Removing Hiring Barriers for the Disability Community

By John Rempel

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 1 billion people, or 15 percent of the world's population, live with some form of disability. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, a disability is defined as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment." The most commonly used symbol representing "disability" is the International Symbol of Access, which depicts an image of a person in a wheelchair.

Regardless of the symbols and legal definitions of "disability," we all tend to draw from our own experiences, perceptions and biases when it comes to disabilities.

The Many Benefits of Hiring Individuals With Disabilities

Most people would agree that considering people with disabilities who are qualified for the job is simply the right thing to do — both morally and ethically. After all, most of us will personally experience some form of disability at some point in our lives. For example, we may experience a temporary disability such as a broken arm or sprained ankle, or we might experience a reduction in our senses and physical or cognitive abilities as we age.

Maybe you or someone you know has a permanent disability, which makes it all the more personal. Although hiring people with disabilities because it's "the right thing to do" is certainly compelling enough in itself, there are several additional reasons why including people with disabilities in your organization is simply a wise business decision.

In the February 2018 article *A Systematic Review of the Benefits of Hiring People With Disabilities*, published by National Institutes of Health, the authors highlight the multiple benefits that people with disabilities have to offer an employer — profitability (profits and cost-effectiveness, less turnover and better retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, company image); competitive advantage (diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety); inclusive work culture; and ability awareness.

If necessity is the mother of invention, then people with disabilities can certainly be considered co-contributors. There are countless examples of inventions that were originally created by or for people with disabilities and resulted in tremendous value to the general public.

Examples include:

- Vinton Cerf, who currently serves as vice president and chief internet evangelist for Google, is hard of hearing. Because of his hearing loss, he needed to rely on an effective method of sharing information with his colleagues that didn't include using the phone. In the 1970s, he was part of an initial research team that developed internet protocols, allowing him to share documents with associates. These initial seedlings to what we now know as the internet were partially driven by a person with a disability who was seeking an alternative means of information-sharing than what was currently available at that time.

- Text messages were first invented by Finnish engineer Matti Makkonen, with the initial intention of allowing deaf people to communicate with one another remotely.

- The auto-complete feature available within word processors and smartphones today was originally created for people with physical disabilities in order to increase their typing speed by decreasing the number of keystrokes required.

Although perhaps less dramatic than the examples listed above, people with disabilities offer almost any organization the opportunity to think outside the box with creative and accessible solutions that often result in better products and services for everyone. When physical and digital environments are developed with accessibility in mind, this often translates into greater usability for everyone.

For example, a blind Georgia Tech employee who was unable to complete electronic forms using her screen reader resulted in a greater awareness of accessible documents by the university's HR department to ensure that forms were made accessible going forward. This same employee's inability to complete a mandatory online training course resulted in AMAC Accessibility — a research and service center located within Georgia Tech's College of Design that promotes technological innovation and the development of user-centered research, products and services for individuals with disabilities — offering training, a comprehensive accessibility evaluation and follow-up technical assistance to the application development team at Georgia Tech.

The results of those initial accessibility barriers resulted in a more accessible experience, not only for individuals who are blind, but for anyone accessing the application using the keyboard alone and people with learning disabilities using additional text-to-speech solutions. It also resulted in enhancing the skill set of the application development team in the area of digital accessibility, which can be applied to other applications in the future.

Reducing and Eliminating Legal Risk

AMAC Accessibility receives frequent requests for accessibility services that often stem from potential or current legal concerns from organizations related to their customers or students. For better or worse, the long arm of the law with its legal sledgehammer is often the catalyst that causes many organizations to take action related to the accessibility of their physical environments and digital content. Hundreds of colleges and universities across the country have faced lawsuits in recent years due to a lack of accessibility, and the number of legal actions continues to escalate.

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In 2015, Harvard and MIT were both sued by advocates for the deaf and hard of hearing community for not providing closed captioning for their online lectures and other educational materials. The Americans with Disabilities Act is often cited in many of these cases as the legal basis for requiring accessibility as a means of equal access. Other laws specifically related to public colleges and universities include Section 504 and the recently updated Section 508 standards.

