

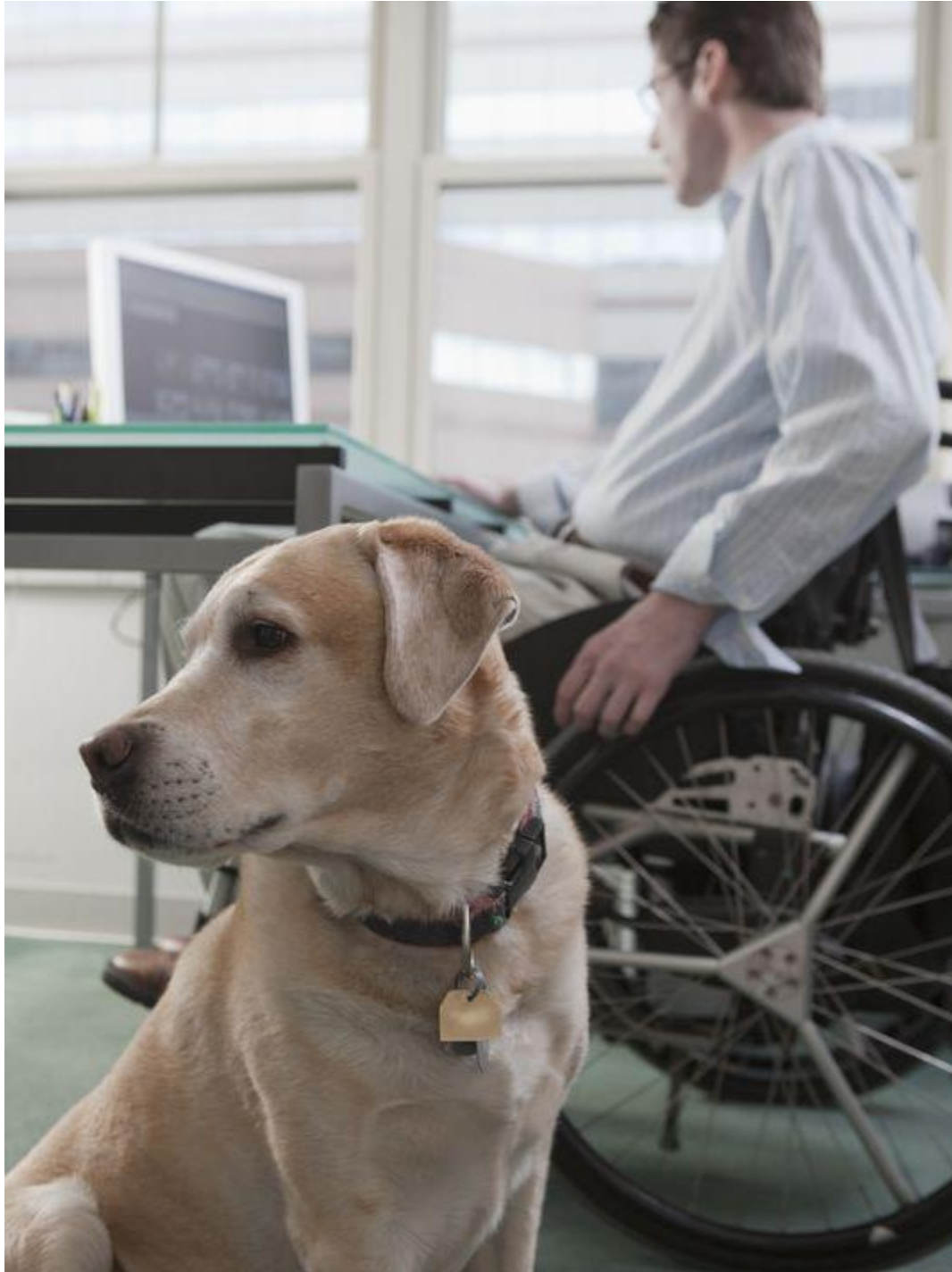
More businesses are opening up to people with disabilities

[Kellie Ell](#), USA TODAY Published 7:00 a.m. ET Aug. 23, 2017 | Updated 11:57 a.m. ET Aug. 23, 2017

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Carpenter Bobby Abrahams was born without hands, but he never let it come in the way of his love for building things.



