

Expanding Work Opportunities for Minnesotans with Disabilities

Despite Minnesota's growing need for skilled workers, the talents and abilities of people with disabilities remain underutilized.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was intended to break down barriers to employment, transportation, public accommodations and services, and telecommunications for people with disabilities. While a recent survey of Minnesota businesses found that the ADA has helped to make workplaces more accessible, more welcoming, and more productive for people with disabilities, much more still needs to be done to ensure that our state benefits from the skills and talents of people with disabilities and the impacts of their economic empowerment.⁶⁸

Nationally, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities stands at 14.8 percent, while the rate for those without a disability is nine percent.⁶⁹ The difference among labor force participation rates, which measure the proportion of working-age individuals who are either working or actively seeking work, is much greater. The labor force participation rate for people without disabilities is currently 69.9 percent, but for those with a disability the rate is a meager 21.6 percent.⁷⁰

People with disabilities have much to offer Minnesota and its employers.

In a survey of Minnesota employers in 2005, employers of individuals with disabilities rated those employees equal to or higher than their other employees in similar positions in all areas of performance — work quality, consistency, attitude, overall satisfaction, and so on — apart from work speed.⁷¹ In addition, the majority of employers seldom or never found it necessary to assist their employees with disabilities with basic functions such as performing job tasks, managing the work day, making decisions, mobility, communication, or grooming.

Employment has much to offer people with disabilities.

The opportunity to work helps people with disabilities truly become a part of their community, helping them to build relationships and contribute their talents. By working, individuals gain dignity, self-reliance, and economic independence, thereby reducing dependence on public assistance and changing public perceptions about disability.

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The Business Case for Hiring People with Disabilities

Increased revenues. Employing people with disabilities can expand markets and increase business revenues. According to a national survey, 87 percent of Americans would prefer to give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities.⁷² Furthermore, nearly 30 percent of American families have at least one member with a disability, representing one trillion dollars in discretionary spending.⁷³ It makes business sense to have a workplace that reflects this huge market. Furthermore, in a recent survey of employers who have hired people with disabilities, a majority said that dollar benefits far outweighed the costs of accommodations.⁷⁴

Reduced costs. Evidence suggests that people with disabilities tend to stay with their employers longer than other individuals.⁷⁵ Hiring people with disabilities can help businesses avoid turnover costs, which typically range from 93 to 200 percent of an employee's annual salary. In a recent survey, 39 percent of employers who had hired people with disabilities said they were able to reduce workers' compensation and insurance costs.⁷⁶

Increased productivity, innovation, and morale. A diverse workplace has been shown to lift morale and enhance productivity.⁷⁷ A recent survey of employers supports this finding, showing that 56 percent of employers who hire people with disabilities experienced increased productivity from all employees.⁷⁸ Diverse work teams that include people with disabilities have been shown to have increased synergies, allowing them to develop more efficient business processes.⁷⁹

Doing the right thing. Finally, many businesses are compelled to employ people with disabilities because they feel it is the right thing to do. At the same time, a recent survey of CEOs showed that 95 percent think the public has higher expectations for businesses to be socially responsible than it did five years prior.⁸⁰ Even doing the right thing makes business sense.

The State of Minnesota can take a number of steps to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

There is much that can be done to bring people with disabilities into the workforce. In the short term, there are two strategies the state can pursue to make a difference. First, as one of the state's largest employers, the State of Minnesota can make strides to become a model employer of people with disabilities (page 24). Second, it can ensure that employment services offered through the state's WorkForce Centers are accessible and usable to people with disabilities (page 26).

Note: An accessible .doc version of this entire report is available at www.gwdc.org



Putting talent
to work

As Bryce Larson moves from one copier to the next, restocking paper and clearing out recycling bins at Kraus-Anderson's Circle Pines office, he warmly greets his colleagues and often fills the hallway with his infectious laugh. "You can't walk down the hallway without seeing Bryce and smiling," says Diane Duguay, who coordinates human resources and diversity initiatives for Kraus-Anderson.

For Bryce, who has Down syndrome, working at Kraus-Anderson is a big step up from his old job in food service. "I like everything I do," he says, adding that his favorite task is lifting heavy things for people. He clearly takes pride in helping out his colleagues. Being paid a competitive wage doesn't hurt, either.

Bryce handles many support functions around the office, a role that was tailored just for him. The arrangement makes good business sense for Kraus-Anderson because it frees up time for staff to work on other tasks. Colleagues attest to Bryce's productivity and diligence, and they describe how he has exceeded expectations. Soon after Bryce was hired, his supervisor had to identify additional tasks for him because he had mastered those he was initially given.

