities around National Disability Mentoring Day (coordinated by the [American Association of Disabled Persons](#)) and the Face-to-Face program in Canada.
- More rigorously pursuing Internship and Work Experience opportunities for students with disabilities.
- More aggressively engaging employers in volunteer roles that put them in contact with people with disabilities.

Maybe we can imaginatively create some entirely new ways to initiate that contact:

- How about having job seekers with disabilities voluntarily assisting (taking registrations, etc. at employer-focused events (i.e. Chamber of Commerce meetings, SHRM meetings, etc.)?
- Think about all the (often free) events that staff members are invited to, and that employers attend. What if clients with disabilities were given the opportunity to attend these events (and bring back briefings)?

Years ago, I learned about a 3-week training event that was to involve 250 upcoming leaders in business, organized labor, and community organizations. I took some steps that resulted in three people with significant disabilities being accepted as participants. In addition to the fantastic learning experience they themselves had, their very presence shaped and reshaped the attitudes of 247 future leaders. In a similar vein, [Project HIRED](#) in California and the [Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work](#) (CCRW) in Canada are two organizations that have worked with large companies to create ongoing opportunities for job seekers with disabilities to attend the training courses that those companies hold for their own employees – both improving the skill sets of the job seekers and creating the opportunity for contact and interaction with company employees.

We all know that the watchwords in the real estate arena are “Location, location, location”. To be most effective in the arena of employment barriers, I believe that our new watchwords need to be “Contact, contact, contact”.

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