



Unlock the Potential of Aging Workers and Veterans With Disabilities

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Demographic changes, a decade of conflicts overseas, the recent recession, and major legislation protecting the employment rights of persons with disabilities have significantly altered the composition of today's workforce. American workplaces have seen exponential growth over the past decade in two specific groups of workers — baby boomers and post-9/11 military veterans.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), baby boomers now make up 40 percent of today's workforce. Also according to BLS, 2.1 million post-9/11 veterans are currently employed or actively seeking employment. And the Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that over the next five years, close to 1 million active-duty service members will leave the military, with the vast majority looking to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Although few individuals within these two groups would self-identify as "disabled," data show that a significant number of individuals within the baby boomer age group, as well as soldiers returning from conflict, do have health concerns and many require some form of accommodation to enhance and/or maintain their workplace productivity. Furthermore, with increased emphasis on diversity, successful organizations recognize that incorporating

disability into their inclusion practices is essential to creating a culture that values the contributions of all employees while gaining competitive advantage. The economic benefits of a diverse workforce are undeniable, and the inclusion of people with disabilities, including wounded veterans and aging baby boomers, is increasingly viewed as an important business imperative of all workplaces.

In spite of the economic and cultural competency benefits that are derived from hiring and retaining a diverse workforce, inclusive of workers with disabilities, employers today are facing myriad administrative challenges: rising healthcare costs, compliance risks and changing regulatory climates. For higher education, the challenges are even greater given the complicated structure of large educational entities, the nature of the academic work environment, including the physical barriers of many "old-world" institutions, and the demographics of academia. However, effective coordination of policies, especially those related to leaves, and increased understanding of the interplay between these policies and the Americans with Disabilities Act and its amendments, may minimize absenteeism and support the efficient return to work for injured or sick employees.

Aging Workers

According to the latest U.S. Census, one in four Americans is a baby boomer (an individual born between the years of 1946 and 1964). The first of the baby boomer generation turned 60 in 2006, and today, a boomer turns 60 every seven seconds. Due to the financial impact of the recent recession, many of these individuals, who otherwise might have been enjoying retirement by now, have needed to remain in the workforce. In fact, in a recent Wells Fargo survey, 30 percent of respondents said they would need to work until age 80 in order to retire comfortably.¹

The correlation between aging and disability is well documented; therefore with individuals working well into their 70s, workplaces are seeing a rise in the number of employees who require some form of accommodation. Although most baby boomers do not view their age-related constraints as a disability, 42 percent of those 65 years and over report some form of functional limitations.²

For employers, the aging workforce brings on a slew of challenges, from healthcare cost considerations to staffing adjustments and the provision of reasonable accommodation. However, the benefits of hiring and retaining older workers significantly outweigh the potential costs. Older workers typically have lower turnover rates, fewer on-the-job accidents and a strong work ethic. They bring to the table valuable work experience and a diversity of thoughts and perspectives. They are motivated and engaged and demonstrate loyalty and reliability.

Veterans With Disabilities

Since 2001, more than 1.6 million men and women in the military have been deployed overseas to support operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to recent data from the Department of Defense, nearly 50,000 have been wounded in combat. The signature disabilities of returning veterans are post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and depression.

In a 2010 survey conducted by the Northeast ADA Center in collaboration with Kessler Foundation, Tip of the Arrow Foundation and the U.S. Army,³ 421 veterans (most of whom served in Iraq or Afghanistan) were polled at job fairs and Wounded Warrior events around the country. Eighty-six percent of respondents self-identified as having a disability (with 57 percent stating a mental impairment, 60 percent stating a physical disability and 30 percent stating a sensory impairment). Close to 60 percent feared

to disclose their disability to prospective employers, 46 percent said they believed that their disability would create barriers to obtaining many jobs, and less than half (44 percent) said they would be comfortable communicating accommodation needs to an employer or prospective employer.