Bryce's friendly and upbeat character has led to a culture shift at Kraus-Anderson. He brightens the day at the office and has helped affirm and extend Kraus-Anderson's commitment to diversity. Since hiring Bryce, Kraus-Anderson has hired several people with disabilities, including two individuals in office support roles and others that have performed final clean-up work at construction sites. In 2006, Kraus-Anderson was named "Large Metro Employer of the Year" by the Minnesota Rehabilitation Association.

In Bryce's five years with the company, he and Diane have become outspoken champions for creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Their many speaking engagements include luncheons with metro businesses, a presentation at the Joey Hebert Golf Classic, and a keynote address at the Down Syndrome Association of Minnesota 2010 Regional Conference. Diane has also educated the broader public as a guest on the KFAI radio show "Disabled and Proud." At Kraus-Anderson, Bryce has organized staff to participate in the Step Up for Down Syndrome walk and has raised money for a local food shelf.

Diane says that many employers are afraid or unsure about how to work with people with disabilities, and she acknowledges that it takes commitment and time at the start. In Bryce's case, this included educating staff on working effectively with him, helping him feel at home, and creating visual aids and checklists that help him complete his work. A local nonprofit helped facilitate the seminar and guided Kraus-Anderson during Bryce's first few weeks with the company.

When it comes to employing people with disabilities, Diane's advice to employers is to simply "step up and do it." She says that businesses are often unaware of the many resources available to help them create opportunities for people with disabilities.

The small amount of effort required to bring Bryce on board at Kraus-Anderson has paid large dividends. According to Diane, "such efforts are worth it when you consider the rewards and see how Bryce interacts with the rest of the staff. He adds a lot of value to the office and we are very proud to have him as a part of the team."

Recommendation 9: Establishing the State of Minnesota as a model employer of people with disabilities

Minnesota's executive branch agencies can benefit from the skills and talents of people with disabilities.

The State of Minnesota has a duty to lead the way in the employment of people with disabilities. But the state also has a very practical reason to harness the abilities of Minnesotans with disabilities: in the last decade, roughly one-third of state employees reached the median retirement age of 60.⁸¹ As government agencies start to face a wave of retirements, the State of Minnesota cannot afford to overlook this pool of talent.

People with disabilities represent a largely untapped source of high quality state employees.

Despite a looming need for new talent, the proportion of state employees with a self-reported disability dropped from 7.8 percent to 5.1 percent between 2001 and 2009.⁸² This is in contrast to Minnesota's entire workforce, of which 14.6 percent reports a disability.⁸³ People with disabilities face a number of hurdles in seeking state employment, including the application process and the online employment application system. Managers encounter their own barriers, such as a lack of awareness about how to work with and accommodate people with disabilities.

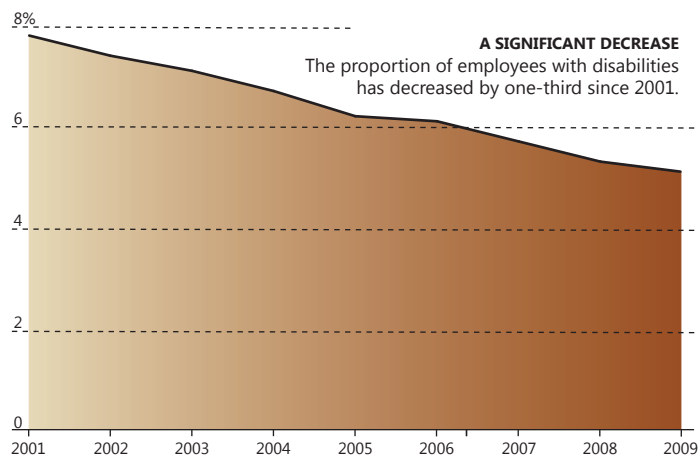
The State of Minnesota has made efforts to accommodate and hire people with disabilities, but more can be done.

In recent years, the state hiring process has changed dramatically. Applicants are no longer required to submit a six-page application or take placement tests on Saturdays, and applicants can now apply for jobs through multiple channels.

Started in 2007, an interagency Accessibility and Usability of E-Government Services Team has addressed some accessibility issues related to the online application system, and in 2009 a new state law set standards for web and technology accessibility.⁸⁴ In

STATE EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

The proportion of executive branch employees with a self-reported disability has steadily declined over the past nine years, from 7.8 percent in 2001 to 5.1 percent in 2009.



