

## **Career Builders**

By Jennifer Searing-Burke

### **Tapping the Abilities of the Disabled**

During the next ten years or so, Baby Boomers will be retiring from the workforce en masse. The numbers of Americans in the generations that are following are considerably smaller and employers are going to find it increasingly difficult to attract the workers they need. There is, however, an untapped labor force available that can help ease this looming crisis.

Based on the 2000 census close to 20% of adults identify themselves as having a disability. Less than half of these people have a disability that is considered severe. In 2005 an American Community Survey found that while 74.4% of individuals between the ages of 16 and 64 without an identified disability are employed, only 37.5% of individuals with a disability are working. People living with disabilities are potential workers that businesses may find can fill their worker shortages.

Public policy initiatives support the idea of encouraging businesses to employ disabled individuals. Tax credits, employee training programs, and free advice on reasonable accommodation efforts are all available through various government programs. The goals of these efforts are to help potential employers understand that people with disabilities do not need to be viewed as potential medical or legal liabilities, while also providing disabled individuals with the opportunity to become or maintain employment and enjoy all the benefits that society has to offer.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for their workers. Legally this means “actions taken which permit an employee, prospective employee or member with a disability to perform in a reasonable manner the activities involved in a job or occupation sought or held”. Consideration of a reasonable accommodation “is to occur when the need is known and/or there is a disclosure and request from applicants and/or current employees”.

Reasonable accommodation is really about listening. Determining reasonableness is based on a cost-benefit analysis of the accommodation being requested. It is a comparison of the impact of the accommodation on improving the job performance of, and convenience for, the employee to the potential hardships, costs or problems caused for both the employer and other employees. Common reasonable accommodations can include modifying or acquiring equipment, support services, and job restructuring and modified work schedules.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “providing job accommodations for people with disabilities is often easier and cheaper than is commonly believed and the professional contributions and commitment of people with disabilities in the workplace far outweigh the cost of these accommodations”. Recent data from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which is a service of the USDOL of Disability Employment Policy, shows that 20% of accommodations cost nothing, and another 60% cost less than \$1,000. Data also show that surveyed employers have reported multiple direct and indirect benefits after making accommodations.

Benefits include employee retention, elimination of new employee retraining costs, increased productivity, increased overall company morale, and improved

interactions with co-workers and customers. In this same study 76% of responding employers stated that the accommodations they implemented were either “very effective” or “extremely effective”. An added bonus is that most reasonable accommodations make a business more accessible to everyone, including other employees and customers.

In an effort to help individuals with disabilities access the labor market, the Department of Labor and the Social Security Administration have established a Disability Program Navigator (DPN) initiative that operates out of local Career Centers. This program funds a staff person who helps people with disabilities "navigate" through the various challenges of seeking work.

The DPN acts as a resource, facilitator, coordinator, and relationship builder to help both youth and adults with disabilities access the services they need to gain, return to, or retain employment. DPN's have connections with programs ranging from Social Security Work Incentives, to Work Incentive Planning Assistance, to Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities are encouraged to take advantage of the employment services and expertise available at the Career Center to help them reach their career goals. The Career Center is fully accessible and both employers and job seekers can benefit from the services it provides.

*Jennifer Searing-Burke serves as the Disability Program Navigator for the Workforce New York Career Center at Columbia-Greene Community College. For more information visit the website at [www.columbiagreene.org](http://www.columbiagreene.org), call 828-4181 ext. 5510, or visit their new home on the top floor of the Professional Academic Center on the college campus.*