



By Alanna Lahey, columnist

THE UNTAPPED WORKFORCE

Diversity, inclusion and access at work

Where did all the labor go? It depends on where you look.

There is one sector of the workforce that is ripe with potential and waiting for employers to tap into: People with disabilities. Disability is the largest minority group in the country and has an unemployment rate that is three times higher than the general population. Disability is fluid, allowing periodic and temporary admission and exit as some people develop disabilities, others recover, and still more have life-long disabilities from birth.

People with disabilities face many barriers in the hiring process but are ready to step up to the plate. For some who are trying to make ends meet on \$800 per month from Social Security benefits, part-time employment can help supplement that income and provide the opportunity to have the extras that the average workforce takes for granted.

What does improving diversity and inclusion in the workplace look like as an employer? It is a common misconception that people with disabilities are incapable. People with disabilities are people first; disability indicates nothing about skill level or motivation.

Employees with disabilities are equally capable of being motivated, educated or skilled workers as employees without.

Generally, in hiring a person with a disability, you get a dedicated employee that is enthusiastic about coming to work, learning and doing the job well.

Workplace diversity is of greater benefit to your business in two ways. First, people with disabilities are creative thinkers and problem-solvers by nature because of their immersive experience in adapting environments to work for them. Secondly, diversity appeals to the consumer base and improves business. Consumers appreciate a diverse staff and prefer businesses that hire a diverse workforce. Further, your consumer base is full of diversity – people with disabilities are your customers too! Diverse hiring practices encourage a refreshing workplace environment, innovative ideas and makes your business more welcoming and inviting for all.

Making the hiring process more



inclusive. While people with disabilities face numerous barriers in the workplace, the three common barriers include access to technology, discussing accommodations and access to transportation.

Modern technology has resulted in the systematic exclusion of people with disabilities in the hiring process. Long gone are the days of “apply within.” Job postings and applications are often posted on company websites that may or may not be accessible to everyone.

Other challenges may be present such as a lack of broadband internet, unlimited data plans and laptops or smart devices required to complete the application. Additionally, internet-based websites are rarely accessible to people with visual impairments using screen readers. To overcome these barriers, try offering paper applications, in-house devices for applicants to complete the application and improve screen reader ability of digital formats.

Conversations about accommodations can be difficult and awkward for both applicant and employer. Accommodations are not necessary for every individual with a disability, but for some needing accommodations, there is fear that an accommodation request will impact the hiring decision.

The solution is easy: As an employer, make accommodations part of every conver-

sation in hiring. While you cannot ask about someone’s disability status as an employer, you can ask an applicant if they are able to perform the essential job functions with or without a reasonable accommodation.

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Open communication about accommodations creates a safe environment for disability and makes your business more inviting to all. Accommodations can be creative, inexpensive and efficient. Some accommodations may require a minute investment, but with diversity and inclusion trending in business, there are grants available to assist with costs of acquiring technology or modifications to be more inclusive.

Finally, many people with disabilities rely

on public transportation, posing a barrier to employment when scheduling shifts. Public transportation may not run directly to your business’s door, requiring additional travel from the bus stop to the workplace. The nearest stop likely comes at an odd time like every 12 minutes on the hour. A rigid on-the-hour start time leads to employee tardiness and frustrations by all staff who may rely on promptness in this situation.

Planning for this variability and flexing the start and end times just enough to accommodate the bus schedule and time to travel from a bus stop resolves this difficulty. Alternatively, remote work may be ideal for some individuals with disabilities.

These barriers are not exhaustive of the difficulties that people with disabilities face in employment. Disability Network Northern Michigan is happy to consult on improving diversity and inclusion in the workplace. If you would like to learn more, visit disabilitynetwork.org.

Alanna Lahey is an access and inclusion specialist for Disability Network of Northern Michigan in Traverse City. Disability Network Northern Michigan is the first stop for people with disabilities and their families in northern Michigan. Its mission is to promote personal empowerment and positive social change for people with disabilities.