



Study Compares Costs, Benefits of Employees with, Without Disabilities

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

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Chicago-Area employees with disabilities working in the health care, retail and hospitality sectors are just as dependable and productive as employees without disabilities, suggests a DePaul University study.

Exploring the Bottom Line: A Study of the Costs and Benefits of Workers with Disabilities (<http://www.disabilityworks.org/downloads/disabilityworksDePaulStudyExecutiveSummary.pdf>), released Jan. 28, 2007, and commissioned by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce's disabilityworks initiative, addresses employer perceptions regarding the tenure, absenteeism and performance of individuals with disabilities.

The research included focus groups and cost-benefit surveys.

Focus group participants—a total of 21 administrators from 16 companies—indicated that:

- Costs associated with workers with disabilities were minimal and worth the expense.
- Employers benefited from dedicated and reliable employees and a diverse workforce.
- Disability employment agencies and disability advocates played a critical role in recruiting and hiring.

However, the groups indicated that managers have biases against those with disabilities and expressed concerns about the cost of accommodations. Moreover, workers with disabilities were likely to remain in entry-level positions rather than be promoted.

Costs vs. Benefits

Thirteen companies participated in the cost-benefit survey phase by providing data for 95 employees with disabilities and 219 without disabilities, with employee permission.

Employees with disabilities were compared on the basis of tenure, absenteeism, performance, supervision, workers' compensation claims and accommodations to non-disabled workers in comparable positions.

Most of the measures reflected favorably on workers with disabilities. For example:

- Employees with and without disabilities had nearly identical job performance ratings, regardless of sector.
- The amount of supervision required was similar for both groups.
- Employees with disabilities had fewer scheduled absences than those without disabilities, in all sectors.
- Few special accommodations were provided to participating employees with disabilities. The average cost of

accommodations was \$313.

“It is interesting to note that many managers are still concerned about the productivity of workers with disabilities and the costs associated with providing accommodations to this group. However, results of this study show that our participants with disabilities were on par with those who were not disabled across a number of work-related variables,” said Brigida Hernandez, assistant professor of psychology at DePaul University and a principal researcher for the study.

However, workers with disabilities did not compare favorably in all three sectors measured:

- Participants with disabilities from the retail and hospitality sectors stayed on the job longer than their counterparts, but those from the health care sector had shorter tenures.
- Retail employees with disabilities had fewer unscheduled absences than those without disabilities, but health care employees with disabilities had more days of unscheduled leave than their non-disabled counterparts.
- Workers' compensation claims were equivalent for those in the retail sector, but health care and hospitality participants with disabilities had more claims than their counterparts.

Applying the Results

Though many of the findings were positive, DePaul researchers said employer misperceptions make it difficult for persons with disabilities to obtain employment. For example, some managers reportedly feared they would incur **personal liability** (www.shrm.org/hrresources/lrpt_published/CMS_004591.asp) under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) if they asked “the wrong question” during an interview.

Manager training, such as that **offered by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** (<http://www.eeotraining.eeoc.gov/profile/web/index.cfm?PKwebID=0x495c398>), as well as training in **disability etiquette** (www.shrm.org/diversity/library_published/nonIC/CMS_023240.asp) and greater exposure to people with disabilities, can help managers overcome concerns they might have.

“I believe these findings will help set the record straight about what people with disabilities can contribute to the labor force,” said Karen McCulloh, disabilityworks executive director, in a press release. “In the not-so-distant future, it will be increasingly important to recruit talent from this community as the workforce continues to evolve.”

Focus group participants indicated that disability employment agencies play a key role in identifying qualified applicants and providing support. But they emphasized the need for disability champions in their companies to serve as internal advocates for employment efforts.

Such champions can work on building awareness and comfort within an organization by planning **disability awareness events** (www.shrm.org/diversity/library_published/nonIC/XMS_021872.asp) such as disability mentoring day.

“Businesses in the retail, hospitality and health care industries are often looking to recruit new employees, and this study demonstrates that persons with disabilities can add a lot of value to their operations,” agreed Jack Lavin, Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity director. “Employers should look to this talent pool to increase the diversity of their workplace and meet their ongoing talent needs.”

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