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**SOURCE:** Business News New Jersey

**AUDIENCE:** 42,295 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]

**DATE:** 11-12-2007

**HEADLINE:** Opening Doors for Workers with Disabilities

### Source Website

By Carl E. Van Horn – 11/12/2007

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As employers struggle to find workers for critical jobs, many companies are taking a fresh look at nontraditional sources of labor. One such group, whose workplace skills have not been fully appreciated, is people with disabilities.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, of the 33 million adult Americans with disabilities, nearly half are unemployed. An applicant's disability should not keep managers from seeing the whole person and recognizing the jobseeker's other valuable work skills. For example, an individual whose disability disqualifies him or her from lifting heavy boxes in a warehouse may still be a gifted employee when handling customers, accounting or computer services at the same firm.

Mistakenly, too many businesses are wary of hiring disabled workers. A 2002 Rutgers' Heldrich Center for Workforce Development survey of 500 U.S. employers revealed why companies don't readily hire the disabled: Nearly one in five employers admitted they have a "general reluctance" to hire workers with disabilities. They complained about the potentially high cost of making their workplace accessible, expressed fears about liability issues, said people with disabilities can't effectively perform the required work in their company, or that the disabled lack sufficient skills and education to be successful.

There is mounting evidence, however, that employers who have hired employees with disabilities have very successful results. A growing body of best practices is now available, and several organizations and government agencies are educating companies about the benefits of recruiting people with disabilities.

The New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce has partnered with the Henry H. Kessler Foundation to launch a New Jersey Business Leadership Network: an employer-led coalition that promotes best employment practices and publicizes competitive job openings for skilled candidates with disabilities. The Business Leadership Network ([www.njchamber.com](http://www.njchamber.com)) offers access to a national job network, [www.AccessibleEmployment.org](http://www.AccessibleEmployment.org), and directs state employers to online resources that can help them fill important job openings with qualified applicants.

The Business Leadership Network is helping employers increase diversity, fill high-demand jobs and promote career education, mentoring and internships opportunities for disabled students.

Employers will also benefit from an initiative launched by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. A national research center, led by Rutgers' Heldrich Center, is examining strategies that will increase the employment of adults with disabilities. The \$2.3 million multistate consortium also includes researchers from the Washington-based Center for Workers with Disabilities, the University of Delaware, UMDNJ and Rutgers' School of Management & Labor Relations.

With new information and resources, New Jersey employers looking to fill job openings should actively

recruit disabled jobseekers—a promising and proven source of talented workers.

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***Highlights: Accessible Employment***