

The Economic Benefits of HIRING DISABLED EMPLOYEES

MINDS ON

On Monday, March 31 the world renowned violinist, Itzhak Perlman arrived at Pearson International Airport in Toronto for a scheduled charity performance. Perlman, who is recognized as one of the world's premier violinists, contracted polio as a child and requires the use of a scooter or crutches. When Perlman disembarked from the plane he was met by an Air Canada employee responsible for assisting him with his luggage and taking him to meet his travel contact. The employee helped the violinist down one elevator but then announced that other duties required him to leave Perlman on his own. Stranded, Perlman faced the prospect of trying to take his scooter and luggage through customs without assistance. He did manage the feat but only by finding another individual to help him.

This episode illustrates the challenges faced by people with disabilities — even the famous ones! Can you imagine what challenges people with disabilities face in other aspects of their lives? One of the major challenges is acquiring a decent paying full-time job. What obstacles do you think people with disabilities could face? Do you think employers might be reluctant to hire them? Is the situation improving for people with disabilities who are seeking employment?

SETTING THE STAGE

Mark Wafer is a business person who owns and manages several Tim Hortons restaurants. He has made it a goal of his business to hire people with disabilities, and he has succeeded in hiring



92 people. Mark can relate to the struggles faced by these people since he has a hearing disability.

Yet Wafer does not pursue this policy out of a sense of charity but because it is a smart business decision. He now makes presentations to business groups promoting the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. He makes a point of addressing what he feels are myths regarding disabled employees. Wafer says that his employees with disabilities have a lower absentee rate than other employees and rarely take sick days. They come to work with a positive attitude and take pride in their jobs. They tend to remain on the job longer than the average employee. One of his disabled employees has actually worked over 20 years at one of the franchises.

Not all employers inclusive

Just as there are some good news stories about people with disabilities obtaining employment there are many where the challenges have been difficult. There have been cases where disabled employees have been paid less than their colleagues. In previous decades the government allowed companies to pay their disabled

employees less because the government felt companies needed to pay more to accommodate such employees and should be able to recoup their costs. Since governments have passed legislation requiring that accommodations be incorporated into buildings, however, many of these costs are no longer deemed extra.

Goodwill? Good policy?

In recent years disabled employees have taken employers to court seeking redress for discriminatory hiring and firing practices and for low wages. Even an organization meant to assist the disabled has been accused of treating its disabled employees unfairly. In 2013, Goodwill Industries — an organization whose goal is “to eliminate barriers to opportunity and help people in need reach their full potential through learning and the power of work” — found itself in court accused of paying its disabled employees less than minimum wage. A petition created on Change.org to support the workers argued that if Goodwill could afford to pay its senior executives six-figure salaries it should pay its workers at least the minimum wage. Goodwill responded by saying that the cases presented were isolated incidents. They argued publicly that with 80% of disabled people unable to find work, their organization was giving opportunities to a part of the workforce that might not otherwise have any.

Solution for worker shortage?

The federal government has indicated that over the next few decades Canada will experience a worker shortage. Advocates for the disabled point to this claim as justification for hiring workers with disabilities. This is an untapped work force which would not only help businesses but would also help these labourers decrease their need for social assistance. Economists have always maintained that when more people are employed, the more they spend, the more products we require as a society, and

the more jobs are created. Increasing the number

Rethinking disabilities

Business leaders may be discouraged from hiring disabled employees by some common misconceptions. In 2012 the federal government commissioned a study on the status of disabled employment. The report identified and dispelled several myths regarding disabled employees:

Myth 1: Workers with disabilities tend to be injured more often.

REALITY: A study of Walgreens distribution centre in the United States, where over 40% of the workforce was disabled, revealed that they had 40% fewer safety incidents than other centres.

Myth 2: Workers with disabilities are underachievers requiring more supervision.

REALITY: An American study found that 90% of people with disabilities performed average or better on job performance reviews.

Myth 3: The cost to accommodate workers with disabilities is very high.

REALITY: It was found that more often than not employers are able to make accommodations at no cost. When they did incur a cost, it tended to be a one-time expense in the range of \$500.

Source:

esdc.gc.ca/eng/disability/consultations/rethinking_disabilities.shtml

of workers who are employed could increase consumer spending and have a positive impact on the economy.