Another recent survey, conducted by the Northeast ADA Center and ADA Center Network in collaboration with the Society for Human Resource Management,⁴ aimed to gauge the extent of the knowledge, beliefs, willingness and practices of HR professionals as they relate to hiring, accommodating and retaining veterans with disabilities. Results show that of the 1,083 HR professionals surveyed, 31 percent did not know which laws covered veterans with disabilities. Fifty-eight percent indicated that they thought that applicants must disclose a disability. Nearly three-quarters were unaware of the programs and resources that exist to support the recruitment and hiring of veterans with disabilities. Sixty-one percent believed that accommodating veterans with disabilities would take up a disproportionate amount of a manager's time.

But all in all, respondents indicated they were willing to hire veterans with disabilities, with 77 percent of large organizations specifically targeting this group in their recruitment efforts (however, only 25 percent of small organizations did so). Seventy-three percent of respondents said that they recognized the benefits of hiring disabled veterans, and 72 percent believed that they performed as well as other workers.

Veterans, like older workers, can bring countless positive attributes to a workplace. They have proven leadership skills, perform well under pressure, are usually proficient in the latest technology, have respect for standards and procedures, and are accustomed to high-level teamwork. But many, especially those who have served in combat zones, often struggle with mental, emotional or physical hardships upon returning home, which can make reintegration into civilian life and, in particular, the workforce, quite difficult. The challenge for both veterans and employers is to gain the knowledge and understanding for translating military experiences to the civilian workplace.

Resources for Employers

With a disproportionate number of two of the fastest-growing groups of employees in today's workforce (and those seeking employment) — aging baby boomers and post-9/11 veterans — legally qualifying as having some type of disability or requiring some form of

accommodation, the onus is on employers to fully understand the implications and follow the letter of the law. The good news is there are many resources available to help employers facilitate the hiring, accommodation and retention process of workers with disabilities.

Job Accommodation Network

Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) provides one-on-one consultation regarding reasonable accommodation and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Services include guidance on all aspects of job accommodations and the accommodation process; resources for ensuring accessibility; information about product vendors; and ADA compliance assistance. JAN has an extensive website (askjan.org) with over 200 publications on disability and employment topics, including sample forms that employers can use in their onboarding and reasonable accommodation processes. JAN also conducts research on the cost and benefit of implementing effective job accommodations.

Employer Assistance and Resource Network

Also funded by ODEP, the Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN) is a service of the National Employer Technical Assistance Center based at Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute. EARN's goal is to increase the employment and workplace inclusion of people with disabilities by engaging and empowering employers to source, hire, retain and advance qualified individuals with disabilities.

EARN offers individualized technical assistance, customized training, webinars, weekly e-mails of critical information, monthly newsletters and recruitment resources, including links to state and local community-based organizations serving job seekers with disabilities, aging workers and veterans. Consultations focus on effective strategies for compliance with affirmative action requirements, diversity and inclusion practices, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act and the implementation of effective return-to-work policies.

The EARN website (www.askearn.org) contains a wide range of documents pertaining to disability laws and practices and an event calendar of applicable conferences, workshops and training programs. The website also provides strategies for creating inclusive workplace cultures and best practices.

Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute

Cornell's Employment and Disability Institute (EDI) is a leading authority on employment and disability research, policy and practice. The EDI team consults with policymakers, disability advocates and rehabilitation program professionals to help companies, labor organizations, government agencies, schools and communities throughout the United States and abroad to accommodate and integrate individuals with disabilities. The EDI offers employment and disability-related training, professional development courses, publications, extensive online resources and more (www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi).

America's Heroes at Work

America's Heroes at Work is a U.S. Department of Labor project that addresses the employment challenges of returning service members and veterans living with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The America's Heroes at Work website (www.americasheroesatwork.gov) offers a wealth of tools and resources to help employers better understand TBI and PTSD and how they can help employees with these types of combat-related injuries succeed in the workplace.