(Photo: Huntstock, Getty Images/Huntstock)

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More than a decade ago, when Jenny Lay-Flurrie was looking for a job, she told an interviewer at Microsoft that she had some trouble hearing.

“I didn’t tell them I was profoundly deaf,” Lay-Flurrie tells USA TODAY through an American Sign Language interpreter. “It was Microsoft that educated me. They helped me realize that my disability is a strength that makes the company better.”

Thirteen years later, Lay-Flurrie is the chief accessibility officer for Microsoft.

“I work for a company that supports me every day,” she says. “I want every employee to have that shot.”

Microsoft is not the only business actively working to incorporate people with disabilities in both its customer base and workforce.

The 2017 Disability Equality Index (DEI), a survey conducted by the U.S. Business Leadership Network (USBLN) and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), reports that U.S. businesses are becoming increasingly accessible for people with disabilities.

Since its pilot three years ago, the number of companies participating in the survey has more than doubled. Of the 110 companies that participated in 2017, 68 earned a 100% rating in recruitment and engagement efforts of people with disabilities. Businesses across 21 different industries, including financial, technology and healthcare and insurance, contributed to the survey and represented Fortune 500 companies such as Walmart, Aetna, Bank of America and Walgreens.

“More and more companies are going beyond what they traditionally thought of as diversity,” says Helena Burger, president of AAPD. “Now people with disabilities are getting a seat at the table.”

The framework for accommodating and including people with disabilities throughout all facets of life began in 1990 when the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in an effort to prevent discrimination and allow people with disabilities to live regular lives by providing reasonable accommodations. Yet there has been one area that has remained relatively unchanged: employment of people with disabilities.

[In 2016, only 17.9% of people with disabilities were employed, compared with 65.3 % of people without a disability.](#) People with disabilities are often disregarded by hiring managers who bring their own personal biases into the hiring process, says Ted Kennedy Jr., board chair of the AAPD. The biggest roadblock, it seems, is the perception that people with disabilities simply can’t do the job, or it will cost too much to accommodate them.

“As wonderful as the ADA is, it’s hard to legislate attitudes,” Berger says. “There are still a lot of attitudinal barriers, stigmas around people with disabilities. The only way to eliminate them is to hire more people with disabilities.”

The Index, which is voluntary, is a tool that helps companies recognize where improvements still need to be made, Berger says. Businesses select a representative to answer a series of questions and provide proof, such as company websites, to back up their answers.

With the help of the Index, more companies are integrating online chat features for deaf and hard-of-hearing employees, guide dogs for blind workers, internal company affinity groups, external recruitment efforts, hiring goals and retention and advancement policies for people with disabilities into the work place.



Captioning is just one accommodation that allows deaf and hard-of-hearing people to work efficiently. [Via MerlinFTP Drop] (Photo: None, Clarity)

At CVS, one of the companies that scored 100% rating on the Index, potential hires who have disabilities can participate in training and skills courses to learn what it would be like to work in a CVS store before they even apply.

“It’s important to recognize that people with disabilities are part of our customer base,” says David Casey, vice president of workforce strategies and chief diversity officer at CVS Health. “We’re reaching into a community that is often overlooked. It’s a no-brainer for us that this is one area where we draw talent from. It’s a safe bet that anyone over the age of 10 knows someone with a disability.”

In fact, one in five people in the U.S. have a disability, according to the [2010 U.S. Census](#), the latest data available.

The Index highlights additional improvements that can be made, such as informing job applicants that they can request special accommodations during the interview. (Only 39% of

companies surveyed do this.) And including disabled people among suppliers. (51% of companies surveyed do this.)

“The index makes us all work harder,” says Lay-Flurrie. “Every year, we are continually upping out game.”

A cross-functional team of representatives compile the surveys, a process that usually takes between 30 to 40 hours, according to Jill Houghton, president and CEO of USBLN.

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The results of this year’s Index will be announced at the 2017 USBLN National Conference in Orlando on Aug. 23, an event that draws more than 1,200 business leaders annually from around the country that are working to develop strategies to further include people with disabilities into the workforce.

“They companies aren’t participating in the Index to be nice,” Houghton says. “They’re doing this because they can’t afford not to. It’s good for business.”

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/careers/2017/08/23/u-s-businesses-becoming-increasingly-accessible-people-disabilities/590335001/>