The Recruitment Process and Applicant Experience

It's likely that your organization will experience a steep learning curve when you embark upon an initiative to increase accessibility throughout the recruitment and applicant process. Providing a flawless experience and environment that is 100 percent accessible at all times for a person with a disability may not always be possible, especially when there are factors that are beyond your control. However, putting forth a good-faith effort to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities will go a long way toward ensuring equal access and a rewarding experience for the individual and the organization.

The Online Application Process

There are several considerations to be aware of regarding the online application process. Some important questions to consider:

- Is there any documentation available to indicate whether or not the online application process meets accessibility standards? If there is no language referencing Section 508 or web content accessibility guidelines, the answer is likely "no." If the application is an external application that was not built in-house, the procurement department or officer should be aware of accessibility requirements and considerations for current and future applications. This is certainly an instance where forewarned is forearmed.

- Does the application process itself allow an alternative means for completion if it is not fully accessible? For example, is there a contact email address and/or phone number that the applicant can reach out to for additional assistance if needed? Providing a means for the potential candidate to reach out to a person within your organization could also be considered a form of reasonable accommodation. It reduces the likelihood of an inaccessible process or experience escalating into a formal complaint and provides the organization with the opportunity to explore potential solutions.

It may be necessary for hiring managers to receive additional training related to disabilities in order to more effectively determine strengths of applicants that could otherwise be overlooked. As an example, a person with autism might avoid eye contact and be less verbal (which could be misinterpreted as a lack of engagement or motivation), but might be highly skilled at detail-oriented tasks. A pre-employment personality test during the application process could help better determine the candidates' strengths.

Interviewing Considerations
The following are areas that can represent common barriers within the interview process for people with disabilities. Concrete solutions are offered for each situation:

- Barrier: Skills tests are only on paper or in an inaccessible format.

    ◦ Solution: These should be made available in an accessible PDF or web-based format.

- Barrier: Surprise skills tests can potentially stress interviewees with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

    ◦ Solution: The interviewer can simply ask if any accommodations are needed in advance.

- Barrier: Interview questions are fixed and homogenous.

    ◦ Solution: Evaluate on the skills for the position, not necessarily social interactions like the ability for small talk and eye contact. Formulate direct questions or adapt behavioral questions to focus on concrete examples, not hypotheticals.

- Barrier: Hiring managers may not be trained to accommodate people with disabilities during interviews or may not consider asking the applicant if any accommodations are needed in advance.

    ◦ Solution: Hiring managers may require additional training on both the legal aspects of interviewing and how to be inclusive of various abilities and backgrounds.

- Barrier: Applicants are uncertain about whether or not they should disclose their disabilities.

    ◦ Solution: Encourage hiring managers to specifically ask interviewees if any accommodations will be needed and if so, direct the hiring manager to consult HR.

Better aligning your organization with an effective application, hiring and employee retention process that includes people with disabilities will prove to be a tremendously valuable investment.

Customized Employment Options
Customized employment is an increasingly popular accommodation in workplaces. Customized employment is a process by which the job description is negotiated between an applicant with a disability and the employer. In this process, the applicant (or in some instances a specialized job developer speaking on behalf of the applicant) presents a proposal voluntarily disclosing issues concerning their disability and offers suggestions for support and/or accommodation. The hiring manager

About AMAC Accessibility

AMAC Accessibility is committed to the promotion of technological innovation and the development of user-centered research, products and services for individuals with disabilities. As a research and service center within Georgia Tech's College of Design, AMAC Accessibility's goal is to address unmet needs in higher education, government, nonprofits and corporations by providing accessible and inclusive environments for everyone. The organization conducts research and development on accessible electronic materials, services and assistive technologies, including disability compliance consultation, disability awareness training, braille production, captioning, audio description, accessible document creation and remediation, technical assistance and web/application accessibility evaluations, and assistive technology assessments and training. Approximately 25 percent of our full-time staff have some form of disability, which is reflective of our commitment to practicing what we preach.

should strive to find alignment of contribution potential and essential duties of the job. It is also important to correctly identify what may be deemed as "essential" for the particular position. This ensures reasonable expectations by both the employer and the candidate. It is important for an employer to remain flexible and open to the potential needs of a person with a disability. And remember, people with similar disabilities may require different accommodations.