Case studies

While it's obvious to some employers that an inclusive hiring policy can be beneficial both for their operations and for the economy, there can still be resistance to employing workers with disabilities. When you consider the following profiles, do you think that these individuals demonstrate the attitude and skills needed to succeed in the workforce?

Chardon is an intellectually delayed adult who is working at a local business. When Chardon was in high school he was placed in a class with students similarly challenged. The teacher who was assigned the class quickly realized that these students were capable and caring individuals. The students rarely missed a class and were always enthusiastic. One day the teacher decided to take the students to the computer lab and have them work on a word-processing assignment. Many of the students had educational assistants with them. It soon became clear that the educational assistants were having difficulty accessing the computers. The students had been working with the computers for many classes and immediately helped the assistants log on the computers and access the proper program! All the students graduated — some with a high school diploma and others with certificates of accomplishment. Many went on to work in service industries.

Alice is visually impaired and requires strong glasses and large fonts to successfully read materials. When Alice was young her mother was told that she would not succeed in school and should be sent to the school for the blind. Her mother refused and worked with Alice to navigate the world with her limited sight. Alice took on the challenge and refused to allow the disability to restrict her future. She graduated from high school, attended university and is now employed by a provincial government as an advocate for the disadvantaged.

Roger is visually impaired and struggled in his youth to adjust to his disability. He quickly realized that he would be restricted in some activities such as driving a car. He had to deal with taunts from schoolmates but soon won them over with his self-deprecating sense of humour. He graduated from high school and university and was hired by a major bank. He now holds a senior position and engages in charity work.

Our society is comprised of all sorts of different people with different abilities and skills. What's your conclusion? What do you think of hiring practices that exclude disabled workers? Do you think it's possible that everyone can make a contribution if given the opportunity and support?

VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing

1. Do you know someone with a disability? How do they deal with their disability?

2. Have you seen disabled people working in any stores or facilities you frequent? What is your impression as you observe these employees?

While viewing

1. Why is Mark Wafer more inclined to hire employees with disabilities?

2. What evidence in favour of hiring people with disabilities does Mark Wafer present to employers who might be skeptical?

3. What do you think of Mark Wafer's assertion that employees with disabilities have a stronger work ethic than those without?

4. Mark Wafer says you cannot make changes based on an emotional response. Is it wrong to be sympathetic towards people with disabilities and make a point of hiring them? Is it just a business rationale that should be considered when hiring people?

5. Both Mark Wafer and Scott Sylvester have other reasons for hiring employees who are disabled: Mark has a slight hearing disability and Scott has a daughter with autism. Does this mean that the trend to hire employees who are disabled may be limited to employers with similar backgrounds?

6. How has Walgreens modified their plants to accommodate employees with disabilities?

Post-viewing

1. What do you think the federal government should do to help people with disabilities gain meaningful employment? Compare your ideas to the programs the government has introduced over the past few years by examining the following site: actionplan.gc.ca/en/initiative-section/persons-disabilities

Your Ideas	Government programs

2. Do businesses in your community hire people with disabilities? Conduct an informal survey to see how many companies do make a point of hiring such workers.

Name of business	Method used to determine if people with disabilities are hired (asking employer, observation of work force, researching company, etc)	Yes / No

Why does it matter which type of method you use to determining hiring practices?

3. The following websites provide links to many organizations that provide employment assistance to people with disabilities. Choose a site (or find one in your own area), examine its programs and prepare a summary for your peers. Indicate the type of assistance that is offered and assess how useful the site would be for potential employers and employees.

- 1. onwin.ca/en/special_interest_groups/persons_with_disabilities/
- 2. aase.ca/links/

Name of organization:	
Type of assistance offered	How useful is the program?

4. Is there more that can be done to encourage more employers to hire disabled people?

5. a) What companies or businesses do you think would be leaders in providing employment opportunities for diverse groups including people with disabilities? List the companies you would expect:

1.		3.		5.	
2.		4.		6.	

b) Compare your list to the one found at Canada’s Best Diversity Employers:

canadastop100.com/diversity/

c) Were there any companies missing or included on this web page that surprised you?