Case Studies in Accommodation

Each year, the Job Accommodation Network conducts a survey of employers who have contacted JAN for information about workplace accommodations and/or the ADA. Survey results consistently show that the benefits employers receive from making workplace accommodations far outweigh the cost. Employers report that making reasonable accommodations for employees who need them allows them to retain valuable employees, improve productivity and morale, and reduce workers' compensation and training costs. Employers also report that 56 percent of accommodations cost absolutely nothing, while the rest typically cost less than \$500.

Accommodations can range from modifying a schedule to restructuring how work is done to using various types of equipment to enable an employee to successfully perform a job to the employer's standards. The following examples and solutions represent real-life situations reported to JAN by employers and employees alike:

- An educator developed glaucoma that resulted in low vision and a permanent decrease in her visual field when working on a computer. The employer

installed magnification software on the employee's desktop and laptop and also provided the individual some time for training with the new software. The typical cost of this accommodation is \$400-\$700.

- A call center employee developed a heart/circulatory condition, and her doctor recommended that she take frequent breaks to get up and move her legs. The job required the employee to stay at her desk until she was on scheduled breaks. After considering a number of options and including the individual in the interactive process, the employer purchased an under-the-desk exercise pedal device that enabled the employee to exercise her legs while remaining on the job. The cost of this accommodation was \$40.
- A retired Army medic working in a university hospital system had difficulty managing stress in the workplace due to PTSD. Her stress intolerance was intensified when she heard the emergency medical helicopter arrive and depart from the hospital where she worked as a nurse. The employee was reassigned to a vacant position on a unit that was far from the helipad.
- A manager for an educational services company had back surgery, which resulted in a back condition and speech impairment. He had difficulty sitting, running weekly meetings and communicating with others due to the combination of pain and weak speech. As a reasonable accommodation, the employer purchased an articulating keyboard tray and ergonomic chair. The employer also purchased a voice amplifier and communication software to improve the employee's ability to communicate. The cost to implement was \$5,000.
- An individual with PTSD working in a university building that was undergoing construction was experiencing extreme anxiety when interacting with or seeing construction workers with whom she was unfamiliar. The employer instituted a check-in procedure and badges for all visitors. The employee was also provided flexibility in break time to access support via phone, and a mirror was installed on her computer monitor so she could see people approaching her work station. The cost of the accommodation was approximately \$25.

Based on these examples, it is not surprising that when asked to rank the effectiveness of accommodations on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being extremely effective, 76 percent

of employers who responded to JAN's survey reported that the accommodations they made were either very effective or extremely effective.

Doing Our Part

As more and more employees continue to work well into retirement age and as vast numbers of post-9/11 veterans return to or enter into the workforce, organizations will likely see a rise in the number of disabled workers on their payrolls. Indeed, many forward-thinking organizations are actively recruiting people with disabilities and are including this group in their diversity plans. As such, we as human resources professionals need to take proactive steps to ensure that we are doing all we can to help our organizations facilitate the success of these individuals in their jobs. By utilizing the plethora of resources out there for recruiting, hiring, retaining and accommodating people with disabilities, we can help our organizations and institutions not only become more diverse and inclusive (and competitive), but also stay compliant with applicable state and federal laws. 

¹Touryalai, H. 2012. *More Americans Say 80 is the New Retirement Age*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com/sites/halahtouryalai/2012/10/23/more-americans-say-80-is-the-new-retirement-age/.

²Kampfe, C., J. Wadsworth, G. Maboledo, S. Schonbrun. 2008. *Aging, disability and employment*. *Work*, 31, 337-344.

³Northeast ADA Center, Kessler Foundation, *Tip of the Arrow Foundation, U.S. Army*. 2010. *Veteran study from Beyond Yellow Ribbons: How Prepared Are Veterans With Disabilities and Employers to Participate in a Disability Inclusive Workforce?* Retrieved from www.northeastada.org/r-vets.cfm.

⁴Society for Human Resource Management, National ADA Network, Northeast ADA Center. 2010. *Employer study from Beyond Yellow Ribbons: How Prepared Are Veterans With Disabilities and Employers to Participate in a Disability Inclusive Workforce?* Retrieved from www.northeastada.org/r-vets.cfm.

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