Source: Annual Workforce Planning Reports, Minnesota Department of Employee Relations. Figures represent all executive branch agencies, excluding MnSCU. Since disability status is self-reported, these figures likely understate actual percentages. Chart taken from the

addition, Minnesota Management and Budget has updated the state's ADA toolkit.⁸⁵

Perhaps most significantly, Minnesota's Pathways to Employment Initiative has pursued a "State as a Model Employer" initiative.⁸⁶ This initiative has created internship and work opportunities, recruited candidates and helped them apply for jobs, and facilitated the hiring of people with disabilities at state agencies. Still, the following issues require more attention.

There is currently an accountability gap with regards to the state's hiring of people with disabilities.

State agencies are required to set hiring goals for protected classes, and the state is required to submit a biannual report on affirmative action progress statewide and at each agency.⁸⁷ Despite these requirements, agency goals are not currently included in the affirmative action report. Doing so would increase accountability for the state's employment outcomes.

Using the state's online job application system can be a challenge, and it is difficult to get assistance.

In 2009, a survey by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities found that households having people with developmental disabilities encountered greater challenges than others in using Minnesota government websites.⁸⁸ In particular, these households were less likely to find web search functions and web forms, such as the state's online job application, to be accessible and easy to use, and they were more likely to report that website designs and font sizes made pages harder to read. In addition, the GWDC's Disability Employment Workgroup heard anecdotal evidence that the state's online job application was sometimes incompatible with screen readers and that it has been difficult to get assistance or find a paper application online.⁸⁹

Hiring managers face barriers and disincentives to hiring people with disabilities.

Hiring managers are not always aware of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. In addition, hiring managers often face a disincentive to hire people who require accommodations — particularly at smaller agencies with smaller budgets — because funds for accommodations are taken from a manager's operating budget. Training managers on the benefits of hiring people with disabilities can help change perceptions and break down barriers, and a centralized fund for accommodations could remove unintended hiring disincentives. Such a fund would simply pool the money state agencies spend individually and would therefore be budget neutral. A similar fund was piloted in 2008 by the Pathways to Employment Initiative for public, nonprofit, and private employers.⁹⁰ The pilot has been popular: employers who used the fund were pleased with the service, and expansion of the fund was overwhelmingly supported at a recent listening session hosted by the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans.⁹¹ Both Utah and Washington state have implemented such funds.⁹²

"Seeds/Pathways is like the Twins farm team," says Michael Ligday, who graduated from the internship program last spring. Since its inception 17 years ago, the program has helped Mn/DOT to "grow its own" talent by recruiting talented underrepresented individuals for internships and full-time employment opportunities.



Internships and work experience programs can help expand opportunities for people with disabilities.

Such programs allow people with disabilities to gain skills and make professional connections. At the same time, they help the state meet its personnel needs and promote the value of people with disabilities in the workplace. The state offers a number of these programs to a limited degree, including the joint Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT)-Pathways to Employment Seeds/Pathways program and the WorkForce Center Resource Area Internship Program.

Fully one-quarter of Mn/DOT's diversity has its roots in Seeds/Pathways, which expanded its mission to include individuals with disabilities three years ago with the support of Minnesota's Pathways to Employment program. Seeds/Pathways recruits college students, and typically 85 percent of interns are offered full-time positions upon graduation.

For Mike, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2004, Seeds/Pathways was an opportunity for a fresh start. After 29 years with one employer, Mike was shocked when he was called an "inconvenience" by his longtime boss. Mike left his job in search of a new career and settled on a two-year computer-aided design (CAD) technology degree program at Century College.

As an intern, Mike used AutoCAD software to catalog Mn/DOT facilities so they could be managed more efficiently. Mike received college credit for the internship, graduating in 2010 as Century College's "Outstanding CAD Student of the Year."

Like many people with disabilities, Mike feared that disclosing his disability would jeopardize his chances of getting and keeping a job. Seeds/Pathways helped create an open, supportive environment where Mike felt comfortable telling others about his disability. His internship experience increased his on-the-job skills and helped him get accustomed to working in an office. "In addition," Mike says, "having a community of other Seeds/Pathways interns was really nice."

Mike loves his position with Mn/DOT, where his responsibilities have expanded to include training facility supervisors, data management, and occasional design work. He says that Seeds/Pathways benefits Mn/DOT by adding diversity to the organization, which helps generate better solutions to business problems. He hopes to eventually get the opportunity to mentor new Seeds/Pathways interns.

