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## Creating an Inclusive Corporate Culture for People with Cognitive Disabilities

*This article is the first in a two-part series that will conclude next month.*

Many companies employing people with disabilities have discovered that they are a valuable resource. Statistics have shown that people with disabilities have a strong work ethic, commitment to the job, and strong punctuality and retention rates equal to or better than non-disabled employees. A business case for employing people with disabilities was further evidenced in a January 2006 survey by the University of Massachusetts indicating that more than 85% of consumers prefer doing business with companies that employ people with disabilities. Once they overcome attitudinal barriers, employers have discovered that hiring people with different learning styles, such as individuals with cognitive/intellectual disabilities, not only shows a commitment to diversity, but can often teach co-workers important life lessons.

"Cognition" implies perceiving and comprehending information and the ability to decipher social cues and body language. A cognitive disability affects a person's mental processes such as reasoning, understanding, and learning. People with cognitive impairments may have difficulty developing new skills, adjusting to unfamiliar environments, ascertaining the meaning of subtle phrases and colloquialisms, and expressing themselves through spoken or written language. Cognitive limitations encountered in people of employable age are very likely to have existed since childhood and been manifested in school settings. These limitations can be found in people who have been labeled as learning disabled, multiply handicapped, mentally retarded, autistic or who have been diagnosed as having a head injury or Down Syndrome. It is important, however, to approach each person as an individual and not have preconceived notions as to his or her specific limitations.

Studies have found that workers with cognitive disabilities often outperform their peers in complex jobs such as administrative legal support and banking operations. Traditionally, jobs for persons with cognitive disabilities were concentrated in services such as mail center management, food service, document imaging and scanning, computer recycling, packaging, and data entry, according to a [Booz Allen study](#). This study further discovered that innovative programs in semi-skilled healthcare positions, such as sterilizing hospital equipment and restocking medical supplies, free up nurses for other functions. A model implemented at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital shows that workers with disabilities who performed non-traditional jobs were faster and more accurate—not to mention consistently more punctual—when compared to their non-disabled peers, giving further reason to consider their employment.

### **Recruitment**

It is important when advertising job opportunities to use accessible formats. Keep in mind that the usual advertising outlets may not reach people with cognitive disabilities. They are more likely to learn about a potential job opening through local educational or training providers or through community disability organizations and support agencies. Support agencies will have assessed the person's abilities and interests and will try to match the person to the type of employment. The Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA)

### Did You Know...?

Through the recently developed partnership between EARN and the National Organization for Diversity in Sales and Marketing, Inc. (NODSM), NODSM is hosting a series of webinars to help you understand the dynamics of recruiting and retaining people with disabilities. The next webinar, entitled *Providing Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities*, will feature guest speakers from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) and will clarify the employer's role in accommodating employees during the recruitment and hiring process. The webinar will take place on December 10th. [Visit EARN-Works' NODSM partner page](#) for more information.

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**EARN will present on *Web Accessibility Issues for Your Company's Online Application Process*** as part of JAN's webinar series on December 9th. The session will provide the business case for ensuring your career site is accessible, as well as methods for verifying its accessibility. [Visit JAN's website](#) for more information or to register.

Employment and Career Services Program has an employment support program (ESP) for individuals with developmental and physical disabilities throughout the country. This program provides employment counseling, job development and job coaching.

### **Job Application and Interview Procedures**

Individuals with cognitive disabilities may have difficulty understanding the meaning of questions on the job application and feel uncomfortable during interviews. Accommodations to alleviate this include:

- Simplifying, minimizing and clarifying language on the job application;
- Conducting a verbal interview to obtain information that may be difficult for the applicant to express in written form;
- Reassuring the applicant that it's okay to ask that a question be reworded;
- Asking questions about concrete experiences and avoiding use of metaphors;
- Describing job requirements concisely and simply;
- Timing the interview to be commensurate with an applicant's attention span;
- Interviewing the applicant in a quiet, stimulus-free environment; and
- Demonstrating job tasks in keeping with an applicant's visual learning style.

### **Job Training and Performance**

Individuals with cognitive disabilities who have relevant work experience may still need instruction in the specific functions of the job. Under these circumstances, additional assistance in job training may be beneficial. A job coach can help the employee with the job application process, learning job responsibilities and how to best utilize company resources. A job coach can also serve as an intermediary with supervisory staff.

Lynn Watts, a staffing and placement specialist and job coach at the [Jewish Social Service Agency's \(JSSA\)](#) employment support program, often does what she calls a "discovery process" for her clients with disabilities. "I will meet with employers to develop a rapport then check out the work environment to determine that it will suit my client's personality and will be a 'good fit.' For instance a noisy space may be overly stimulating and inappropriate for clients with cognitive disabilities."

If her assessment determines that a company setting is appropriate, Watts will also ask potential employers if they have ever worked with someone with a cognitive disability. If they answer no, she will discuss what the individual's needs may be to inform the employer on how to best accommodate them. Keeping the key factors of "adjust and adapt" in mind, Watts and others in the field, including the [Employment and Disability Institute at Cornell University](#), recommend the [following suggestions](#) to employers:

- Spend additional time in training the new employee;
- Break job tasks down into smaller steps, which are more clearly defined;
- Use very clear and basic language to provide job instructions;
- Develop a set routine for a job and a consistent work sequence;
- Allow the employee to use alarm watches or timers;
- Develop pictures/diagrams showing job sequence to assist in learning tasks;
- Teach the employee how to follow the example of co-workers to learn work routines and appropriate work behaviors; and
- Encourage co-worker involvement in ongoing support, if needed.

### **GIVE US YOUR FEEDBACK**

**IF YOU HAVE AN EARN SUCCESS STORY, TELL US ABOUT IT. WE WOULD LIKE TO FEATURE YOUR STORY IN THIS NEWSLETTER AND ON OUR WEB SITE.**

**E-MAIL YOUR STORY TO:**  
[EARN@EARNWORKS.COM](mailto:EARN@EARNWORKS.COM)

### **EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES**

- [DisabilityInfo.gov](#)
- [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#)
- [Ticket to Work](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network](#)
- [National Organization on Disability](#)

### **INFORMATION YOU CAN USE**

**Ensuring your career site and applicant tracking system is accessible** makes good business sense. The more candidates who can apply for your openings, the more talent you can get into your company. W3C recently published new content accessibility guidelines ([WCAG 2.0](#)) which can assist in making your systems accessible.

### **EARN SUPPORT**

EARN is funded by the [U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy](#).

EARN is managed and operated by [CESSI, Division of Axiom](#).

*EARN offers employers free consultation and recruiting services for successful workplace integration of people with disabilities. To sign up with EARN and to learn more about EARN services, go to [www.earnworks.com](http://www.earnworks.com) or call us toll-free at:*

**1-866-EARN-NOW (1-866-327-6669, V/TTY)**