

Chicago Tribune: Disabled job seekers struggle to find work
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Disabled job seekers struggle to find work

A landmark law failed to improve the disabled's employment situation, even in a strong economy. Now a slowdown has made it harder. By Barbara Ballinger Buchholz. T. Shawn Taylor contributed to this report

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Like many job seekers, Sam Joehl is frustrated. The 27-year-old Chicagoan has sent more than 100 resumes in seven months, but so far has gone on just a few job interviews and received no offers.

Joehl attributes most of his misfortune to the stalled economy. But he knows he faces a greater challenge than the average job hunter due to his visual impairment.

"I don't want to sit around and do nothing. I'm young and feel fairly intelligent, but there are employers not willing to hire those with disabilities," said Joehl, who recently earned a bachelor's degree in computer training after losing his job as a medical transcriber. He lost that job because the software program he needed to do the work was changed so it no longer could be used by the legally blind.

The job hunt is frustrating for people like Sam Joehl because Americans with non-severe disabilities are traditionally a hard-working bunch. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), in the prime employable years of 21 to 64, 77 percent of those with a non-severe disability had a job or business compared with 82 percent of people without a disability. Only 26 percent of those with a severe disability were at work.

And even though a major purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities by making it illegal to discriminate against them, their unemployment rates have failed to improve, despite the booming economy in the late 1990s. Now that the job market has stalled, the outlook has only worsened.

One gauge of how the disabled are faring in today's job market is that more are turning toward the government for support--a sign they may be having trouble finding work. About 1.5 million people last year filed for Social Security disability insurance, a number that's up 13 percent from 2000.

During the boom years of the 1990s, disabled workers were the one sector that saw employment decline, some economists say. "Typically, groups with lower average employment such as the disabled, African-American teens and single moms witness the most dramatic fluctuations over a business cycle," explained Joshua Angrist, economics professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"In down times, their employment ranks fall off more sharply and in boom times they increase more. But the disabled saw deterioration [even during economic growth]."

Specifically, those with work limitations saw their employment rate drop to 32.8 percent in 2000 from 40.8 percent in 1989, while those without limitations saw employment increase to 88.1 percent from 86.3 percent during the same period, said David C. Stapleton, director of the Cornell

University Center for Policy Research in Washington. These figures are based off of Current Population Survey data, which differ from SIPP.

In the short term, Angrist said, the ADA may have backfired because many employers perceive that complying with the ADA comes with a price tag. Other researchers dispute this conclusion, arguing that no studies have been able to disentangle the ADA's impact with other factors—such as changes in the mix of jobs in the economy or access to Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income benefits.

Still, some employers worry that insurance premiums will climb if they hire disabled workers. Todd Swim, a principal and consulting actuary at Mercer Human Resource Consulting in Chicago, said those fears aren't unfounded. The disabled generally incur health-care costs twice those of the non-disabled.

"The 2-to-1 ratio varies by the severity of the disability," added Swim, explaining that, for example, an employee with diabetes is much more likely to have higher-than-average health costs than a worker who is hearing impaired.

Employers also have expressed concerns over the costs of reasonable accommodations for disabled workers guaranteed under the ADA. But the government insists that many of these costs are minimal. According to research by the Job Accommodation Network, a program funded through the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, nearly half of on-the-job accommodations cost less than \$500 and 20 percent of them cost nothing at all.

Peggy Palter, spokeswoman for Hoffman Estates-based Sears, Roebuck and Co., which has made hiring the disabled a diversity initiative, said most accommodations involve such simple things as providing flexible schedules and bending dress codes to allow for special footwear.

But even if an accommodation required expensive computer software, Palter said Sears views that as a worthwhile expense to hire a qualified person. In addition, disabled workers are known to be very loyal employees, she said.

"That's obviously a huge advantage to us. The retail industry is composed of a lot of part-time employees. The turnover is very high. We have found that [disabled workers] are very, very qualified and a very good pool of workers," Palter said.

The federal government is helping states phase in its Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, which provides access to employment training and placement services and provides health care supports for working individuals with disabilities. Illinois is among the first 13 states.

Earlier this month, Mayor Richard M. Daley became the first mayor to sign an executive order creating a task force to coordinate a city-wide plan to bring more disabled into the workforce. "It's fine to make office buildings accessible. But how much good does that do if people with disabilities can't find jobs in those buildings?" he asked.

In addition, Daley will introduce an ordinance to expand the city's commitment to contract with businesses owned or operated by people with disabilities. David Hanson, commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and co-chair of the Task Force, estimates the area has 400,000 disabled.

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