Without the Seeds/Pathways program, Mike says that he would probably be out of work and relying on Social Security Disability Insurance. "I'm so happy to be working," says Mike, "it makes me feel better to contribute."

Recommendation 9

9.1 Accountability. The state's Executive Branch Agencies should be held accountable for the employment goals for people with disabilities (and all other protected classes) set forth in each agency's affirmative action plan. These goals should be a required part of the state's Affirmative Action Progress Report, along with current levels of employment for protected classes and a description of each agency's efforts to reach its stated goal.

9.2 Technology Accessibility. Minnesota Management and Budget should ensure that the state's online job application system meets the standards set by the 2009 Technology Accessibility law⁹³ (Chapter 131, H.F. 1744), that the system makes end-user feedback opportunities readily apparent and available to all, and that the system provides easy access to assistance via a phone/TDD/web help line. Furthermore, as Management and Budget looks to replace the current system, it should consider using a platform like MinnesotaWorks, DEED's online jobs site.

9.3 Staff Training. Minnesota Management and Budget should ensure that training programs for state hiring managers address the benefits and opportunities associated with hiring people with disabilities, in addition to covering legal compliance issues. The State of Minnesota should include people with disabilities as facilitators of staff training modules whenever possible, and training curricula should be reviewed and updated regularly, with the input of relevant stakeholder groups.

9.4 Accommodation Funding. The State of Minnesota should create a centralized fund, available to all agencies, to help pay for costs associated with providing reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. Since funding accommodations can be more difficult for smaller agencies with smaller operating budgets, the centralized fund should be targeted to serve these agencies. The design of the fund should explore the merits of allowing agencies to opt in to the fund, whether or not monies contributed to the fund should be returned if not used, and the feasibility of using a revolving loan fund. In any case, the centralized fund should be derived from state general funds, and should be designed to be cost-effective with minimal administrative costs. In addition, the state should keep a centralized list, available on the state intranet, of equipment purchased for accommodations but no longer used as a way to save money on future accommodations.

9.5 Internship and Work Opportunities. The State of Minnesota should expand its current efforts to offer people with disabilities pathways and incentives for working for the state. In particular, Minnesota Management and Budget should work with all state agencies to develop and implement a plan to expand internship and work experience initiatives. Promising examples might include the Minnesota Department of Transportation's Seeds/Pathways program, the WorkForce Center Resource Area Internship program, and the Minnesota Capitol Fellowship program.

Recommendation 10: Ensuring that Minnesota's WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities

WorkForce Centers are a critical component of the state's employment and training system.

In 2009, Minnesota's 49 WorkForce Centers logged 80,000 new customers, 4,700 of which reported a disability.⁹⁴ Many of these customers seek basic services, such as help with a job search and career planning, assistance with résumés and interview skills, and referrals to other, more intensive services. Now more than ever, it is crucial that the services WorkForce Centers provide are accessible and usable for all clients, including those with disabilities.⁹⁵

Ensuring WorkForce Centers are accessible and usable to all customers is a challenge.

Numerous state and federal laws provide for equal access and opportunity and prohibit discrimination at the state's WorkForce Centers.⁹⁶ Staff from the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) are responsible for ensuring high standards and legal compliance at every WorkForce Center across the state — no small task, especially as funding for WorkForce Centers has dwindled in recent years. DEED staff certify and recertify WorkForce Centers when they are created, moved, or remodeled. In addition, DEED has taken additional steps to address customer service for people with disabilities by developing and implementing universal design⁹⁷ principles for WorkForce Centers and marshalling the expertise of a handful of Disability Program Navigators⁹⁸ across the state.

The WorkForce Center Certification process should continue to be strengthened.

According to DEED, a majority of WorkForce Centers have not been recertified in the past five years, and in response DEED has issued a new policy to prioritize those sites that have not been recertified in the last three years.⁹⁹ The GWDC applauds this new policy and supports DEED's efforts to recertify WorkForce Centers on a three-year basis.

Additional measures can augment the recertification process.

To ensure that access and usability issues are addressed between certifications, additional steps can be taken to make sure that feedback is generated when problems arise. DEED and WorkForce Center staff have expressed a desire to be aware of accessibility issues in WorkForce Centers, and DEED Policy requires that "customer satisfaction tools and feedback mechanisms are used to improve services."¹⁰⁰ By increasing opportunities for customer feedback and incorporating accessibility and usability concerns into the Minnesota Workforce Council Association's yearly "Mystery Shopper" program,¹⁰¹ DEED and its local partners will be better equipped to address problems as they arise.

