

People with Disabilities (like everyone else) Come in Ones

By Rob McInnes

“We don’t come in teams” said my friend Lance Dawson. Lance is a terrific speaker on topics of disability awareness & etiquette. At the time, he was addressing a crowd of about 300 HR professionals. I had to chuckle at the visual image that his statement invoked for me – of a dozen or so people with disabilities trotting along with matching sweaters with a big “D” on the front. As someone who is blind, Lance knows from personal experience how erroneous it is to lump people with disabilities (even with the same disabilities) together.

Human beings have a tendency to do that. We readily categorize people and things by some common characteristics and make generalizations about what we think we know about them. For the most part, this can actually be a very useful skill. For instance, seeing a plant with thorns on it and lumping it into the category of “plants we don’t touch because they hurt” can be a good thing. Seeing a person who is waving a gun around and lumping them into the group of “people we stay away from because they are potentially dangerous” can likewise be useful. Unfortunately, most human beings also have a tendency to lump people who are different from themselves into the “people I stay away from because I am unfamiliar with them, uncomfortable, and possibly intimidated by their differences.” Of course, this is the root cause of most of our societal and workforce discrimination. Not only is this kind of thinking not useful, it is wrong, harmful and hurtful.

In the context of attitudes towards people with disabilities in the workplace, we need to examine this “grouping” tendency even closer. We know how an employer’s unfamiliarity with people with disabilities can be a barrier. Familiarity can also be a barrier.

My earliest memory of a personal encounter with a person with a disability was when, as a young teenager, I would cut my grandparents’ grass. Almost every time, a boy who was close to my age would appear. He would follow about 12 feet behind me – walking with a strange gait, talking to himself and drooling. (On the one occasion that I tried speaking to him, he only looked down and mumbled incoherently.) For many years, when anyone mentioned the words “handicapped” or “disabled”, his was the image that would immediately come to mind. For me, people with disabilities became synonymous with feelings of discomfort and assumptions of incompetence. Similarly an employer, whose first encounter with someone with a disability is with someone who does their job poorly, will tend to generalize that “all people with disabilities do their jobs with equal incompetence”.

Of course, there are employers who have a great first experience with a person with a disability – and, from then on, are always on the lookout for more of them. This is the “six pack” phenomenon: “Hey, this person with a disability is great! Send me six more of them!” Those of us in the “job development business” love this one. We play on it. We make sure that our first placement in a company is going to be a great fit – so the employer will readily hire more of our job seekers with disabilities.

Further playing on the dynamics of group perception, we may find ourselves using statistics like the DuPont study to convince employers that “All employees with disabilities are...”.

I have met few people who wanted to be offered a job because of their disability. Over and over, however, I hear stories from people who commend their employers for hiring them despite their disability – for being able to overlook the disability and see their skills and abilities clearly.

Speaker and writer Richard Pimentel, was the first one to make me realize that promoting people with disabilities as a group, even positively, has an inherent flaw. It just reinforces the tendency to group people – instead of promoting the idea of seeing each person as an individual. (Richard’s perspective on this is explained in more detail later in this newsletter.)

Richard’s “Pick-a-Disability” module in the Windmills attitudinal training program is a brilliant way to make people understand that everyone with a disability is different and needs to be seen for their individual strengths and

weaknesses. I also think that the “No Two Disabled Persons Are Alike” chart in the book “Job Hunting for the so-called Handicapped” is another clever tool for driving home this lesson.

Our overriding job in educating employers about disability is not to convince them that people with disabilities make good employees; but to convince them that each prospective employee with a disability should be considered equally (without bias or preconceptions) and individually, on his/her own merits, throughout the recruiting, interviewing and hiring process.

As an employer, I’ve had the opportunity to employ dozens of people with disabilities. There were people with disabilities that I would rank among the best people that I ever worked with. There were others who ranked among the worst. Based on my experience, I would never tell another employer that people with disabilities make great employees; but I would readily advise them that some of my very best employees have been people who happened to have disabilities.

That has to be the message, loud and clear: People with disabilities come in Ones.

(Oh, and the guy who followed me around when I used to cut the grass? We met again about 10 years later. Ross and I ended up working for the same company. Admittedly Ross was employed doing simple tasks for piece-work; but he was working and proud of his job. His mumbling turned into real conversation once we got to know each other. I learned that he had always had a fascination with machines and he wasn’t following me at all – it was the lawnmower that had held his interest.)

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