Disability Awareness and Inclusion: An Ongoing Investment

Even within AMAC Accessibility, an organization filled with subject matter experts in the areas of disability awareness and accessibility, we still don't get it right 100 percent of the time. Wherever your organization currently is on your roadmap to achieving greater accessibility and

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Resources and Readings on Accessibility and Inclusive Hiring

ADA Toolkit in CUPA-HR's Knowledge Center (www.cupahr.org/knowledge-center/toolkits)

AMAC Accessibility (www.amacusg.org)

Easy Steps for Including Disabled People in Your Workforce (www.paciellogroup.com/blog/2017/06/easy-steps-for-including-disabled-people-in-your-workforce/)

Americans with Disabilities Act Section 508 Toolkit (https://section508.gov/refresh-toolkit)

Why Inclusive Hiring Is Good for Business (www.extension.harvard.edu/inside-extension/why-inclusive-hiring-good-business)

Introduction to Inclusive Talent Acquisition (Free EdX MOOC) (www.edx.org/course/introductioninclusive-talent-perkinsx-inc1-1-1)

Recruitdisability.org (www.linkedin.com/pulse/10-facts-recruitdisabilityorg-janet-fiore)

Federal Government Resources (www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/)

Employer Perspectives (www.dol.gov/odep/documents/employerperspectives.pdf)

5 Benefits of Hiring People With Disabilities (https://chicagolighthouse.org/sandys-view/top-5-benefits-hiring-people-disabilities/)

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inclusion of people with disabilities, it is essential to realize that it is an ongoing process. It is more a journey than a final destination, offering many enriching rewards and lessons along the way.

There is tremendous value for an organization to carry out an honest and comprehensive inventory of its current state related to accessibility — warts and all. Far from opening oneself up to legal risk by doing so, which is a frequent fear that many organizations have, completing an inventory of the areas needing additional improvements and prioritizing those areas on an ongoing basis will display a good-faith effort and provide concrete steps in addressing those vulnerabilities if or when an external audit is carried out.

Some of the things AMAC Accessibility does on a consistent basis in order to ensure and maintain that we uphold our own standards and expectations toward an inclusive and accessible environment include the following:

- Orientation for all new staff that includes an immersion into disability awareness and accessibility.

- Periodic luncheons made available to all staff on various topics related to disabilities and accessibility awareness.

- Monthly meetings of the management team that serves as a repository and steering committee for ongoing accessibility concerns, along with a continued prioritizing and reprioritizing of action related to accessibility and disability awareness throughout the agency.

- The development of an accessibility policy which reflects AMAC Accessibility's policy, goals and accomplishments toward addressing and improving accessibility throughout the organization.

Twyla Moore, assistant director of human resources at Georgia Tech's College of Design, says that her department has recently revamped how it interviews for staff positions, which has resulted in a more effective and equitable process for everyone. She states: "We've moved away from social interview questions, which often result in hiring decisions being made on the basis of how well the interviewer 'likes' the candidate rather than focusing on whether or not the candidate demonstrates the ability to carry out the duties of the job. Social interviews are often not reliable, fail to connect questions to measurable criteria, and frequently rely on criteria and intuition versus data. We now utilize the critical behavior interview method, which

which allows candidates to provide real-life examples versus 'canned' responses. This method also allows a better understanding of how candidates' skill sets meet the needs of the position."

Systemic Investments Translate to Systemic Dividends

The technological revolution of recent decades has served as an immense equalizer for people with disabilities. Stephen Hawking is just one such example. Considered to be one of the greatest minds of the modern era, he was able to continue contributing to the scientific body of knowledge through the use of various assistive technology solutions throughout his life. This level of independence and access could not have been possible even a few decades ago. The importance that technology plays as an equalizer for all people across the globe, regardless of ability, cannot be overstated.

Better aligning your organization with an effective application, hiring and employee retention process that includes people with disabilities will prove to be a tremendously valuable investment. The resulting benefits include a more diverse staff, a broader range of talent and accessibility to better serve your students and/or customers, reduced legal risk that could prevent costly and time-consuming lawsuits, and the ability to promote your organization to the community as one of diversity and inclusion for everyone. cupa-hr

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