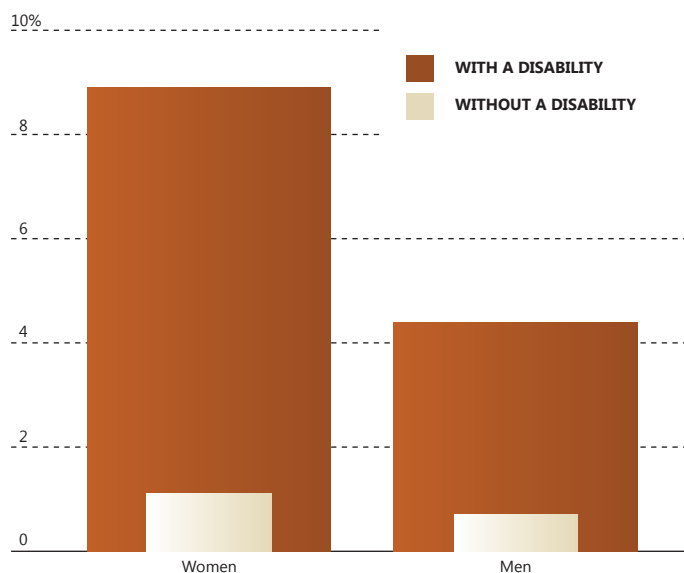
To ensure the best possible customer service, all WorkForce Center staff should be trained on disability and accessibility issues.

A lack of adequate staff training at one-stop career centers can lead to lower-quality service. A recent study of one-stop career centers in Kansas (one-stops in other states are analogous to Minnesota's WorkForce Centers) describes how job seekers with disabilities often experience low self-esteem, and how staff are often not well-prepared to address their particular needs.¹⁰² This reinforces the customer's feelings of disempowerment, limiting the positive impact that can be made. In the study, staff expressed a level of discomfort working with people with disabilities, but they also indicated a desire for training to better assist customers with disabilities.

In Minnesota, WorkForce Centers house a wide array of programs and services for job seekers, often run by multiple governmental and non-governmental organizations. DEED staff in WorkForce Centers are required to receive training on accessibility and serving customers with disabilities, but currently employees of partner organizations are not. All employees should undergo the same high training standards in this area.

UNEMPLOYMENT HAS INCREASED MORE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

From April 2009 to April 2010, the number of unemployed people grew by a significantly larger percentage for people with disabilities compared to those without.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-6; data are for entire U.S.



Now more than ever, it is crucial that WorkForce Center services are accessible and usable for all clients, including those with disabilities.

Recommendation 10

10.1 Recertification Periods. The Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) should set three years as the maximum time between recertifications for a given WorkForce Center. In addition, DEED should ensure that staff responsible for recertifying WorkForce Centers receive ongoing training that helps them understand accessibility and usability issues from the perspective of people with disabilities.

10.2 Customer Feedback. DEED should require that all WorkForce Centers publicize multiple avenues for submitting complaints (phone, email, web, etc.), along with information that clearly explains the complaint resolution process and identifies the on-site manager or designee in charge of handling complaints. This information should be easy to find, both on-line and at the WorkForce Center. In appropriate instances when confidentiality is not a concern, each WorkForce Center's on-site manager or designee should also be responsible for notifying complainants when their issue has been resolved.

10.3 Mystery Shoppers. The Minnesota Workforce Council Association (MWCA) should include accessibility and usability criteria in its Mystery Shopper program. The MWCA could work with the State of Minnesota's disability organizations and DEED staff to develop these criteria, train mystery shoppers, and recruit volunteers from the disability community to participate in the reviews.

10.4 Staff Training. Non-DEED staff should receive training on physical and programmatic accessibility and on serving people with all types of disabilities. DEED should develop policy guidelines for training all WorkForce Center staff during their orientation, and require WorkForce Center managers to report on which staff have and have not received training. The GWDC supports DEED's current inclusion of people with disabilities as facilitators of staff training programs and encourages the expansion of these practices. In particular, DEED should continue to include people with disabilities in staff training modules to demonstrate the use of assistive technology and to provide insights on accessibility and usability. Additionally, training curricula should be reviewed and updated regularly, with the input of relevant stakeholder groups.