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Getting more people with disabilities into the workplace

By ANN BELSER
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- Physical disabilities, which can make working an extra challenge, make looking for work especially discouraging.

The statistics don't provide much reason to be optimistic.

In 2004, the number of adults who were 18 to 64 with a work limitation who were employed was 19.3 percent. And the number of people in the same category with incomes below the poverty line was 28.2 percent, according to statistics compiled by Cornell University researchers working with government figures.

Getting people with disabilities to work is both good for them and the companies that employ them, said Dana Egreczky, the vice president of work-force development for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and the president of a new job-search Web site for people with disabilities.

Accessibleemployment.org is a Web site that, though started in New Jersey, has gone national to link companies to potential employees who happen to have disabilities.

Egreczky said the chamber started the site because so many of its members were national companies that were seeking diversity among their employees and found they were lacking in employees with disabilities.

"A diverse work force helps you work and sell to a diverse customer base," Egreczky said. "There are many, many disabled folks who have high-level skills."

The Web site is still focused on employment in New Jersey and has listings for 326 jobs, many of which are in medical fields, but the site is designed to be able to handle the entire country with searches that can find any key word in a listing.

"There is not a single company on the board that isn't doing something nationally or internationally," she said.

Egreczky said her research has shown there is a need for the site because there are currently 1.25 million Americans with disabilities who are looking for work.

Rick McWilliams, a program manager at the Pittsburgh-based Three Rivers Center for Independent Living, said the inability to get a job is not the barrier that keeps many people from working. McWilliams, 47, of Penn Hills, Pa., said many are afraid to give up federal health benefits and Social Security insurance.

After 20 years of working at the center, he is earning a college degree at Carlow University in Pittsburgh and his senior thesis is examining the question of why, if there are so many supports to help people with disabilities get jobs, more aren't working.

He said there are attitudes in society that people with disabilities can't work, but that is the lesser of the problems. The bigger problem, he

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said, is getting past the fears of trying.

"Sometimes they're afraid to work, they don't think they can do it," McWilliams said. McWilliams, who has been unable to walk since he was 16 because of a spinal-cord injury, said he has been without the traditional government safety nets for years and wonders what would happen if he lost his job.

"Most employers don't look past the disability to see the person's skills and qualifications because they are afraid of the cost it will take to accommodate those disabilities," Eric Smith, the associate director of the Center for Accessible Technology in Berkeley, Calif., said. "But really two-thirds of those accommodations cost less than \$500 and nearly a quarter cost nothing."

According to the federal Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network, more than half of the employers surveyed said the returns on each of the accommodations made was an average of \$5,000.

And, while the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that employers cannot discriminate against people because they have disabilities that can be reasonably accommodated, the job Web site makes it possible for companies to reach into a community that traditional recruiting might not reach.

"There's a pent-up demand for this we've only begun to tap," Egreczky said.

(E-mail Ann Belser at [abelser\(at\)post-gazette.com](mailto:abelser(at)post-gazette.com).)

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