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Performance of workers with disabilities as good as co-workers

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A DePaul University study found workers with disabilities performed as well as other workers while requiring about the same amount of supervision and minimal accommodations.

The three-year study, scheduled for release Monday, was commissioned by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce's Disabilityworks initiative with state and city money.

Researchers collected information about 314 employees, including 95 with disabilities, working in service, administrative support, professional and managerial jobs at companies in three growing industries: health care, retail and hospitality. They also conducted focus groups with administrators.

Employers reported 16 instances of having to accommodate an employee, and the average cost of accommodations was \$313. The single most expensive was about \$1,500 for assistive technology.

Yet when retail employees were asked what accommodations they got to help them do their jobs, those without disabilities as well as disabled workers cited examples of help, such as changes to their work schedules or their job duties.

"Many managers are still concerned about the productivity of workers with disabilities and the costs associated with accommodations," said DePaul's Brigida Hernandez, assistant professor of psychology and a principal researcher. "However, results of this study show that our participants with disabilities were on par with those who were not disabled across a number of work-related variables."

In terms of job performance, employees with disabilities averaged 2.3 on a 3-point scale on their annual performance reviews, in which a 2 means "meets expectations." Employees without disabilities averaged 2.31, the study said.

Among other findings, retail workers with disabilities had fewer unscheduled absences than those without. And over all three sectors, those with disabilities took fewer scheduled absences than those without.

The study said the benefits of hiring the disabled include having "dedicated and reliable employees" and a more diverse workforce.

Advocates said they hoped that locally based research will educate employers who have been reluctant to hire people with disabilities.

"In the not-so-distant future, it will be increasingly important to recruit talent from this community," said Disabilityworks Executive Director Karen McCulloh.

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